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# Visiting Exotic Worlds, Globetrotter shares her Window to the World

By Victor R. Martinez / El Paso Inc.

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1 of 24

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Not all classrooms have four walls, desks and whiteboards.

Some have sandy beaches with crystal clear blue ocean water or lands filled with bamboo forests, while other classrooms have towering volcanoes.

Educator Sue Koenig knows travel is the best way to immerse yourself in geography, history, culture, gastronomy, language and biology.

For more than 30 years, she has enriched the minds of her students far beyond any textbook or travel guide. She has brought the world to them.

A world traveler, Koenig, a former elementary school teacher from Colorado, has shared her international adventures and extensive collection of authentic objects with her students.

During her travels to 112 countries in seven regions – Latin America, Europe, Africa, Oceania, East Asia, Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia – she has collected 10,000 items representing the countries' history and cultural diversity through artifacts, musical instruments, art, clothing, jewelry, and household items.

El Pasoans will soon be able to share in Koenig's travels.

The El Paso International Museum of Art, 1211 Montana, has been providing "sneak peeks" of Sue Koenig's Window to the World exhibit.

Cynthia Horton, a member of the museum's board of directors who is leading the project, said this is a life-changing exhibit for the museum calling it "an amazing gift for the city of El Paso."

"How do you understand art without understanding the culture of the people who created it?" she said. "To be able to bring this type of culture and art to our city is amazing. We are an international city, now people are really going to understand what that means."

Window to the World has been described as walking into an exotic bazaar with Kente cloth from Nigeria, holy water from Mecca, a seven-pound veil decorated with Turkish coins and so much more.

"There is a vending cart from Costa Rica and another one from Cairo," Horton said. "Just the enormity of the collection is tremendous and for people to have that opportunity to see things from around world is incredible."



These are a set of Matryoshka (Russian nesting dolls). In the background is a handcrafted marionette puppet from Burma.

#### How it started

Julie Anderson and Koenig have been friends since childhood.

They worshipped at the same church, they attended the same schools and both became elementary school teachers.

"We grew up in Fort Dodge, Iowa," Anderson said, smiling at the memory of living in the small town along the Des Moines River. "I eventually taught in Minneapolis and she went to Denver to teach."

They also shared the love of travel.

"Once my husband and I retired, we went to 70 countries, and she went to 110," she said. "Here is the crazy thing; we never traveled together."

The roots of Window to the World began in the 1972 in Jefferson County, Colorado, where Koenig was teaching elementary. It is when her foreign travel began.

She worked extra jobs to save enough money for a ticket to go somewhere every summer. She would return with music, costumes, artifacts, household utensils and language lessons that she would share with her class.

Her travels became more frequent, and she eventually established an international network of friends with whom she would stay. She was able to learn some of the language, saw how people lived, learned customs and was able to shop with a native.

"In 1984, she took a job with Aramco Oil in Saudi Arabia where she taught at Saudi Aramco schools for 11 years," Anderson said. "She was in the perfect spot to travel all over the world. She continued gathering musical instruments, costumes and things to use in the classroom to share with her students in Saudi Arabia."

When she returned to the United States, she had 10,000 items and opened Window to the World Museum in Hot Springs, Arkansas, where she had a friend.

Koenig would move back to Denver, taking her collection with her and opening her interactive museum in a Denver mall.

When the mall closed, she put all her belongings in storage where they stood for 20 years, until now.



Sue Koenig, left, sits with former student Maram AIDowayan, right. In the center is AIDoway's husband, Deiya Maghrabi.

### Arrival in El Paso

"I have been well aware all these years that she wanted her collection to be seen," said Anderson, who lives in El Paso. "When she had her museum in Denver, she loved to have kids try on the clothing, use the instruments, eat the foods and listen to the music. Her museum was about kids experiencing the world."

Two years ago, Anderson informed her childhood friend about El Paso building a children's museum and, "what better place for children to try on costumes from all over the world."

But the museum was not interested and the search for an El Paso location continued.

"I always had pictures of Sue's collection and she had a list of the 10,000 items, so she sent the list to me," Anderson said. "I made copies and put them in a notebook and one day I walked into the International Museum of Art and met with the director who kept the book and told me to come back. I met with Cynthia Horton and the rest is history."

Koenig's collection had been in storage for two decades. Now it has a new life.

"It has been an amazing two-year journey with her," Horton said. "The museum doesn't receive any help from the city. We truly are the people's museum, so we are dependent on the community for funding. I think the community is really going to fall in love with this collection because it's just that amazing."

Horton said one of the unique aspects of Window to the World is the collection is an interactive cultural experience.

"She designed it to allow people to actually touch the artifacts," Horton said. "The kids are able try on the costumes and play the musical instruments. I talk to the owner frequently, she is in her 80s now, so we are still gathering her stories of the different items. Every time I learn something new."

Horton said the museum hopes to have its official opening in mid to late 2024.

"We are dependent on the financial support of the community, that's the key indicator," she said. "It's a massive project and we need about \$65,000 for Phase 2. Phase 1 was bringing it from Colorado."

People can help by going to [internationalmuseumofart.org](http://internationalmuseumofart.org) and hitting the donate tab, or send their donation to the International Museum of Art, 1211 Montana, 79902. Sponsorship opportunities are also available.

### Student impact

Koenig, who was not made available for this story, told the Denver Post in 2000, "The bottom line is, people are people. We all eat, drink, dress, play, pray, talk. We just do it in a different way. That's my mission - to make people understand better."

It is almost impossible to gauge the emotional impact educators have on their students.

However, Koenig can rest assured she has made a huge difference on the children she taught, making the world a little bit smaller for them to immerse themselves in the stories she told and the items showed them.

"Sue was my most memorable teacher not because of the math we learned or the reading we completed but because she exposed us to her vast array of items collected from around the world," said Maram AlDowayan, who was in Koenig's fourth grade class in Saudi Arabia. "We were blessed with having exposure to a diverse variety of nationalities."

AlDowayan, 47, said she still has the Chinese paper cuts Koenig gave her as a child.

"To this day I still remember all the songs we learned about the different ways to say hello from around the world," she said. "She made everyone feel comfortable and valuable. That everyone has something to share."

AlDowayan said her teacher opened her eyes to so many cultures, traditions and languages.

"I clearly remember her showing us her passport that folded down like an accordion with stamps from so many countries we had never heard of," she said. "She planted a seed of curiosity and adventure in each of us. She made the world seem vast and beautiful, full of people with amazing traditions and hearts."

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### More Information

#### Make plans

**What:** Sue Koenig's Window to the World exhibit

**Where:** El Paso International Museum of Art, 1211 Montana

**When:** The museum sneak peeks" of exhibit

**Information:** [internationalmuseumofart.org](http://internationalmuseumofart.org) or 915-543-6747

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