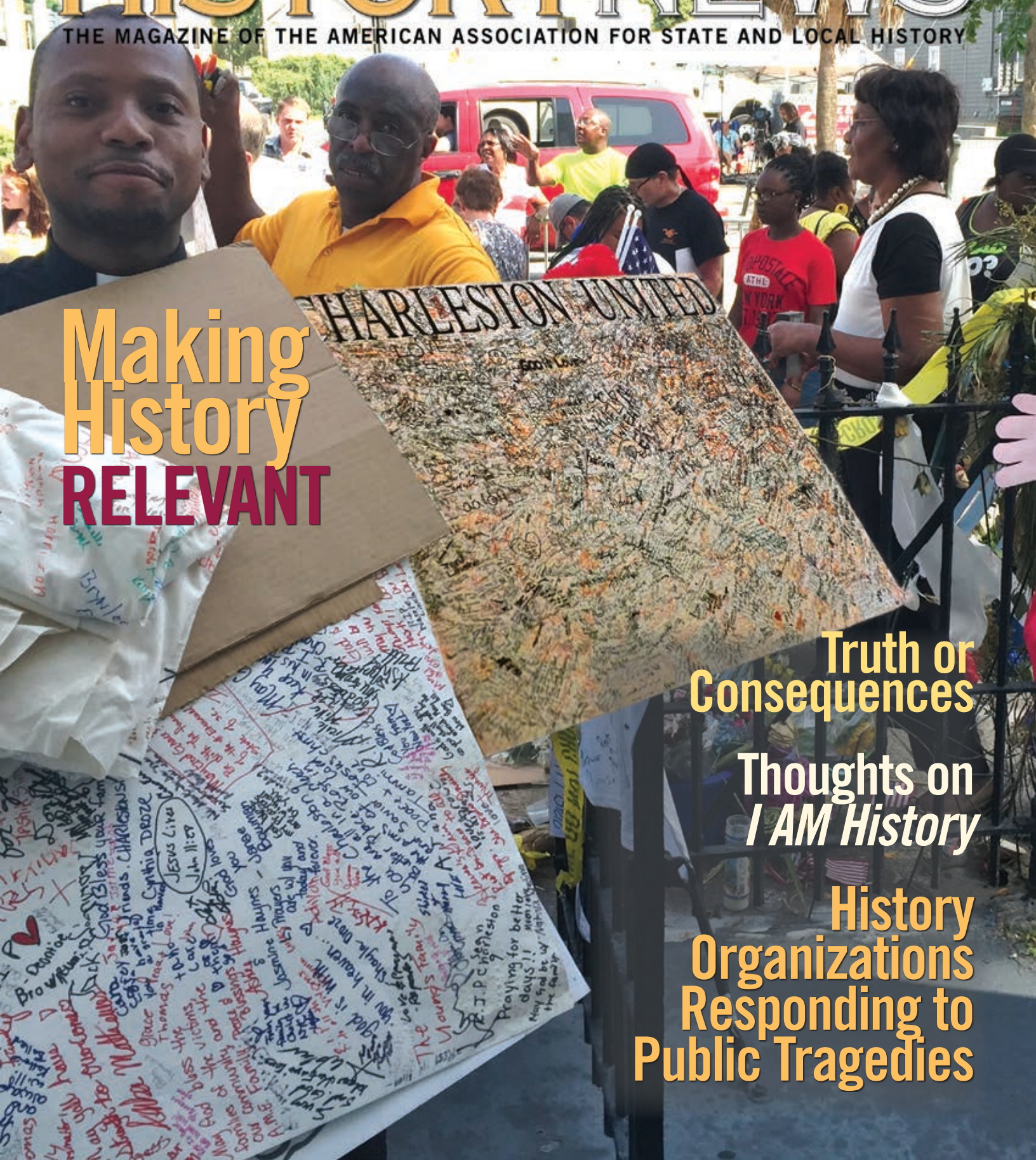


HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



**Making
History
RELEVANT**

**Truth or
Consequences**

**Thoughts on
*I AM History***

**History
Organizations
Responding to
Public Tragedies**



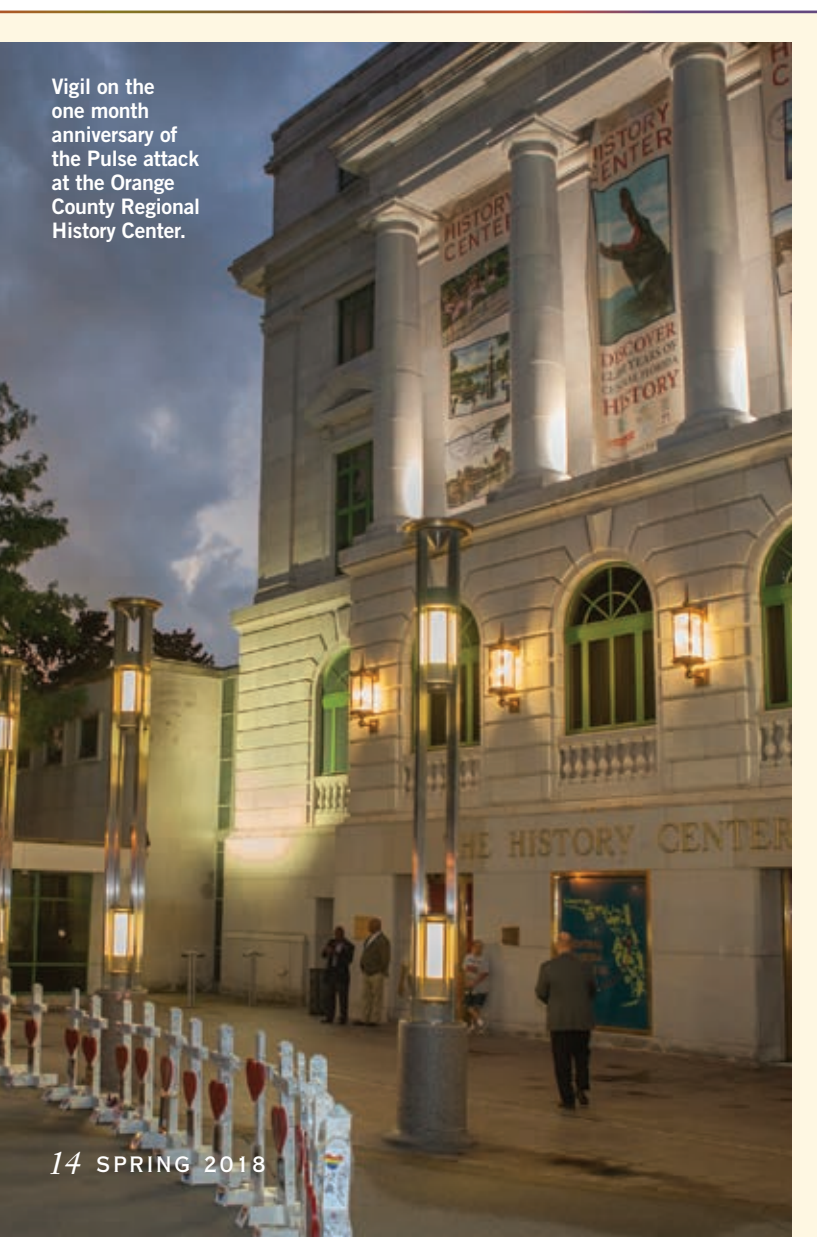
The *Personal* and the *Professional*:

HISTORY ORGANIZATIONS

Responding to Public Tragedies

BY GEORGE W. MCDANIEL

Vigil on the one month anniversary of the Pulse attack at the Orange County Regional History Center.



On June 11, 2016, Adam Ware, historian with the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, was on a staycation at Walt Disney World. It had been an entirely normal weekend for him, riding his favorite rides, getting angry about changes to the park, and staying at a hotel on site. When he awoke the next morning, ten text messages appeared on his phone, asking “Are you okay?” He had no idea what they were talking about. Going online, he learned a man in a nightclub about ten blocks from his downtown apartment had gunned down forty-nine people, with scores wounded, physically and mentally. Terror had struck. In fact, his community had become the scene of what was then the largest public mass shooting in American history. History was now at his doorstep. He recalled, “If you work in a history museum, on paper that sounds like your dream come true. It’s far from that, far more



Orange County Regional History Center

The History Center collected and preserved memorial artifacts to document this difficult history in progress and to help transform the outpouring of public support and grief into a permanent collection for interpretation and healing.

complicated. As a historian, you know your responsibility is to collect, preserve, and interpret history, but how do you do that after your community has suffered a trauma completely unexpected? What do you do that Monday? That Tuesday? What do you do six Mondays from then? Your responsibilities change, and they change in ways not immediately clear.”¹

Unfortunately, those questions and others like them are increasingly becoming what we in the history profession need to plan for, as we do for disasters. Of course, each disaster is different—a fire, a flood, an earthquake, or a hurricane—and as history organizations, we still plan and prepare for them. So too with mass murders. The question is not if it will happen, but when and where, as events in Las Vegas, Texas, New York, and, most recently, Parkland, Florida, have shown.

What these mass murders all have in common is that the perpetrator had come to see ordinary people—men, women, or children—as “the Other.” They became so different in the perpetrators’ minds that they should be killed. As historians, we know this warped perspective is not new. It is as old as the genocide against Native Americans, the destruction of African societies, the pogroms and the slaughter of Jews in the name of racial purity in Europe, the killing sprees in the Trojan War, and in the Bible itself.

We in the history profession are not standing idly by. The “Value of History” statement provides a foundation. In keeping with its rationale, organizations are using history both to bring healing *after* a tragedy and to promote cross-cultural understanding and empathy *before* it happens. They are trying to use public tragedies as teachable moments and engage their communities. Their staffs are responding in ways both professional and personal, and in so doing, are themselves touched and changed.

This is a story about the mixing of the personal and the professional in the face of public tragedy. It is derived from numerous discussions and specifically from a session at the American Alliance of Museums conference in May 2017 with presenters representing different types of organizations and responding to different tragedies at different times. With comments paraphrased into a conversational format, their experiences may have been different, but together they form a pattern informative for us all. In addition to Ware, who served as moderator, and me, they were:

Amy Weinstein – Director of Collections and Senior Oral Historian at the 9/11 Memorial, who served as a fieldwork curator for the New-York Historical Society in its collecting endeavor after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001.

Pam Schwartz – Chief Curator at Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, who spearheaded the collecting efforts after the 2016 shooting at Pulse Nightclub.

Tamara Kennelly – University Archivist and Associate Professor at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, who coordinated the collecting efforts after the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech.

While questions could fill long lists, these three focus on personal and professional responses to tragedy. Readers are urged to contact the participants for more information and, looking forward, to keep in mind *both* the personal and the professional nature of our lives.

Could you give the personal side of the story? What were you doing at the time of the tragedy, how did you respond, and how were you affected as a person?

AMY WEINSTEIN: In 2001, I was a new junior curator at the New-York Historical Society. We had no TV, no radio, a little bit of Internet, and we heard something horrible had happened. Our response: paralysis, shock, wanting to help but not knowing where to help or what to do, and having to get home. As Adam Ware was speaking to the audience, I made eye contact with his curatorial staff, and they were in tears, as was I. I also made eye contact with my director and a former intern, and we immediately went back to that moment. So it’s a combination of personal and professional. No matter the tragedy, you will respond using both your profession and who you are.

We were lucky at the New-York Historical Society because our president was a historian, and he wisely advised us: “I know you want to help, but you cannot fight that fire or move those steel beams, but you can be historians and think about how you can help as historians.” That is what we did—and more.

PAM SCHWARTZ: I was hired a few months before Pulse happened for a very specific purpose: to be the project lead for our multimillion-dollar, full-scale museum exhibition renovation. I woke up on Sunday morning, June 12, and was sitting lazily on the couch with my dog when I got the news. At first, it was just shocking. We didn’t know how



George W. McDaniel

Visitors sign a memorial banner outside Mother Emanuel AME Church on June 20, 2015.

shrines sprang up all around campus. Like many others, I was in shock. I wandered out to the Drillfield and looked at the shrines.

The following day, I received an email from Ed Galvin, director of archives and records management at Syracuse University, who offered condolences and told me that Syracuse had gone through a campus tragedy in 1988, when they lost thirty-five students in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103. He said they had established a major archives devoted to the victims and their families, and offered advice and assistance. His email put things into focus, and I began thinking how we were going to build the collection.

GEORGE MCDANIEL: On June 17, 2015, I was still the executive director of Drayton Hall and was at home that evening. When I woke up the next morning, I saw the news of the murders at Mother Emanuel AME Church. I felt connected because I had been to services there and had friends who went there, such as Elizabeth Alston, a former member

of our board and a church leader, and some of the African American descendants of Drayton Hall.

On June 19 and 20, I went to pay my respects and was struck by the throngs of people coming to voice their sympathy, grief, and hope and expressing their sentiments through conversations, prayer, and song and also with artifacts—crosses, teddy bears, flowers, rosaries, balloons, as well as makeshift signs and banners signed in every inch available. Just as the murderer and virulent racists over time have represented our worst, these expressions testified to our better angels. I thought, “This moment will vanish. What can I do so it doesn’t?”

I called Elizabeth Alston and asked if the church had a plan for preserving the memorabilia. It did not, so we agreed to call and meet with representatives from history organizations in Charleston. A week after the shootings, we met in the same fellowship hall where the massacre had taken place. Bullet holes were still in the ceiling. It was a sad time, but also uplifting to see the life of the church going on and to see so many people from Charleston and across the nation coming to express their sympathies.

Keeping in mind that other sites of tragedy like Sandy Hook decided not to preserve artifacts, we asked the church, “What do you want to do?” The church replied that it wanted to preserve the memorabilia, so we teamed with parishioners and began retrieving artifacts that afternoon, storing them in a side room of the fellowship hall. Since it

many were dead. It was twenty at that hour. The night before, we had experienced the murder of the young singer Christina Grimmie, shot dead in a venue five minutes from my house. The nightclub was ten minutes away.

I first started to panic. “What do I do? Should I go give blood? Well, I just gave blood last week, so I can’t do that right now.” They’re probably going to have enough water. You start hearing the news. Police are out investigating. Doctors in the trauma ward are doing countless surgeries within hours, trying either to save or patch up as many people as they can. So, for me as a historian and a curator, I tried to think of what I should be doing.

TAMARA KENNELLY: On April 16, 2007, at about 7 a.m., Seung-Hui Cho shot freshman Emily Hilscher in her dorm room. Resident adviser Ryan Clark went to investigate and was shot too. Two hours later, Cho went across campus to Norris Hall, chained shut the three main entrances, and gunned down and killed thirty more students and professors in the classrooms and hallways. He wounded many more. He shot himself in one of the classrooms.

I was home sick that day. My son came bursting in with his friend and yelled, “Mom, turn on the TV.” His friend was on his cell phone and declared, “They’re jumping out of the windows.” I was a lucky one. I knew where my son was that day.

The next day stones painted with the names of each victim appeared as shrines on the Drillfield along with a large plywood board painted white for people to sign. Spontaneous

had not rained since June 17, all the memorabilia was still in front of the church and in good condition. (Later that night, it rained.)

Racial prejudice runs deep in the South, including Charleston, so I think on a personal level, I and other history professionals wanted to use this moment to help bridge racial divides. We were deeply affected by the response of family and church members and by the thousands in Charleston and across the nation declaring that hate would not prevail. Personally touched, we were asking ourselves and one another: “What can we do so this moment is not just a flash in the pan?”

How did you respond as a museum professional?

AMY WEINSTEIN: For me, I think it was almost immediate. I remembered I had worked as a professional in the World Trade Center. I didn’t remember exactly which tower, but I was back in that tower in my mind, which was frightening because then you start thinking about where those fire escape stairs were. Where was the exit? What was my office like? I should remember this. I can’t remember this. What would I do? What if it was my floor?

I walked home. Since the subways weren’t working, I walked from the Upper West Side to Brooklyn with two colleagues. It was a long walk. To illustrate how freaked out we were, we made a wrong turn, walked over the wrong bridge, and ended up in the wrong part of Brooklyn. Eventually we got home. I couldn’t get the Twin Towers out of my mind: Where was the bookstore? Where did I buy a coffee?

I knew only one thing: I can save my photo IDs from the World Trade Center. I got home and made sure my boyfriend was okay and that people knew I was alive. I found my photo IDs and went back to work two days later. I brought my ID and business card to my boss. Other people had already done something similar. We’d already collected a

dust mask from somebody who lived downtown. It can be immediate, or it could take a couple of years, but I had no doubt. We just wanted to help.

PAM SCHWARTZ: My immediate response that morning was that I needed to figure out how to begin preserving the memory of this event for the education of those in the future who aren’t here living it. Within minutes, I was sitting on the couch writing a five-page plan on how we needed to collect to preserve the story of this event and who to work with. What permissions do we need? What do we do to preserve these unique items out in the Florida sun and rain and getting destroyed? How are we going to mitigate the damage? How do we use this to help our community? That was step one.

On Monday, I went into the office and handed this plan to my director. He just looked at me and said, “Nobody’s thinking about this but you.” I replied, “Well, it’s the only thing I know how to do. It is something I can do.” It wasn’t until about two weeks later that we officially got through all the questions and approvals to begin collecting. My questions were: Who do we need to talk to? Who do we get permission from? Can we collect these things? How are we going to collect them?

Since then, we have professionally conducted more than 30 oral histories, collected over 5,000 items, and preserved terabytes of photography. Every individual we’ve dealt with is in a different place in their healing. Even five years later, people may be in different stages: mad, sad, happy, thankful, or any other.

For individuals worried about dealing with community members who are still raw from an event, you need to be prepared and remember you never know who’s walking in and what their story is. I don’t treat Pulse stories and donations any differently from those of other people because it isn’t necessarily less emotional for them than it is for those affected by Pulse. That tragedy is just more recent, and that’s what makes it seem like it’s going to be harder. We

Tamara Kennelly, university archivist, with items from the April 16 condolence collection, and speaking to a Virginia Tech University Museum Ethics class about the April 16 Condolence Archives.



also need to be open-minded and compassionate. We should remember that though we are doing a professional job, you and the person you're interacting with are both just people, so treat them as you would a sister, a friend, or a neighbor who is crying.

TAMARA KENNELLY: The Virginia Tech shooting received intense media coverage, and people around the world responded. We received over 90,000 items from all 50 states and from 800 different countries. Our Student Union was papered with things people sent. I spoke with the Dean of Libraries about developing an archives, and she invited a team from the Library of Congress (LOC) to meet with us. They suggested we build a representative collection because we weren't able to keep everything. They thought there was a sameness in the materials we received. Since a lot of them mentioned thoughts and prayers, the LOC team said we were getting all those prayers because we were in the South. Actually, the thoughts and prayers came from people all over the country. It wasn't a southern thing. They also suggested that we keep the weird because that's part of the response to tragedy. We wrote an initial proposal to create a new archives with project archivists and new computers, but never got an administrative response.

Greg Beecher from University Unions and Student Activities and I made a bare-bones proposal, which got accepted. We found a site in the university's Corporate Research Center, got cheap tables and old computers from our IT department, and hired six students to work with me. Since we could not keep everything, I decided to also make a digital collection. We didn't have equipment for photography. I asked a university photographer to evaluate our setup, and he laughed and said I had chicken lights for the lighting. He didn't offer to help us. Eventually a colleague loaned us lights.

We hired local photographers who wanted to help. As we considered the items, I thought of them first as comfort to the families and the community. I indicated on the finding aid if a particular person was mentioned, so their family and loved ones could find the items we had honoring them. In the longer term, I thought of the collection as a research collection. How do we respond to death? What do people talk about in their writings? Why do people send things?

The more I read the banners and posters, the more I saw that many people addressed big issues: gun control, mental health, war, racism, politics, bullying, school safety. We noted these references for future researchers. After reading so many messages from beyond our community, it seemed important to hear the voices of our own community. Colleagues in the Oral History Association told me, "You need to start an oral history project." One of the LOC team was an oral historian, so that made it easier for me to suggest beginning an oral history pilot project.

GEORGE MCDANIEL: My professionalism came in quickly because, as a historian, I know that what separates history from fiction is evidence. Like many others, I've wanted to produce histories in exhibits, tours, or publications, but the evidence has not been preserved, so the history cannot be

told. Since the memorabilia at Mother Emanuel constituted evidence, it warranted preservation. My professionalism also told me of my limits, so I called on other professionals for help. We formed the memorabilia committee, consisting of church members and representatives from Charleston's historical and preservation organizations, the

College of Charleston, and the city of Charleston. Crucial was the work of the Charleston Archives, Libraries, and Museums Council. Working with the church and volunteers, we developed a systematic retrieval process and reviewed and organized memorabilia, including numerous Bibles, letters, quilts, art, and works on paper, mailed to the church.

My professionalism also helped with commemoration. For the first anniversary of the attack, Mother Emanuel requested an exhibit and turned to us for help. With the church's input and approval throughout, we selected the theme of healing, because healing is something we all need. For the exhibit, the city loaned a small building across the street. In light of limited space and lack of funds, we chose to display samples from the more than 400 colorful quilts sent from all over the world, many bearing messages on them, along with a case of representative artifacts. Also featured was a video of an online tribute to Mother Emanuel produced by the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston, which had preserved a digital archives of television recordings, photography, and social media. A local museum design firm, HW Exhibits, donated its time and talents to help us.

To generate both empathy and action, we asked visitors to reflect on what they had seen in the exhibit and to think of one issue or person that needed healing, and then to write on an index card how they might help with that healing. That card they placed in a box with all the others. With no follow-up from us, it was simply a pledge to themselves. All of these steps were informed by my professional training, and through this process, my own professionalism and that of others have been enhanced.

What were the unexpected things that happened, and how did you handle them?

AMY WEINSTEIN: That's a difficult question. I guess what surprised me was the sheer number of people who wanted to participate and share their stories. It's been more than fifteen years, and what's been unexpected has been the number of first responders who wanted to talk, those who saved something or made something from the steel

Amy Weinstein of the New-York Historical Society salvaging large objects taken from the scene of 9/11 in spring 2002.

Amy Weinstein





PAM SCHWARTZ:

Every single thing that happened after the Pulse shooting was unexpected and almost more painful than that initial moment, because we had had time to think and reflect. For me, the hardest part was dealing with people’s motives—personal, professional, or political. Everybody had one, and you rarely recognized it at first. Was it to give blood? To leave an arti-

fact? To create a new artwork? To allow us as an institution to go out and collect? Because we are county-governed, we confronted a lot of unfortunate political motives. Somebody could come in and say, “I’d like to do an oral history. I have a story to tell related to Pulse.” What is their motive for doing that oral history? Do they think it’s going to be put in an exhibit? Is it because they want to contribute to their healing, such as a trauma surgeon who can’t tell the media exactly what he went through that night but can tell us? Or is it about the mother who simply wants her son’s story to be remembered and wants him to be greater than the one 2:02 a.m. moment when he was massacred?

To deal with the unexpected, we, as a field, need to create an entire toolkit to help other institutions responding to mass casualty events. What’s extraordinary are the differences

or picked up something they had seen at Ground Zero; the number of people who saved a little bit of dust and ash they saw; the artists who took the ash and incorporated it into the paint as they were trying to process their feelings, because putting the ash onto the canvas somehow meant something to them. While it should not have been surprising, it was a nice surprise. It’s the depth and compassion of the human spirit that comes out.

I wanted to respond to something said earlier. The collecting is not only about the aftermath and the response. Our collecting has been about the act itself. It’s about more than 3,000 lives lost, the buildings lost, and 343 firefighters and 37 Port Authority police officers lost. There were tons of steel. We had to make decisions about which piece of steel to save, which fire engine, which police car.

What’s extraordinary are the differences

From our discussions, the following questions provide a sample in order to help historical organizations move forward:

- What is the **mission** of the organization? How does responding to tragedy fit into it?
- What **partnerships** might be formed? What is the chain of command?
- Who decides whether **memorabilia** and other evidence should be collected? When?
- What are sources of **funding** for staff, collecting, cataloging, storing, or conservation?
- What and how much should one **collect** (artifacts, art, oral histories, photographs, video, social media)? What should one not collect but document digitally?
- Does the organization have the **resources** to do this? What will it need for collecting temporary memorials or ephemeral memorabilia?
- What **collection** policies best suit different types of material (artifacts, art, photographs, video, documents, digital and social media)? Where might these items be stored?
- What is the **nature** of the place where the tragedy occurred? Is it public or private? Who is in charge of that place and of what happens to it? Who owns the memorabilia? Legally, can the organization collect from the site?
- Who manages **communications** and public relations? How should the organization communicate what it is doing and aspires to do?
- Who manages **volunteers** and ensures professional protocols, including security, are followed?
- What are the **goals** of commemoration, and who decides? How does commemoration connect back to the victims and survivors and to families and friends?
- What can history organizations do to **promote** cross-cultural understanding and prevent people from stigmatizing people different from themselves as the “Other?”
- Throughout the process, how will the organization **respect** the fact that each individual on staff is a combination of the professional and the personal?

amongst the tragedies, the different governance structures, and communities. We need to think about that and decide how we as a profession should respond.

TAMARA KENNELLY: What was unexpected for me was that we archivists need the perspective of museum professionals, for we have a different approach for handling materials. We box things up and make finding aids and inventories. Our work is geared to bringing things to researchers in the reading room or to digitizing and making them available online. At first I didn't realize how important the exhibit component would be. But for the last five years, I've worked with the art director of Virginia Tech's Perspective Gallery, who's curated our exhibits, and that has made all the difference.

I had been thinking like an archivist, but I needed to think like a museum professional. For example, I took pictures out of their frames because that's what archivists do. I didn't realize that it's so much better and easier to show things that are in their frames. You hang them up. I just didn't know. Another example of my learning from a curator pertains to a paper banner with paper daisies on it. I thought it was really cute. We rolled it up. But when I unrolled it and wanted to display it, the curator exclaimed, "You can't show that! It's all crumpled. People will think you don't care." I still thought of it as nice, but realized she was right.

If mass tragedy happens in your community, even if you're not charged with responding, you might consider offering your help, because we archivists need the perspectives of museum professionals and vice versa.

GEORGE MCDANIEL: Public tragedies are inherently unexpected. None of us knows when or where the next one will happen. Also unexpected are the consequences for preservation of memorabilia. While we in the history field are used to working with trained professionals, a church, a school, a nightclub, an airport, or office building is not a history organization. Education is needed all the way around. Respect, candor, and diplomacy are critical. How does one tactfully but effectively ask such basic questions as: What are your goals? Where's your funding? What is the plan? Who's going to pay for the supplies, storage space, staff, or exhibit you want? Who will manage volunteers and ensure protocols are followed?

While professionalism is critical, there are times one has to let go. For example, there may be procedures an archivist or curator believes in doing, but there is no more time or funding. They can't put documents or artifacts in proper boxes, or there may be too many items to catalog. Relinquishing control is made all the more difficult because as a professional, you know the eventual outcome.

Moving Forward

In the face of public tragedies, which will inevitably happen, community-based history organizations in those communities will have to ask themselves a range of difficult questions. While the five of us followed our hearts and our professional training, if we had to do it again, we would have initiated long-range planning much earlier. In fact, we all agree, as do others, that a local, state, or national professional association or alliance, including universities, should produce a plan for preparing for and responding to public tragedies. In Boston and elsewhere, organizations are using strategies dealing with trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders. Disaster preparedness and recovery plans could serve as models, for they cover different types of disasters and provide templates which can be tailored by individual organizations to their specific needs and capabilities.

Epilogue


Another unexpected outcome for me has been my involvement in the Charleston Illumination Project, a multiracial program, grounded in the organizational strategy of polarity thinking. A product of the tragedy, the project's goal is

to build a healthy community by enhancing relationships between police and communities and between communities traditionally separated by race. Working with churches, schools, and neighborhood associations, we've used history and artifacts to encourage participants to voice their individual points of view and explore how history both haunts us and helps us. The results have enhanced dialogue and understanding and suggested a means to prevent further public tragedies. ●

¹ Responses paraphrased from the session, "It Could Happen to You: Collecting in the Face of Tragedy," May 7, 2017, American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting, St. Louis, MO.



An emergency kit for conservationists includes tools for quick onsite work.

 George W. McDaniel is President of McDaniel Consulting, LLC and serves as vice chairman of Mother Emanuel AME's Memorabilia Subcommittee. A native of Atlanta, he earned his Ph.D. in history from Duke and recently retired as Executive Director of Drayton Hall in Charleston, South Carolina. He continues to devote his career to building bridges across cultural and racial divides through history, education, and strategic planning and through the Charleston Illumination Project. A frequent writer, speaker, and facilitator about such issues, he can be reached at gmcDaniel4444@gmail.com or www.mcdanielconsulting.net.