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## The Queer Omaha Archives

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## **SLIDE 1**

Good morning everyone. Thank you to Christa Burns for inviting me to do this NCompass Live session to share the University of Nebraska at Omaha's **Queer Omaha Archives** with you today. The Queer Omaha Archives is a very new project for us and we appreciate the Nebraska Library Commission's interest as well as the interest of those of you who are watching today.

## **SLIDE 2**

As I was thinking about this presentation over the last two weeks one of the notes I wrote to myself was "why are we here today? What does UNO's Criss Library have to share?" Part of the answer I found for myself is firstly, it is actually really nice to be able to share sometimes important, sometimes exciting, and often enjoyable work we are doing at our institutions with others. But as I was thinking about "why should I do this webinar when the Queer Omaha Archives is not necessarily something new in the U.S.?" I was reminded of other presentations I've attended or seen mentioned about new LGBTQ collections or collecting initiatives in recent years and that there are always people in the audience or in the comments who did not know this was A Thing. So, I'm here to add to the body of work about LGBTQ archives and collections *and* remind myself and my GLAM colleagues that there is always more work - outreach and otherwise - to do. This includes talking about our projects when we have access to a forum until everyone knows about our archives.

Today I'm going to talk about: our collecting initiative's background; our partnerships involved in its creation and ongoing work; the mostly good news about the recent launch of the collection; AND a bit about our plans for moving forward.

## **SLIDE 3 Safe Sex Cabaret**

I will begin with a few words to situate myself and the Queer Omaha Archives. I am a cisgender straight white woman archivist who is leading this collecting initiative. Further, I am a new resident of Omaha and Nebraska having set foot here on the Great Plains for the first time less than three years ago. The Queer Omaha Archives joins a long list of similar collections in community, academic, historical societies, and other archives and special collections. LAGAR (the

Lesbian & Gay Archives Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists) is over 30 years old and its guide to repositories, *Lavender Legacies* is about 20 years old. My moment of feeling long in the tooth last week was remembering how helpful *Lavender Legacies* was in the early days of the internet and recalling putting in my time updating entries in the early years of this century.

#### **SLIDE 4 - GALO of UNO + *collection policy statement***

UNO's LGBTQ material in the archives prior to 2015 was not voluminous. We have some material in the Congressional Papers of Chuck Hagel, but that collection was closed. Much of what was in the university archives was the usual type of material you would expect to find in a university archives including 8.5x11 fliers from around campus like this one, articles in the student newspaper, as well as brief mentions in faculty senate and task force records. As a sidenote, we might have some personal papers of LGBTQ folks, but they were not identified as such at the time those collections were accessioned.

In 2014, Criss Library Archives & Special Collections revised its *entire* collecting statement for the first time since...well, since the Reagan administration. The new portion that is relevant to the Queer Omaha Archives was the following: "Material in Special Collections includes unique and specialized items of local, state and regional interest with a particular focus on Omaha history and culture. **Areas of focus are individuals and organizations which have traditionally been underdocumented**; the arts in Omaha from the 20th century to the present; and material in support of the Criss Library's Barbara A. Holland Collection for Service Learning and Community Engagement."

For a number of years, the archives faced the same sad circumstances that many archives & special collections unfortunately did: not enough staff, space, or resources. Actively collecting archival and manuscript collections was not always encouraged, supported, or even possible. The good news for us is that between 2013 and 2015, the department doubled from 4 to 8 people and our workspace was expanded and renovated. Relatedly, we had an increased emphasis on collecting material and providing access.

#### **SLIDE 5 Josh Burford**

In October 2015, during LGBTQ History Month, Josh Burford of UNC-Charlotte was invited to campus by my UNO colleague Jessi Hitchins. Jessi is the Director of the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center in UNO's Student Affairs unit. Burford gave two talks about queer history and queer archival and historical qualitative inquiry. His visit was co-sponsored by the Sociology & Anthropology Department, Gender and Sexuality Resource Center (GSRC), and the Gender and Sexual Orientation Student Agency. The Queer Omaha Archives was created because of this event. In the days before Burford visited campus he reached out to me inquiring if the archives had an interest in creating an LGBTQ collection, to which our answer was "yes" and "thanks for getting all of these campus folks with a potential interest together in one room."

### **SLIDE 6 OUT and Proud**

In November 2015, Jessi Hitchins put out a call to her campus and community contacts for a meeting in Criss Library to discuss creating an LGBTQ collection at UNO. The folks invited included representatives from various community organizations, representatives of student organizations, queer faculty members, including those teaching courses that were part of the new LGBTQ and Sexuality Studies minor directed by Professor Jay Irwin, and of course Criss Library's Archives & Special Collections was there.

Attendees brainstormed potential collections and folks to contact. I provided some basic information about what an archives would and would not collect, how the donation process works including donor agreements and financial contributions, how researchers might use the material, and how we would care for the collection long term.

### **Slide 6a Wearing Gay History**

For instance, I explained to folks that there are some things that we would not want to add to the collection for reasons of space, preservation needs, or that they were outside of our usual scope, like t-shirts. But we are fortunate to have the option to photograph objects we do not want to add to the collection. We can then retain those photos in the collection - and in the example of t-shirts - eventually submit photos of our tshirts to a site like Wearing Gay History.

### **Slide 6b Pride 1991 sash**

At this organizing meeting, we also discussed the potential geographic scope of the collection. For those of you from outside Nebraska, Omaha is located in

eastern-most Nebraska. Driving across the state is a drive of around 6 hours and we are a Midwestern city as well as being part of the Great Plains, but we are also pretty close to what I think of as the West. Immediately across the Missouri River from Omaha is Council Bluffs, Iowa. Around one half of the state's population lives in the Omaha metro area. We ultimately decided that the collection would collect material from the Omaha metro area, but we would be open to collecting from across the state of Nebraska, if another cultural heritage organization in Lincoln or another Nebraska community did not have an interest in also collecting.

Attendees were very interested in a potential oral history project - who should be interviewed and how to collect interviews. We talked about how this could be a funded project or organized with an interested community group or as part of a UNO class. We had some further discussion of potential projects with UNO faculty and their courses related to both students seeking and collecting content and students' coursework coming to the archives.

The group discussed long term goals related to fundraising including establishing an endowment and the potential future naming of the collection to honor a community member.

We knew we wanted to hold an event to announce the collection to the public. People in the room were very eager and excited. We initially thought we would hold our public launch in February.

And our final piece of business during that meeting was discussing and choosing a name for our initiative. This is where the name the Queer Omaha Archives was selected.

### **SLIDE 7 - Glitter sign**

In the weeks that followed, Jessi Hitchins from the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center and I had a reality check. We both had a lot going on in those winter months, so we decided that we would delay our plans by several months and hold our public reception announcing the collection in the summer. This time was important to the archives for a number of reasons. First, we decided to

hold our launch event in the summer after the annual Heartland Pride Festival, which would allow us the opportunity for outreach at Pride.

Second, it gave me time in the archives to work with an enthusiastic student to build the LGBTQ records in the university archives from less than 50 identified pages to several cubic feet of records that included publications, fliers, administrative records, memorabilia, and signs from protests and rallies like the one you see here. The student's passion and interest for the archives was frequently demonstrated as they made numerous trips from the student union to the library bringing boxes of records from multiple student organizations and offering various pieces of memorabilia. **Note** that we accepted some of the memorabilia and other material, but also declined some of what was offered. Remember: if you're not making appraisal decisions when offered collections, you're probably not an archivist.

[Fun archives trivia: this particular sign led to the creation of my favorite note on an archival container to date. The note that always make me giggle when I open the map case drawer reads "*Warning: Contains Glitter.*"]

### **Slide 8 Sexuality extravaganza**

During the spring semester, we also had an opportunity to continue solidifying the library's and archives' partnerships on campus with the UNO Gender & Sexuality Resources Center and English Professor Tammie Kennedy. The library was a co-sponsor for a series of events we dubbed the Sexuality Extravaganza, which included a screening of the documentary *Tig* with director Kristina Goolsby and appearances by author Anna Pulley and artist Kelsey Beyer for their wonderful book *The Lesbian Sex Haiku Book (with Cats!)*. This created an opportunity for the library to be included in these events and get mentions, including mention of our new Queer Omaha Archives.

### **Slide 9 Queer Film class**

Another partnership with English Professor Tammie Kennedy was the ingestion of her students' work into the Queer Omaha Archives. Prof. Kennedy offered her Queer Film course for the first time during the spring semester. She had decided to require her students to do their responses to films and other writing on individual blogs created for the course. Early in the semester she extended the

invitation to her students to add their blogs to the Queer Omaha Archives when their coursework was completed. According to Prof. Kennedy, the students were all excited by the offer and it seemed to make them a bit more thoughtful about the work they were producing. This is Prof. Kennedy, her students, and guests at a screening.

In the upcoming fall semester we will be working with Prof. Kennedy and another faculty member whose two courses will include an oral history component with the intention those interviews will be added to the Queer Omaha Archives.

### **Slide 10 pride ad**

So, let me move on to the public launch of the collection. We signed up to share a table with our friends from the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center at the Heartland Pride Festival in June 2016. This is our ad that appeared in the Pride program and that we distributed on postcard sized fliers at Pride and posted on social media. It made the rounds on Facebook especially thanks to lots of wonderful friends and strangers.

### **Slide 11 - Terry Sweeney's stuff**

As a result of the sharing and reposting on Facebook, a week before Heartland Pride, I was contacted by Terry Sweeney. Mr. Sweeney had lots of questions for me about this new collecting initiative he had heard about on Facebook including our long term sustainability, funding, and he even quizzed me about the particulars of our collecting policy that he had read on the library's website. Mr. Sweeney very quickly decided he wished to donate his collection to us in honor of his deceased life partner, Pat Phalen. The Terry Sweeney & Pat Phalen papers include local magazines they had a role in publishing, programs, photos, scrapbooks, memorabilia, and more. Terry is a pretty organized person as you can see by the two banners from Marches on Washington in zip lock bags on the right. These banners were carried by the Nebraska delegation and one was signed by folks from Nebraska who attended the 1987 march. The collection includes lots of interesting documents and photographs as well as memorabilia. Because of the perfect timing of this gift, we took these and a few other photos

of the collection to show to folks at Pride when we were having conversations about the types of material we wanted for the Queer Omaha Archives.

### **Slide 12 table at PRide**

Here is our table at the Heartland Pride Festival with a closeup of the buttons, temporary tattoos, and beach balls we handed out. Our wonderful student supporters also promoted the Queer Omaha Archives at a separate Pride event for teens the evening before. We talked to over 400 people during the six hours we were at Pride. This included folks who I had had email exchanges with in the weeks leading up to Pride about potential donations, folks from community organizations as well as incoming UNO students and parents and new UNO faculty. We invited everyone to visit our website and attend our reception in July.

### **Slide 13 416 button**

So the actual launch. About a month before our opening reception Jessi Hltchins from the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center and I met with our colleague from University Communications who had contacted us about a press release for the Queer Omaha Archives and media placements. The announcement went out the week before our event. The announcement written by the university was picked up and published in a few local papers. Jessi and I spoke with a reporter from the Omaha World Herald who wrote an article for the newspaper. I was also interviewed by a local radio station and a local TV station included footage from our opening reception in one of those “around the metro” news highlights.

We were happy with the media coverage the Queer Omaha Archives received. I was however once again reminded that the online comments section of newspaper articles - apparently especially on Facebook in the case of the *Omaha World Herald* newspaper - are often not an affirming and happy place. In the interest of self-care, it can be important to schedule something joyful or cleansing to do after reading those comments. Note, we will include copies of those comments in the Queer Omaha Archives Ephemera Collection. We want to make sure we document the public’s reception of the collection, so that will include photos from our reception as well as those comments attached to news articles.



Let me do a sidebar about Amendment 416 and this button. First, this anti-Amendment 416 button was offered to the Queer Omaha Archives the day before our opening reception by my colleague Angela Kroeger. It was a great item to have in the collection and display at our reception because it got several of our guests who don't have anything in the way of documents or a collection of material thinking, "Hey, I have material like this that I have saved. Maybe I should donate it to the archives?" Yes, yes, you should offer the material you have to the archives.

Amendment 416 was passed in 2000. It was a ballot initiative that amended the Nebraska Constitution to make it unconstitutional for the state to recognize or perform same-sex marriage or civil unions. The referendum was approved by 70% of the voters. So you have this as the law of the land in Omaha, meanwhile across the river in Iowa we had marriage equality in 2009. Then we had the city of Omaha pass a non-discrimination ordinance a couple years later. So there was a fair bit of recent activity at the university, local government, and state government levels and in the courts that we want to document.

OK, back to the reception.

#### **Slide 14 Reception collage**

We held the opening reception for the Queer Omaha Archives two weeks ago on July 13th. We were thrilled to welcome over 80 guests to Criss Library Archives & Special Collections that evening. Our target audience for the event was the general public, but it was open to UNO employees and students. We ended up with guests split close to evenly between the public, UNO students, and UNO employees. While a number of our wonderful library colleagues came to show their support, we also welcomed folks from across campus, most of whom had never visited Archives & Special Collections. The archives & Special collections staff staff and students did amazing work to make the evening a success and to provide all of our guests with a great experience.

You can see in the top two photos there a display of items from the Queer Omaha Archives staged in the workroom where we do our arrangement and description of collections. We had a brief program including Jessi Hitchins there on the lower left and the dean of the UNO Libraries Dave Richards. They talked

about our goals and dreams for the collection including future potential donations, an oral history program, paid student internships, fundraising, and more.

As usually happens to archivists, that evening we heard about many basements, garages, and storage units that need to be visited as well as personal stories that need to be recorded. But we also talked with younger professionals and newer members of the Omaha community about potential outreach and events that we could hold with or in the archives for community groups.

At the 3.5 hour mark, it was past time for my three wonderful colleagues who had been there from the beginning of the reception to go home.

As I said to a few enthusiastic guests a little later in the evening as the library was closing, we could host future events in the library during the academic year when the library is open until midnight.

### **Slide 15 QOA Omeka website**

So, what's next for the Queer Omaha Archives?

We have a number of community members and organizations that we are following up with about donating collections.

I've heard from multiple community members who would like to volunteer with us on organizing collections. We're going to have one volunteer start next month and will wait a few months when we have more collections in need of arrangement and description before welcoming the other community members as volunteers.

We're talking with an organization next month about a potential fundraising initiative.

We want to capitalize on the success of our opening reception and ensure we maintain contact with attendees. The library recently welcomed a new communications specialist to our staff the week before our reception and we're going to be talking about how best to maintain a flow of information to folks. We're talking with an arts organization about potential joint programming in the coming months. This is someone the library has not previously worked with, so that is exciting.

We'd like to hear from local cultural heritage organizations who may have an interest in working together on this initiative.

### **SLIDE Donations**

We set-up this Omeka site to show folks how we could display digital objects that are part of the collection as well as to serve as a home for information about the Queer Omaha Archives. You can see it includes information about how to make donations and a link to the university's foundation to make a direct gift to the Queer Omaha Archives.

### **SLIDE Finding aid**

Our Omeka site links to the finding aids for collections that are part of the Queer Omaha Archives. We use ArchivesSpace for our collection management system. As my colleague Angela Kroeger and I were working on accessioning the first collections for the Queer Omaha Archives, she raised the matter of how we should identify those collections in their finding aids. At Angela's suggestion we went with a local subject heading for the Queer Omaha Archives. Everything donated after November 2015 that was given with some intention by the donor for the Queer Omaha Archives will receive this subject heading.

### **SLIDE LibGuide**

We're connecting any collections received prior to November 2015 related to LGBTQIA history through our research guide on the library's LibGuides platform.

### **SLIDE Thank you**

The Queer Omaha Archives at the UNO Criss Library Archives & Special Collections was established to collect, provide access to, and preserve the history of LGBTQIA life in the region. We have a long way to go in the work ahead of us, but the enthusiastic response to this collecting initiative from partner organizations, members of the public, students, and others has -in my biased opinion - been wonderful for the archives, library, and university. It is opening the eyes of many on and off campus to the potential of partnerships with our archives and library as well as generating good will. One of the first bits

of feedback we heard from outside of our initial bubble of supporters was from the parent of a new graduate. These parents heard about the Queer Omaha Archives at the university's Lavender Graduation ceremony last spring and they told the university's chancellor that they thought this was a great initiative. Yay, archives!

Thank you again for your interest and we have some time for questions.

++One question we've heard from folks is about the name. Why did we call it the Queer Omaha Archives?