

# Smithsonian's new head: don't call it "The Nation's Attic"

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With millions of artifacts ranging from first ladies' dresses to the flag that inspired the national anthem, the Smithsonian Institution has been cheekily known for decades as "The Nation's Attic." Just don't let the new head of the Smithsonian catch you calling it that.

David Skorton, the former president of Cornell University who joined the Smithsonian on July 1, says he's "not fond of that expression."

"I think about an attic as somewhere that you sort of put stuff that you used to be interested in and might be interested in again someday. You don't know for sure. The Smithsonian, I've learned, is much more dynamic than that," said Skorton, a physician who was president of the University of Iowa before taking over at Cornell.

Skorton will formally be installed in a ceremony Monday as the Smithsonian's 13th secretary. He will oversee the Smithsonian's 19 museums and galleries, its zoo, a staff of 6,500 and an annual budget of more than \$1 billion. He replaces Wayne Clough, who led the institution for six years.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Skorton appeared to be settling in to his office on the second floor of the Smithsonian Castle, the 1855 building on the National Mall that was the Smithsonian's first.

In shelves lining one wall, Skorton—a cardiologist—had a model of a heart. A white hard hat from a recent tour of the National Museum of

African American History and Culture, set to open in 2016, sat on a mantle. And in a corner was a music stand where Skorton, who plays jazz flute, says he sometimes plays at the end of a long day.

Then there's the sign on his desk with the letters "PGATUS." That's short for: Please go ask the under secretary, one of Skorton's deputies. He's joking, but the sign is an acknowledgement he doesn't have all the answers. One thing Skorton has been working on in his first three months is connecting with and hearing from the Smithsonian's staff.

"I'm so hungry for and dependent on that feedback," he said.

At Cornell, he made himself accessible by giving out his email, joining Facebook, writing for the student newspaper and living in a dorm for the first week of school. At the Smithsonian, he's also been giving his email address out and urging people to write.

He says he hopes at some point to join a Smithsonian Sleepover, where kids spend the night in a museum, though the 65-year-old Skorton says he'd need an air mattress. And he said he wants to do other things where he can "taste the experience" the Smithsonian is giving visitors.

"I could read a 200-page briefing, and it would be very valuable, but nothing's quite the same as sitting down with an eighth grader and saying, 'Is this cool? Are you enjoying this? Is it fun? Is it boring?'" he said.

Skorton likes getting out and talking to visitors when he has time, he says, and not everyone has praise. One father he met in a Smithsonian sculpture garden wanted to know why his daughter couldn't climb on the sculptures, for example.

Skorton said he has visited each of the Smithsonian's museums and

galleries, though he wants to go back to some for formal tours. He's also been several times to the Smithsonian's National Zoo, where in September he joined first lady Michelle Obama and China's first lady, Peng Liyuan, for the naming of the zoo's newest panda cub, Bei Bei. (And, no, Skorton didn't actually get to meet the zoo's most famous resident). This month, he has a trip planned to the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Massachusetts, and in January he will visit the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama.

Skorton says he is working to learn more about the Smithsonian and its holdings. The doctor in him couldn't resist taking a peek at the Smithsonian's collection of stethoscopes, some of which will soon be displayed along with some of his own in a conference room next to his office.

And during a behind-the-scenes tour of the National Museum of American History, he put on latex gloves to hold a baseball glove worn by Sandy Koufax, whom Skorton saw pitch as a boy when he lived in Los Angeles. But when Skorton asked to put his hand inside, he was told: "No, you cannot."

Skorton said he thought about pointing out, "I'm the secretary." He didn't. He said the moment reminded him of two things: that he still has "a lot to learn" and that it's his job ensure that the Smithsonian's "stuff" is preserved for future generations.

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