

Rich Wandel MARAC Presentation, April 2013

Archival advocacy

Archival advocacy seems to suddenly be a big topic. At a time both of budget cuts and when portions of our society are actively seeking to distort the historic record for their own political purposes, it is only natural that we should feel a need to circle the wagons, defend ourselves and organize for a greater role in the national shouting match. But the idea of the archivist as advocate is not a new concept. In some sense all Archives are institutions of advocacy. The very idea of preserving the past entails advocating for the importance of history and for the lessons it may teach. To control the historic record is to control the view of the present, and to constrain our hopes for the future. For this reason conquerors have always paid attention to history, seizing records or at times destroying them. Early Christians destroyed the library at Alexandria, Napoleon captured and removed to his own control the archives of those places he had conquered, modern fundamentalists destroyed the Buddhist statues and artifacts of Afghanistan. To be a preserver of history, to be an archivist, is to be an activist in the cause of truth telling. This is always directly or indirectly a political as well as a social act.

All institutional archives are advocates

In addition, anyone who is an archivist for a particular company or institution is in fact an advocate for that institution. Not only do we preserve the history of the organization, but we regularly participate in assisting that organization in its daily activities and often in its outreach and publicity. Whether looking up how a particular project was accomplished in the past as a way of guiding current activity, supplying information to celebrate an organizational anniversary, or helping in the day to day public relations of our institution, we are advocates. New York's LGBT Community Center decided to celebrate its thirtieth

anniversary with a series of short works by young videographers. Partnering with NBC , the young artists were given a network mentor and instructions to visit the Center's Archive. The archive is also a regular contributor to the Center's web page and email blasts. Advocacy is a normal part of any institutional archive.

Extending that advocacy to directly archival concerns is a natural extension of our work, and is by no means a new idea. Many archivists and archival organizations have publicly been heard on such issues as the Clinton administration's appointment of the Archivist of the United States, and the lawsuit compelling the Bush administration to turn over all of their records to the National Archives. In New York City, the Archivists Roundtable of Metropolitan New York was loud in its protest of the Guilianni administration's bypassing of the Municipal Archives to place his papers in a local university. In a press conference at City Hall the Roundtable pointed out the dangers of the Mayor vetting his own records and then removing them from City government. Although New York's Archivists were unsuccessful in preventing Mayor Giuliani from doing this, they did as a result influence subsequent legislation which will make it more difficult for future mayors to do the same thing. The Roundtable was also heard from when Mayor Bloomberg sought to reorganize and downgrade the status of the Municipal Archives. The Roundtable has also been prominent in urging its members to lobby for archival and library funding, notably the successful attempt several years ago to preserve the New-York Historical Society from extinction.

IN LGBT community need for history

Archival preservation can also be a form of advocacy for particular communities. Prior to the Stonewall Riots, Lesbian and Gay citizens often felt that they were the only gay person within hundreds of miles. Lacking even family support, and seeing no truthful images of themselves in any media gay men and women were isolated and felt themselves to be alone. This isolation reinforced the societal prejudice

and mythology of the criminal-sinning- sick homosexual. Even as a New Yorker, I remember quite clearly the revelation I had when I attended an early reading of historian Jonathan Ned Katz's play "Come Out" in 1970 or 71. The play was simply a series of short biographies of well know historic figures who were homosexual. Katz's telling of Walt Whitman's meeting with his lover Peter Boyle for the first time – essentially he picked him up on a Washington street car -- was a revelation to me. His later description of how Peter would sometimes wrap himself in Walt's old grey coat after Whitman had moved to New Jersey, spoke to me in a way that nothing else ever had. For me and many like me, the preservation and telling of history, was truly a lifesaver. For many, particularly for Transgender persons who are just now coming into their own, this isolation is still true. The rediscovery and public acknowledgement of our nearly lost history goes a long way to ending this sense of isolation. The same, of course, can be said for the uncovering of women's history and for the rediscovery of the stories of many minority groups.

Collecting grass root organizations

The collections of the LGBT Community Center National History Archive cover a wide cross section of LGBT communities. In addition to the records of the Center itself, they include over 100 separate, fully cataloged, manuscript collections of organizations and individuals. In many cases these individuals and organizations are well known, for example we hold the papers of the ongoing Heritage of Pride organization and of the still continuing Congregation Beit Simchat Torah. We also include many collections from persons or even organizations that are largely unknown, yet contain important information about the diverse LGBT community, its history and what it was like in a given time and place. In the early days of the AIDS crisis I would often get calls from people who had just lost a loved one – from partners, siblings, friends or parents. They usually asked about what was to be done with collections of gay periodicals, worthy of preservation but hardly rare, or possibly club invitations or flyers. As we spoke I would ask about other materials, perhaps snapshots, letters, or the rare diary.

Initially I found these conversations to be difficult and strange until I realized that in speaking with these people at a time of their grief I was actually telling them the lives of their loved ones were valuable and should be preserved. We don't normally see this very common part of an archivists work as advocacy, but in its own way it is, advocacy for the bereaved.

AT the LGBT Community Center National History Archive, we have sort of unofficially made a specialty of collecting the scattered records of organizations which have never had an office of their own.

Characteristically these organizations records are scattered among any number of past officers or members of the organization. The historic record is in bits and pieces. I mentioned earlier the records of Heritage of Pride, the organization which has planned New York's Pride celebrations since the mid-1980s. Before HOP there was the Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee; CSLDC, as it was called, was originally a coalition of NYC Gay and Lesbian organizations but quickly became an organization by itself. Having no office of their own, their records were scattered among any number of committee members. The minutes of their meetings, and other records can be found here and there among a number of individual manuscript collections at the Center's National History Archive. We respect provenance and keep the collections separate, but they are easily found and gathered through the Archive data base. Similar stories can be told of a number of early LGBT organizations whose records are found among individual collections of personal papers. Preserving their histories also allows the continuity of the LGBT movement to become clear. There is a clear line of continuity found in the founders and members of better know groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance through the short lived and lesser know Lavender Hill Mob to the well know ACTUP and beyond. These early grass roots organizations are often more radical than the settled larger organizations which come after them. They are also the true beginning of the various aspects of the LGBT movement. Preserving and making know these early histories honors the men and women who plotted a path to

today's world of increased visibility and strength. By remembering and honoring them, we implicitly validate and encourage today's grass-roots and radical organizations.

In summary, as archivists, individually and from within our Archival organizations, it is appropriate for us to advocate, within the constraints of non-profit tax regulations, for the preservation of our collective history. We need to advocate for funding and against any manipulation, or destruction of the historic record. As individuals we may also work in any number of just causes, but we should not overlook the inherent advocacy of the archival profession itself. By our preservation strategies, and by making documentary evidence available to the widest possible numbers of people, we are advocates for the communities we serve and for an accurate view of these communities' histories.