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Curator of spies

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By Melanie Hicken - Yes, Peter Earnest tells the children and their parents gathered in a room at the International Spy Museum, he was once an operative for the U.S. government.

It was during the Cold War — an era quite different from today, he says. It was exciting and even dangerous at times, but it also involved a lot of research and simply talking to people. His job was thrilling, but it wasn't always like the scenes in James Bond movies.

"There are situations that are dicey, but it is not all screaming tires and shots in the night," he tells the crowd, who just watched a British children's spy movie.

These days, Mr. Earnest, a former operations officer for the Central Intelligence Agency, gets his adrenaline rush from a different position, as executive director of the museum, where he hopes Americans can go to learn about the traditionally secretive world of spies.

"We take our education mission very seriously, which is helping people understand to a degree, the role of espionage, or spying intelligence plays in national security," he said.

At the museum, visitors can examine and learn about more than 200 spy gadgets and weapons, such as invisible ink and buttonhole cameras. They can learn about the history of espionage or Mr. Earnest's spy specialty — stories from the Cold War.

On this day, Mr. Earnest is helping the museum celebrate its fifth year. He smiles as he walks past the red "SPY" balloons decorating the halls while on his way to speak to the room of children. Not even the mid-afternoon downpour can keep the hoards of people from filling the museum for a special discounted admission of \$5.

And Mr. Earnest is thrilled.

He proudly boasts he is often told the museum is one of the city's most popular attractions, a noble feat in a city rich with museums and other landmarks, many of which are free as opposed to the Spy Museum's \$16 adult admission price.

In five years, more than 3.5 million visitors have toured the narrow halls of the museum.

The museum job has been a change of pace for 74-year-old Mr. Earnest.

In his 35 years with the CIA, he worked in various capacities. He spent 25 years as a case officer in its Clandestine Service, running intelligence collection and covert operations against various targets, including Communist organizations. He also worked at CIA Headquarters running counterintelligence and double-agent operations. He later moved out of operations and worked as a CIA liaison with the Senate, as well as director of media relations and a spokesman.

Mr. Earnest is a calm yet enthusiastic man, perhaps from years of being prepared for anything. He talks with a soothing voice, and when several emergency vehicles race down the street outside his office with roaring sirens, he doesn't skip a beat. It's almost as if he doesn't even hear them.

Mr. Earnest originally wasn't interested in the museum director position. But eventually, the museum's parent company, The Malrite Company, was able to convince him otherwise. And he hasn't looked back since.

One of the best things about his job, Mr. Earnest says, is that every day is different.

One day, he gives media interviews about a breaking news story regarding the CIA, such as the June release of the CIA "family jewels" reports produced in 1973, which gave details of CIA wrongdoing, to the National Archives.

On another day, he sits in on development meetings or speaks with museum visitors.

"We have had a number of projects here, all of which I am involved in because I am their resource; I'm their only spy. If anything happens to me, they will probably stuff me and put me in a display case, down off the lobby there," he says with a chuckle.

Of course the job has also presented its share of challenges.

Lately, it's been dealing with the technical glitches that delayed the opening of the new museum program, Operation Spy. The program will be an hour-long interactive experience by which participants actually take part in a spy adventure through hands-on activities.

"It's been touch and go," he says of the technical problems. "But I think when Operation Spy really takes off, it will be a big draw to the museum."

It is still unclear as to when Operation Spy will open, though the museum hopes for sometime within the next few weeks.

But no matter what he is doing, Mr. Earnest says he subscribes to an informal, teamwork-conducive atmosphere with the 150 employees of the museum, to whom he seems to take a friendly, fatherly approach.

He jokes with employees of various levels while walking through the halls. "I'm off to see the wizard," he says to one. "I hope that's lunch. You should eat," he says to another.

Once he gets to the room where the children and their parents are watching the end of a British kids' spy movie, he paces around the back of the room, seemingly unable to stand still.

This is one of his favorite parts of the job, he says, getting to interact with museum visitors, especially children. His eyes light up and his voice fills with excitement when he gets up to talk to the crowd, which includes his wife and two of his six grandchildren.

After so many years of required secrecy, he says, getting to share stories with the public is a nice change.

"Good luck in whatever you do," he says ending the question-and-answer session, "Whether it's being a spy or just riding your bicycle."
