

Archives for All: Setting the Context
Daria D'Arienzo, Chair/Speaker

Remarks for Session 307:
Strategies for Accommodating People With Physical Impairments and Disabilities in Archives

SAA 2009 Meeting
Austin, Texas
August 14, 2009

Good Morning. Welcome to *Strategies for Accommodating People With Physical Impairments and Disabilities in Archives*. It is good of you to come at such an early time of day. And, it is very encouraging to see colleagues concerned with the issues considered in this morning's session.

I'm Daria D'Arienzo, Chair. I have the honor of providing contextual remarks and the pleasure of introducing my fellow panelists. We are also lucky to have David Adams with us today to sign. In the interest of time, we are going to get started right away.

"Accessibility and accommodations are not just an issue of disability, but a human issue." It was this phrase in a paper by fellow panelist Avery Olmstead that really struck me—for it succinctly captures the matter at the heart of our session today.

As archivists we strive to inclusively save, care for, and make accessible the "stuff" from which all people can tell their stories. As a profession we choose to be inclusive and we have been working to that end for decades. The scope and range of our collections reflect this.

But how are we doing when it comes to the scope and range of archivists? How have we fared when it comes to inclusively accommodating colleagues

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and patrons with physical limitations? Has this issue ever been considered in a systematic way? Do archivists have a practical, vetted source for disability-related issues faced by professionals and patrons? Where do archivists find concrete recommendations and solutions for creating negotiable working environments for colleagues? What about sources for creating welcoming, accessible, user-friendly physical and virtual research use spaces for patrons?

Though it is now changing, an honest answer to these critical questions is: “There is not much that is archival out there.” Certainly some laws and especially the “Americans With Disabilities Act” provide basic legal groundwork for assistance for the nearly 49 million people with disabilities in the United States. And it is true that archivists in our various personal and professional environments want to do well by our colleagues and patrons who may be challenged by physical impairments. As a group we want both literally and figuratively to break down barriers that hinder accessibility and that may interfere with a colleague’s ability to do his or her job or that may prevent a patron from gaining access to research tools and thus from easily getting the information needed.

And, as a practice, we do find ways to provide physical and informational access to meet an individual’s needs, but most often on an ad hoc basis.

Advocacy, accessibility, adaptation and accommodation, education and training need not be expensive, but they must be a priority.

Every person here has, at one time or another experienced a physically limiting illness or injury or has just plain entered the aging process that unifies us all. My sense is that personal experiences actually have a very great impact on our understanding of physical challenges. And, it is these experiences that are an important part of the driving force in finding ways to build bridges. Developing awareness, enhancing sensitivity, overcoming

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fears, and sharing information are all important steps. Talking with our colleagues and patrons is key.

This session was built on the desire to do just that. In 2007 Russell James, then chair of the Records Management Roundtable, contacted me, as co-chair of the Archives Management Roundtable, to propose to SAA the creation of a Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management. SAA leadership welcomed the recommendation to create this coalition of archivists, records managers, librarians and related professionals.

The Working Group was charged:

To contact and network with persons with physical impairments in the archives and records management profession (archivists, records managers, and researchers/patrons), identify and study the challenges for them in same, and develop tools to assist them in overcoming these challenges.

We are lucky to have with us today 4 wonderful presenters, most members of the Joint Working Group, who will share their personal and professional experiences, as well as new research, including the results of the recent SAA survey, together with information and recommendations that can successfully serve the needs of colleagues and patrons. These resources, put together by the Joint Working Group, are available online through a variety of links and connections, which you will hear more about shortly. (See also links on the SAA conference website and the AMRT and the RMRT websites: “Recommendations for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities.” RMRT/AMRT Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management, 2009.

<http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/archmgmt>;

“Recommendations for Working with Archives Employees with Physical Disabilities.” RMRT/AMRT Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management, 2009.

<http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/archmgmt>).

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All presentations will be brief and are intended to inspire lively discussion. I'll introduce each speaker and return to facilitate the discussion. We are counting on all of you for a dynamic exchange—because it is true—accommodation and accessibility is, at heart, a human issue.

Our first speaker will be Frank Serene, followed by Avery Olmstead, via a pre-recorded presentation, Casey Greene, and Debra Kimok.

[Introduce Frank]

Frank Serene:

Frank Serene is an Archivist with 30 years of experience at the National Archives working primarily in arrangement and description. He received his Ph.D in history from the University of Pittsburgh in 1979 where he used his archival training to work in the Archives of Industrial Society. His catalogue, *World War II on Film*, was published in 1994. He is currently at work on a Reference Information Paper that identifies and describes National Archives records that relate to disabilities for their online ARC catalogue. His next project will be the records of Gallaudet University, noted for its groundbreaking work with students who have hearing impairments. Frank's work, *Making Archives Accessible for People With Disabilities*, (Washington, D.C. National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], 2008: <http://www.archives.gov/publications/misc/making-archives-accessible.pdf>) is one of the most important advocacy statements for accessibility and a critical tool for every archives. Welcome Frank.

Avery Olmstead:

A virtual Avery Olmstead comes to us via a short film he prepared for the program today. He regrets that he could not be here in person but felt strongly that he wanted to participate. Avery is a 2008 graduate of the MLIS program at the University of South Carolina. Currently he serves as a Project Specialist for Project Ready to ServeMaine at the University of Maine's Center for Community Inclusion & Disability Studies. He joined

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the AMRT/RMRT Joint Working Group after completing his research for a course paper on accessibility in archives and records centers (available online at the SAA 2009 Meeting website). He says that access issues are both a personal and professional passion and he brings his life experience to the group's work. Welcome Virtual Avery.

Casey Edward Greene:

Casey Edward Greene is Head of Special Collections at the Rosenberg Library, with responsibility for the Galveston and Texas History Center and the Library's Museum. Casey served as Chair of the Archives Management Roundtable for several years and is now Co-Coordinator of the AMRT/RMRT Joint Working Group. Casey will speak on workplace problems and coping strategies he has developed for dealing with his hearing loss, which stems from a family history of hearing impairments going back many generations. Welcome Casey.

Debra Kimok:

Our last speaker, Debra Kimok is Special Collections Librarian and an Instruction/Reference Librarian at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She recently served as the Records Management Roundtable Vice-chair and was the newsletter editor for several years. Debra is Co-Coordinator of the AMRT/RMRT Joint Working Group that has been addressing the issues that are at the core of this session. Debra will provide an overview and summary of the Joint Working Group's 2008 survey about archives employees and researchers with physical disabilities. Welcome Debra.

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