

Museums' free days expand to wide area

By Charles Desmarais

In January, when the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco announced a new policy of free general admission on Saturdays for San Francisco residents, Director Thomas P. Campbell admitted it was a "marketing ploy," of sorts.

"Our business is engaging people with art, and my job is getting people to come to the museum," he said at the time. On Wednesday, Campbell and the museums signaled the success of the experiment when they announced expansion of the program to those living in all nine counties of the Bay Area, beginning Saturday, Oct. 19.

In an exclusive interview with *The Chronicle*, Campbell said the first year of free admission to the de Young and the Legion of Honor, the two museums in his purview as head of FAMSF, is made possible by a seven-figure gift from longtime contributor Dede Wilsey, who is also the veteran, recently departed president of the museum board. The museums will seek funding from additional donors for future years.

"We have seen a substantial uptick in attendance as a result of our new Saturday policy," Campbell said, "and

Museums continues on E6

Arts museums' free days expand Bay Area-wide

Museums from page E1

we have had particular success in reaching our goal of increased diversity among our audience, a critical part of our program. We are walking the walk." Visitors taking advantage of free admission are received at a "welcome desk," he said, where they are asked to complete a short survey.

Miriam Newcomer, director of communications for FAMSF, reported that 23,215 people took advantage of free admission at the two museums on Saturdays between April 6, when the program launched, and Sept. 28. Com-

► For a list of the guidelines to the FAMSF's free admissions policy, go to datebook.sfchronicle.com

pared with the same period last year, visitors identifying themselves as Native American increased from 1% to 4% of the total, African American visitors from 2% to 8%, Latino visitors from 7% to 10%, and those of Asian descent from 14% to 45%.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfnchronicle.com Free weekly newsletter: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>