

# Archiving grief: Museums learn to preserve memorials left at mass shootings

By DAVID MONTERO  
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A makeshift memorial to victims of the Las Vegas mass shooting has been moved to the Clark County Museum in Henderson, Nev. (Chase Stevens / Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Cynthia Sanford sat in a Clark County Museum storage room and fretted over the email she was about to send to Jeff Schwartz, president of the Parkland Historical Society in Florida.

"I'm not sure if I should overwhelm him with tips," Sanford said.

In the quiet, she began typing: "Try to get on the same page as the public works department or whoever owns the land where the memorials are located."



She paused. Typed some more: "You can't save everything. Flowers, food and other organic materials can't be saved. Paper items blow away, fragile items get broken and large items can be a public hazard."

It had been about five months since Sanford was in Schwartz's place. Las Vegas was then the focal point of tragedy after a gunman killed 58 people attending the Route 91 Harvest country music festival. People began leaving candles, posters, flowers and crosses at the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign at the south end of the Strip.



The Clark County Museum is small and, even though Sanford has a degree in anthropology and a certificate in museum studies, the curating and archiving of more than 15,000 items was daunting. She knew she needed help. She got it from a museum in Orlando, Fla., site of the Pulse nightclub shooting.

Since Columbine High School in 1999, police, schools and hospitals have offered each other advice, and sympathy, after each mass shooting. Now add museums to the unlikely mix of those groups forced to forge a plan on how to deal with the rise of massacres.

Museums have created an informal support network — each site of a mass shooting passing along lessons learned about preserving items left at makeshift memorial sites. Charleston, S.C., helped Orlando. Orlando helped Las Vegas. Las Vegas is now helping Parkland.

Last year, the American Assn. for State and Local History hosted a panel titled "Commemorating Tragedy, Healing Wounds: Mother Emanuel, AME Charleston, S.C." The group will probably hold a similar panel at a convention in Kansas City this year.



Workers remove a makeshift memorial honoring the victims of the Oct. 1 mass shooting in Las Vegas. (John Locher / Associated Press)



John Dichtl, president of the association, said establishing protocols that museums can follow is an "emerging area for history museums" and that it can help them do "a better job getting in front of the collecting challenges in mass tragedies."

Museums are planners by nature, moving slow and contemplating the weight of exhibits before mounting a display that puts a moment of time in historical context. They keep most of their artifacts in storage under exacting conditions to slow deterioration. When items are received by a museum, it's usually a few at a time.

Mass shootings and the memorials that spring up are exactly the opposite. Thousands of items are subject to rain, heat and sometimes snow and build up quickly. Intake, cataloging and archiving can take years.

Jenny Hankinson, curator of collections at the Littleton Museum in Colorado, said after the Columbine High shooting more than 10,000 items were left at sites around the school. It took seven years to sort and archive such an array of items, including Beanie Babies, cassette tapes, track shoes.

Keeping it all presents special challenges — emotion versus pragmatism. Special boxes usually are used to store artifacts, but museums are learning to buy cheap boxes in the early stages of gathering materials. Hankinson cried at times — the toll

was overpowering. But she had to steel herself for the difficult choices about what to keep and what to discard.

"There's a lot of pressure on museums to keep items as long as we can, which in our industry is forever. But stuff takes up space," Hankinson said. There also are humidity and temperature controls to consider. "All of that costs in the long run," she said.



Cynthia Sanford of the Clark County Museum in Nevada catalogs memorial items. (Chase Stevens / Las Vegas Review-Journal)





Pamela Schwartz, chief curator at the Orange County Regional History Center in Florida, with items collected from memorials honoring the victims of the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando. (Joe Burbank / Orlando Sentinel)



When the Aurora, Colo., theater shooting happened in 2012, more than 5,000 items were left near the site where 12 people were killed during a screening of "The Dark Knight Rises."

Jennifer Kronk, curator of collections at the Aurora History Museum, said museum staff were only half way through sorting items left at two memorial sites.



She said they talked with the Littleton Museum about preserving, storing and archiving the items.

"Just hearing from them that it took seven years to sort through the collection — and that was OK — helped ease the pressure a little," Kronk said. "It's not something you can spend all your time on because it's emotionally draining."

Museums have found that memorials serve as time capsules, reflecting the era or location of a shooting and giving each a distinct sociological fingerprint.

Columbine occurred when Beanie Babies were popular and hundreds were left as tokens of compassion. Batman and comic book items appeared in Aurora. Cowboy boots, hats and — because of Las Vegas' international draw — flags from Canada, New Zealand and Japan were left at the Las Vegas sign.

The Pulse nightclub memorials featured LGBTQ rainbow flags, Disney items and votive candles with Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Virginia Tech, where 32 people were killed in 2007, was flooded with 90,000 items, many related to the school's mascot, Hokies.

One place that took a different tack to mementos left behind was Newtown, Conn., site of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that left 26 people dead, including 20 first-graders.

Kyle Lyddy, chairman of the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission, said the outpouring and volume of items were so overwhelming to the small town, it was initially difficult to see how it could follow what Littleton and Aurora did. He says Newtown doesn't have a museum.

With 50,000 teddy bears alone arriving from all over the world, the task of honoring people's expression of grief and solidarity bumped up against the realities of physical space.



Pamela Schwartz with items collected from memorials after the Pulse nightclub shooting. (Joe Burbank / Orlando Sentinel)



"We are a small community, and to drive down the street and see thousands of teddy bears and the crosses and messages — it stops you in your tracks," Lyddy said. "Right after the new year, it had to come down. It was wet and soggy and wasn't attractive. But in its time after the tragedy, it was so spontaneous and so incredibly powerful. That's what you want to preserve."

Lyddy said the town ended up turning the mementos — including the teddy bears — into ash and will integrate that ash into the permanent memorial site.

But most places have seen the items left to museums to handle.

Orlando, which before Las Vegas had the highest mass shooting casualty count, had more than 6,000 items left at sites. Pamela Schwartz, chief curator of the Orange County Regional History Center, spoke with George McDaniel in the immediate aftermath of the Pulse nightclub massacre.

McDaniel had been through the shooting in Charleston, where nine people were killed at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church a year before.



He said people sent Bibles, quilts and "an abundance of origami cranes." McDaniel met with other historians seven days after the shooting to figure out what to do with it all.

"I think in the future, anthropologists will look at the artifacts left behind and see strong commonalities because of our human condition," McDaniel said.

"Unfortunately, that human condition shows we are flawed, and you see incidents where hate prevails. But the reason this is so important is because it also shows how people want to express themselves just by being there. There is a deep-seated human need to communicate in these times of grief, and it's natural to want to leave something behind to express that. We want to honor that."

Sanford is still in the early stages of the painstaking process of cataloging the Las Vegas memorials. Sitting with two other people who were photographing, labeling and cleaning items on a January morning, she picked up a small ornament that had been left at the cross for Michelle Vo, one of the 58 people killed.

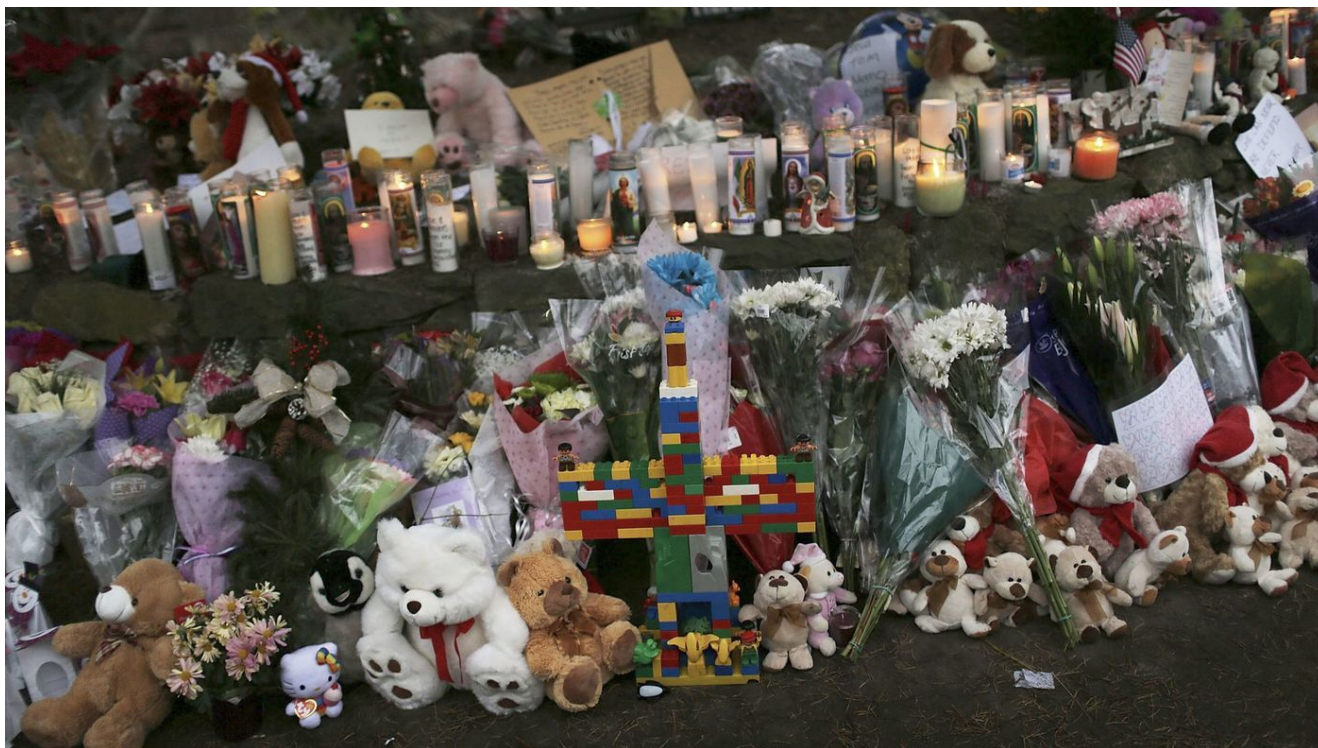
It was item No. 58.84. She entered its description into the laptop computer, talking as she typed.

"Glitter gold painted star with 'MV' in black at the center," she said. "Condition: good. Detail: dirty."

She carefully laid it on the table. It was photographed, labeled and placed in a special bag to preserve it. She has gotten volunteers to help — a tip she picked up from Orlando and one she passed on to Jeff Schwartz in Parkland.

Schwartz said the last week had been overwhelming and he was grateful there is a support network of museums that have been through it before. The Parkland Historical Society doesn't have its own building yet.

"We've been tasked to archive as much as we can, but it's also such a morbid event. It's part of our history now," he said. "But it's also a way to show that this happened in the past, so as to try and prevent it from happening again in the future."



A Sandy Hook Elementary School memorial in 2012 in Newtown, Conn. (Spencer Platt / Getty Images)



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