

**Q&A: Ken Bubp**

# Changes keep Conner Prairie official on his toes

*Chief operating officer moved from Prairietown to museum's front office*

**By Chris Sims**

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An average of 237,000 guests visit Conner Prairie each year, and more than 57,000 children stop by on field trips, according to the museum's Web site.

Chief operating officer Ken Bubp, Noblesville, talked about his time at the museum and how he sees the past catching up to the future.

**Question: You've come a long way at Conner Prairie. How long have you been there and how did you make your way to the top?**

**Answer:** I've been here 10 years. I thought I would spend a couple months here — and 10 years later, here I am. It turns out I am more suited to leading and managing than talking to guests. I went from the front lines to managing Prairietown and the Homestead to



**Ken Bubp**

guests.

**Q: A 5-year-old photo shows you portraying a farmer. How does one progress from farmer to carpenter?**

**A:** I don't know that I have progressed. I'm not sure I have any more skills now than I did then.

**Q: You seem to really enjoy your job. What makes it so pleasurable?**

**A:** We have a great staff and a great plan. We've been bucking all the trends that are at other outdoor museums across the country. We have a lot of exciting things going on and a lot coming down the pike. That is why I get up and come to work every morning.

helping run this place as a chief operating officer. It's been invaluable to have this experience.

**Q: How do you find yourself doing so much hands-on work?**

**A:** It's really to stay connected to what we do, which is engage

**Q: How is the interest in Conner Prairie compared to five years ago?**

**A:** In each of the last few years, we've seen double-digit increases in attendance. Those are remarkable numbers.

**Q: What is the Opening Doors Initiative?**

**A:** A few years ago we started really listening in depth to our guests. We did a series of intense learning studies. We miked guests and recorded their whole visit. We realized the need to be more guest-centered instead of just delivering information. It's much more driven by what the guests are interested in.

We created this initiative ourselves and have shipped DVDs of this training resource to every state in the union and a dozen foreign countries. From all historical societies in Wisconsin to the Smithsonian, people are using this resource to change what is going on. Literally on a weekly basis we get calls on training or give advice to counsel.

**Q: How much of an impact has the initiative made?**

**A:** I think we can credit a big part of the attendance increase to this. In some of our follow-up studies, guests tend to stay longer and engage with our staff for longer periods of time. All across the board, from impact on bottom line to the quality of learning experience, everything has improved as a result. I don't want to be boastful, but we really are a model for the rest of the field.

**Q: What were some of the main changes?**

**A:** How our staff reacts with guests — there are more hands-on opportunities and we are more interactive. We are a lot more adaptive. We also have diversified our experience.

**Q: What is your favorite program?**

**A:** The animal encounters area, partially because I have an 18-month old. She loves it. Several of the animals are so well-trained and well-behaved that they roam around freely. There isn't a cage or net keeping you from the animals.

★ Call Star reporter Chris Sims at (317) 444-5548.