

Crafting Relevant COmmunity Partnerships Using Archives

LGBTQ+ Voices: The Queer Omaha Archives Oral History Project

Amy C. Schindler, Director of Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries

20 February 2019

{Slide : Acknowledgement of Country} We wish to first recognize that we are the guests living on lands represented by Native Nations whose sovereignty, governance, and treaty lands existed long before the state of Nebraska. These Nations include the Omaha, Ponca, Santee, Ho-Chunk or Winnebago, Lakota, Pawnee, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Otoe-Missouria, Ioway, Kaw, Sac and Fox or Mesquakie, Kickapoo, and Delaware Nations.

Hello and thank you for tuning in today.

I need to begin talking about UNO's LGBTQ+ oral history initiative with a few words to situate myself in relation to the collection. I am a cis, straight, white woman archivist leading this collecting initiative. Further, I am a relatively new resident of Omaha and Nebraska having set foot here for the first time about five years ago. So I am not a member of the communities we are documenting.

{Slide: QOA overview}

The Queer Omaha Archives is a newcomer to a list of similar collections in community, academic, and other repositories across the country. It is an initiative from the University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries' Archives and Special Collections. The Queer Omaha Archives was conceived in late 2015 by students, faculty, staff, and community members to address the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ people and organizations in UNO's and Omaha's archives. The spark that lit the fire was a visit to UNO by speaker Josh Burford during LGBTQ History Month in which he talked about queering history and queering archives including his work establishing

LGBTQ collecting initiatives and oral history projects at other universities. Happily, members of the community were interested in supporting such an initiative at UNO.

{Slide: Jessi and Jay} I want to specifically acknowledge here the collaboration of Dr. Jessi Hitchins, director of UNO's Gender & Sexuality Resource Center. Without whose interest and address book this initiative would not have started when or as strongly as it did.

Thanks to Jessi, we held an organizing and brainstorming meeting in the library at the end of 2015 and then active collecting began in early 2016 with a quiet phase of conscious acquisitions of material from UNO student organizations. The creation of the collection was announced and collecting personal papers and organizational records from Omaha community members began in June 2016.

The core mission of the Queer Omaha Archives is to preserve and provide access to material of enduring value to the legacy of LGTBQ+ folks in greater Omaha including Council Bluffs, Iowa. That "greater Omaha" scope has – as expected – expanded to actually cover pretty much all of Nebraska. The collection of meeting minutes, photographs, posters, scrapbooks, videos, regional newspapers & magazines, oral histories, and other historical material ensures that the public can hear the underrepresented voices and learn about LGBTQ+ history specific to the region's queer communities. This act of collecting material is a testament to the past omission of these histories from the archives.

In archives, we need to listen for silences. And sometimes we take action or seek others who may take action - with or without us - to address these silences. When records do not exist, the archives may have to see that they are created through our documentation or an initiative such as an oral history project.

So, from that first UNO organizing meeting about starting an archives, there was interest in launching an oral history initiative. In that conversation folks understood that this would be something that would need to be done in one of two ways. First, we could collect oral histories after the archives raised private money so we could hire additional staff. Our second option was to

collaborate with a faculty member and their students or in partnership with community members who would collect interviews for the archives.

Sociology professor Dr. Jay Irwin was immediately a booster for the archives in all ways including collecting the first oral histories. He consulted with me on creating an oral history project for his Intro to LGBTQ Studies course including the always important documentation and signed agreements. The assignment had students working in pairs conducting an interview. During spring and summer Dr. Irwin had invested a great deal of time in creating a list of potential interviewees. Dr. Irwin prioritized folks to interview to ensure he had a diverse group of narrators. As a trans man, Jay absolutely understood the archivist's wishes to have the oral history interviews help to ensure that the voices of people of color, trans folks, and women were immediately brought into the archives during its first year. Over the summer, Jay began contacting folks to ask if they were willing to be interviewed by his students in the fall.

{Slide: Irwin student narrators}

As expected, some folks said yes, some said no, and some didn't return his messages. One potential interviewee, a retired UNO dean, said "yes, but..." Sadly, the "but" was that Dean Shelton Hendricks was in the final stages of cancer in hospice and could not wait 2 months to be interviewed. As a result, the first interview collected for Omaha's LGBTQ+ archives was not collected by students, but came from the recording devices of Jay and myself spending a Saturday morning with Dr. Hendricks in his home - with his husband and some of his children and grandchildren dropping into the interview room. Dr. Hendricks passed away later that week. It was a beginning we had not imagined for the Queer Omaha Archives' oral history project.

Jay's students would go on to conduct 15 interviews. Unfortunately, immediately after the semester two interviewees asked me to NOT include their interview in the archives because they felt the students did a poor job. Fortunately, both were people we know. This meant that the poor impression that could have been made of UNO and the new archives was mitigated because the narrators knew Jay and Amy. Later, two other

narrators from this first group asked to re-do their interviews. The archives has only been able to redo these interviews because of the ongoing grant project I'll talk about in a minute. (And I'll just say that while discouraging, these hiccups were at a comparable or lower rate than I've experienced with faculty having their students collect interviews for other classes and projects.)

Continuing forward, we are willing to again collect oral histories with classes, but only selectively. We have been more focused on raising money through grants and private gifts from organizations and individuals to employ part-time oral history associate Luke Wegener to conduct interviews. The interviews conducted by our oral history associate are more in-depth, better researched, have been a more consistently positive experience for the narrators, and also have better metadata for the archives.

{Slide: Grant project narrators}

Beginning in fall 2017, we were able to leverage small gifts from several individuals and local groups to hire Luke Wegener who was trained to be our oral history associate. We have called the grant project *LGBTQ+ Voices: The Queer Omaha Archives Oral History Project* and all interviews we are collecting include this name. In addition to using the Humanities Nebraska grant funds to conduct oral histories, we also needed to use a small slice of the funding for a public program and since we knew our new oral history associate Luke would need to be trained, our public programming was a half-day community workshop on how to do oral history led by the wonderful oral historian and archivist Jade Rogers. The workshop was held off-campus at The Union for Contemporary Art and successfully drew a diverse group of community members, students, and faculty members.

Starting in fall 2018, we are also purposefully interested in adding more voices from folks outside of Omaha and Lincoln to the collection.

Our numbers to date: 12 interviews collected by Jay Irwin's students in 2016 are available and two interviews Jay himself collected are available. Since fall 2017, LGBTQ+ Voices' oral history associate Luke Wegener has

20 interviews online with 8 completed and in different stages of editing and approval.

Of the 34 interviews available to the public to date, 8 were with people of color, 7 interviews were with transf folks, 16 interviews were with women, and 10 interviews were with white, cis men.

An important part of our project is sharing the interviews as soon as the narrators are willing to do so. I want to share with you our access points.

{Slide: CONTENTdm}

Luke writes detailed interview summaries, biographies of the narrators, and breaks the interviews into time-code indices for encoding using OHMS, the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer app. Our digital initiatives Librarian Yumi Ohira and Metadata Coordinator Angela Kroeger then upload the interview and its metadata to our various platforms where folks can access the interviews online.

First, all oral history interviews are described on our CONTENTdm platform. This links to the interview encoded with OHMS, the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer.

{Slide: Omeka}

All LGBTQ+ Voices interviews are also described on our Omeka.net site for the Queer Omaha Archives, which also link out to the OHMS-encoded interview.

The metadata will also be added to the finding aid for the LGBTQ+ oral history collection, which is available in our University of Nebraska ArchivesSpace database.

{Slide: OHMS}

And here is what an interview looks like in OHMS. The OHMS viewer is where the library's platforms - CDM, Omeka, and ArchivesSpace - link to.

OHMS allows the public to listen to the LGBTQ+ Voices interviews (or watch if you have video interviews) and then follow along by segment or transcription. Since these are audio recordings, we started asking narrators

if they have a photo we could use on the website, but we don't have those for everyone.

I want to note that we are not creating transcripts of LGBTQ+ Voices interviews. This is a time savings for staff and our budget, but between the person's bio and summary of the interview on the platforms along with the time-code index here in OHMS, there are lots of entry points for folks to find specific content of interest in the interviews.

{Slide: Protest sign and Pride flag} To wrap-up...

The project is moving along, but as with life, there are challenges for LGBTQ+ Voices.

1. Money - We will likely continue to scramble for a couple thousand dollars from various private sources to keep paying our oral history associate. We are hopeful about help for raising more money - and in larger increments - in the future. In the meantime, I will continue sending emails and letters and invest hours in online day of giving campaigns like Give OUT Day coming up in April (or give directly to QOA through the university foundation).
2. Narrators - Especially useful to the archives is that Dr. Irwin started a spreadsheet of folks for potential interviews before his class conducted interviews. While we amassed an initial list of about 70 local folks for potential interviews, many folks turned out to be unwilling or unable to sit for interviews at the time. Luke, and to a lesser extent I, continue to add to this list of potential interviewees, which is over 150 people.
3. Building trust takes time - I'm an outsider. Oral history associate Luke, while a trans man from Omaha, is young. We rely on the recommendations and referrals of community members. The incomparable Dominique Morgan, Executive Director of Black and Pink, artist, and community activist, has enabled Archives to add two more interviews with people of color just by posting the link to his interview on his Facebook and encouraging other folks to share their stories.

4. Long term continuation of collecting new interviews is an open issue. Collecting oral history interviews ourselves is not part of Archives' core function at UNO. This past year, oral histories are taking a lot of time from several of us in the department as we work on two small grant projects. But this attention simply cannot continue.

There is of course the good as well:

1. Great community engagement.
 - a. We would not have the diverse group of narrators we do without the work and referrals of many.
 - b. During LGBTQ history month last fall I posted a photo from an early Omaha Pride parade on a Facebook group for old photos of Omaha. It received lots of comments with offers to add to the archives. We heard from several folks interested in being interviewed and Luke is currently editing two interview recordings.
 - c. We try to be opportunistic. When we heard interest from folks in Lincoln last year, we seized on the excitement and interest and conducted several interviews [note: I talked with my UNL colleague Mary Ellen Ducey before diving in to those interviews]. Similarly, when I heard from folks at Wayne State College who were interested in the project, I asked for referrals to local folks or alumni who might be willing to sit down for an interview.
2. Wonderful public attention in news stories, talks with community and student organizations, presentations, and more.
3. Archives is addressing one of the archival silences in its collections.

I believe I am a realist and as a realist I know that the archives will never be complete, but we are always seeking and this is part of our continuing collaborations and hopefully our growth.

{Slide: Thank you}