

Perusing the Past: My Days with a Digital Memory Project

By Kaelynn Hayes

Several times last year, when I arrived to my office cubicle and saw most of its three surfaces covered in file folders of photographs, newspaper articles, and much more to be reviewed and organized, I thought, “What have I gotten myself into?” As a student employee at Wabash Valley Visions and Voices (WV3), a digital archives project based in the Cunningham Memorial Library of Indiana State University (ISU), I had been asked to take on a project about Special Olympics Indiana (SOI). My work supervisor and ISU’s media relations coordinator both enthusiastically assured me that I was perfect for the job and so I agreed, having no idea how much I would work and learn in two semesters.

Though I completed the Special Olympics Indiana project as a college senior, my contact with the library’s WV3 department began during the fall semester of my sophomore year. I was serving as the chair of the community service committee of a programming board, and my graduate student advisor told me about a conversation he had with Cinda May, the director of WV3. She had told my advisor about the project’s Community Days during which they traveled to a site and invited people to bring items of historical significance to be scanned or, in the case of three dimensional objects, photographed by employees. Owners of the objects filled out information forms, and this data was eventually entered as metadata when the object was displayed online. Cinda, my advisor told me, had mentioned wanting to begin a collection of ISU items related to sports teams, student organizations, and student life in general. As a history major I was thrilled by this idea, and my committee and I decided that, if Cinda agreed, we would try to plan an ISU Community Day for the spring semester.

Conveniently enough, ISU’s Founder’s Day is celebrated in February, so we selected a date



in the middle of that month for the event. Thinking that ISU Community Day was not an enticing enough title, we renamed the event “ISU Treasure” to allude to the upcoming release of the second *National Treasure* movie. Cinda invited my fellow committee members and me to a short training session in the WV3 office of the library so that we would be able to assist in the scanning process. I was surprised that the task was relatively uncomplicated; the most difficult part seemed to be remembering to select the correct DPI (which is based on the length of the document’s longest side) before clicking the “Scan” button.

On the day of the event, Cinda and three of her WV3 co-workers set up scanning stations in one of the main event rooms of ISU’s union building. As students and faculty arrived with their contributions, they were invited to sit at a table and complete an information sheet while their items were scanned. During the 6-hour event, many interesting pieces were collected, including Homecoming button pins, programs and T-shirts from ISU’s trip to the 1979 NCAA basketball championship, and shirts from various student organizations. For a first-time event, we considered this a great success. By the end of the academic year, thanks to the hard work of Cinda and her WV3 crew, the ISU Community Collection of over 60 items was

fully accessible on the WV3 website.

Internship

As the "ISU Treasure" project progressed, I had learned that Cinda would be teaching a public history internship course in the fall. I met with her to discuss the course and quickly decided that enrolling in it would greatly aid me, a history major with little interest in teaching. Plus, Cinda assured me that I could work with WV3, which was convenient because I did not have a car and would be able to walk to my site, the campus library. As an intern my job was to enter metadata for an online collection of World War I and II posters. For my main project I scanned photographs of the aftermath of a massive 1913 Wabash Valley tornado and flood and, using many of WV3's holdings concerning the storm, such as newspaper articles and anniversary histories, created web pages which tell the story of the extensive disaster. These are still linked to the WV3 main site under "Related Resources." I loved being able to (carefully and while wearing gloves) handle real documents and artifacts. I also admired the mission of WV3, which is to digitize and provide free online access to historical items related to the regions of west central Indiana and east central Illinois. I felt thrilled when Cinda informed me that a couple of her student workers were graduating and offered me a job. She was even willing to hold a position for me while I studied abroad during the spring semester of my junior year.

Additional Opportunities

Just at this time, as I was wrapping up my semester as an intern, I first heard of the Special Olympics project. Paula Meyer, the media relations coordinator I mentioned earlier, helps to plan and promote SOI fundraisers and Summer Games ceremonies at ISU. She and Cinda had spoken with Mike Furnish, the CEO of Special Olympics Indiana, about having an official history written as part of the 2009 fortieth anniversary celebration of SOI. Since SOI had held its Summer Games on the campus of ISU for 38 out of the 40 years, the organization was eager to work with the university, through WV3, to also organize and digitize their archived material. Paula and I had met when she interviewed me for a media article about the "ISU Treasure" event,

so both she and Cinda knew of my interest in public history and approached me about taking on the project. I agreed, not wanting to pass up a great opportunity to gain experience in historical research, but I was also a bit anxious.



Toward the end of the semester, over sandwiches and salad at a local restaurant, Cinda, Paula, and I met to discuss further details before I went overseas to study in England. While I was gone, they would be gathering materials from SOI to be displayed in a fortieth anniversary gallery on campus during the Summer Games. The Games would take place during a three-day weekend in early June, and I was invited to attend in order to witness the opening ceremonies and conduct interviews with important figures from SOI's past who would be present for the celebration. These interviews would not only provide good material for my paper, but also valuable experience in oral history, an important facet of public history. With these specifications set, we went our separate ways for the holiday season and spring semester.

I returned to my home in Danville, Indiana (a small town thirty minutes west of Indianapolis) in May of 2009 and after resettling back into American life, began to compose my oral history questions. Paula e-mailed me background information on the five interviewees, and I did some of my own quick online research. After I wrote the questions, I e-mailed them to Cinda, Paula, and Mike Furnish for approval. Paula set the interview schedule and arranged for me to stay on campus for one night. Before I knew it, the big weekend had arrived. I drove down to Terre Haute's active campus early Friday afternoon,

checked into my room, and met Cinda in the union building to help her prepare our interview area on the ninth floor, an elegant and formal space used for banquets and receptions. Cinda set up both a video camera and a tape recorder in case one malfunctioned. Paula brought over the three interviewees for that afternoon's session. They were Judy Campbell, one of the co-founders of SOI; Carl Erskine, a retired Brooklyn/L.A. Dodgers baseball player from Anderson, Indiana who has served as a coach, volunteer, and spokesperson for SOI; and Dan TeGrotenhuis, SOI's first Director of Programs.



Though I began each interview apprehensively, I found myself quickly relaxing while taking in the responses to my questions. Whether it was Campbell talking about how she and graduate students mailed out invitations to the first SOI Summer Games, Erskine describing how his grown son still participates in SOI, or TeGrotenhuis speaking about the development of the first SOI Winter Games, I became engrossed in the stories, and the camera and small audience faded away. Each of the interviewees profusely thanked me afterward; they were thrilled that someone was documenting the history of the organization which has made a difference in the lives of many.

The interviews came to an end in the early evening, and I was taken to the Hulman Center to attend the fortieth anniversary Opening Ceremonies. News crews had come to broadcast from the facility as a way of promoting SOI, and Cinda and I were briefly interviewed about the project. Athlete delegations paraded in, welcomed by joyous, cheering volunteers and booming music. A

local news anchor and a Special Olympian served as emcees once all were seated. As the night went on, presenters cut a birthday cake for SOI, the crowd danced to live music, SOI ballroom dancers performed, and the excitement in the atmosphere never waned. I walked back to my room feeling fortunate to have been a part of such a meaningful occasion.

The next day I spent one hour conducting short interviews with athletes who came into the display gallery. Some spoke gregariously about their SOI experiences, while others were prompted by chaperones standing behind the camera. Right after this, I completed interviews with Tom Songster, the other co-founder of SOI who had gone on to later work with Special Olympics International in Washington, D.C.; and Dennis Schmidt, SOI's first executive director (and the first paid Special Olympics director in the United States). These were the two men considered most knowledgeable about SOI history, and as expected, both of their interviews ran close to an hour, if not more. Once again, the recollected stories were not only informative, but fascinating. Among other things, Songster described hosting Eunice Kennedy Shriver when she attended the 1971 and 1974 Summer Games, and Schmidt explained the process of facilitating the 1987 Special Olympics World Games at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana. As I was helping Cinda to pack away the electronic equipment, I felt optimistic about the project and eager to find out more once I returned to ISU in the fall.

Summer passed quickly, and I soon found myself back on campus, reporting to work in the Digital and Archival Services offices on the second floor of the library a couple of times each day. I worked approximately 20 hours a week to fulfill requirements for a Focus Indiana scholarship, an award given to internships which contribute to an Indiana community. For the first couple of weeks, I organized and scanned photographs that had been brought to ISU for the summer's fortieth anniversary celebration. I began an inventory which listed the total number of photographs for each category (Basketball, Banquets, Medals, etc.) as well as the file names of those which I had chosen to scan. These file names I also

wrote lightly with pencil onto the backs of the photographs.

In mid-September, Mike Furnish and SOI's public relations manager, Amanda Personett Shelley, came from Indianapolis to bring the entirety of their archives to WV3 and further discuss the future storage of these materials with Cinda and Paula. I met with them briefly in the afternoon, during which time Mike and I were filmed for Paula's marketing video about the Special Olympics project. I typed in metadata as he identified people in a few scanned images. Once they had departed, Cinda revealed to me the wealth of material they had delivered. I became overwhelmed as we placed into large storage drawers countless Kodak and Fujifilm packages, videotapes, humongous binders of company records, and overstuffed file folders of newspaper articles, brochures, and magazines. Since I had already started a photo inventory, I decided to continue working with the photograph collection, having no idea that this task would fill my hours for the rest of the semester.

Day after day I followed the same routine of opening a pack of photographs, counting them, selecting the ones to scan, scanning and labeling these, and placing them in a folder with other photos of the same category, if one existed. Even though I had been given the largest student work station, a U-shaped desk with almost 2 full sides' worth of space on which to place things, it became completely covered by stacks of folders as I progressed. I could usually navigate the seemingly random piles, but to anyone else, it appeared to be a massive mess. Despite my anxiety over my continuously growing stacks of materials, I enjoyed examining the photographs and deciphering their contents. I found heartwarming photos of triumphant athletes of all ages at medals ceremonies; images of Eunice Kennedy Shriver on the ISU campus for the Summer Games; snapshots from several years of SOI awards banquets; and pictures of Special Olympians participating in all kinds of sports, from the usual (basketball, softball, and track) to the less common (equestrianism, figure skating, and bocce ball). Toward the end of the semester, Cinda provided me with acid-free boxes in which to permanently store the photographs. I labeled and filled these, placed them in a cabinet, and slowly reclaimed

my desk space.

However, the workstation did not remain clear for long. When I returned to campus in January after the holiday break, I began to sort through the dozens of file folders of printed materials. These items included newspaper articles, letters, event programs, meeting minutes, program handbooks, promotional magazines, and more. Since my goal was to have a history written by the end of the semester, I decided to simply inventory these materials rather than also scanning them. As I did so, I found myself learning about several aspects of SOI, such as fundraising, programming, and administration, as well as gaining a sense of its development over time. I organized the materials in new acid-free file folders, taking note of those which would offer valuable information for my paper.

Phi Alpha Theta

When it came time to begin writing, I became doubly motivated once I resolved to present my findings at a regional conference of Phi Alpha Theta, a history honors society, to be held at the University of Evansville the last weekend of April. Piecing together bits of information from my various sources, including my oral history interviews, to create a cohesive narrative both exhausted and exhilarated me. Some days, I left the library frustrated because I had become stuck, unsure how to continue the paper; yet there were other days during which time flew as I easily constructed one paragraph after another. I produced a footnoted, 14-page paper examination of SOI's first 20 years and created my conference presentation. After having two faculty members read my paper, I polished the final draft. I also searched my plethora of scanned SOI photographs to include some in PowerPoint slides as part of my presentation. By the day of the conference, I felt very proud of the results of my close to one year of research, and it was a fitting end to learn that my submission, entitled "Making Gains through Games: Special Olympics Indiana, 1969-1989," had been selected as Best Undergraduate Paper.

Conclusion

Those many hours spent at my WV3 workstation on the second floor of Cunningham

Memorial Library, scanning photograph after photograph or reading yellowed newspapers with brittle edges, were my first introduction to extensive public history research. I am glad to have had this experience, as well as to have been able to observe the daily routine of a small digital history project. As I go forward into Indiana University-Purdue University's public history graduate program, I am sure the skills I acquired during my WV3 work will serve me just as well as those I learned in classrooms. Perhaps the best outcome of the past year is the confidence I gained in myself to take on and manage large projects, as well as a cluttered workspace.

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