

Episode 2: Documenting the UB Community Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Omar Brown

Welcome to Libraries Out Loud, a podcast produced by the University of Buffalo Libraries. I'm your host. Omar Brown, Evening Supervisor in Silverman Library on the UB's North campus. In each episode of the Libraries Out Loud, we'll explore the connections between the UB Libraries and the research, learning, teaching, and creative activities of our faculty, students, and staff. In our second episode, Sarah Cogley, a Digital Archivist for the University Archives, is joining us for a conversation about the ongoing University Archives COVID 19 project. Hello, Sarah. It's been a long time.

Sarah Cogley

It has been a while.

Omar Brown

To get started, tell us a little bit more about yourself and your work you do in UB Archives.

Sarah Cogley

Sure. Well, thanks for having me here today. I'm the Digital Archivist for Special Collections. I work in the University Archives, which is one of the units within Special Collections, and I worked there for about seven years now. So, the Archives, our mission is to collect the official records of the University and its predecessor, the University of Buffalo, which was UB, before it became part of the SUNY system back in the 60s. So, we have records of various administrations like the President's Office and also all the Deans offices on campus. And we also collect publications that the university puts out and that students create, such as the student newspaper, yearbooks, things like that. And we also have collections related to students of various student organizations on campus and their activities while they're here. And in addition to that, we have manuscript collections which generally reflect the research interests of the faculty. Here at UB, we collect faculty papers and we also have collections related to topics of interest in Western New York. So, my job as digital archivist, it's a kind of a new position. I've only been in the job for about a year and a half. It was a new position, but I focus on historical materials that are born digital. So, things that are created on your computer or on the web, just digital files in general. So, that's my focus, and I concentrate on digital preservation and providing access to these historic records.

Omar Brown

Oh, that's excellent. I have one question, though. You said you collect faculty papers, correct?

Sarah Cogley

Yes.

Omar Brown

Do you collect all faculty papers from every department or is specific to one particular department?

Sarah Cogley

No, it's, it's really any department on campus. Often what happens is faculty members, when they get set to retire, they will contact the Archives and we'll discuss with them the transfer of their papers to the Archives. So, it often the collections will reflect their scholarly interests and their research from their time at UB and sometimes their personal papers as well. So, they're really rich. They're really a rich resource for students, faculty outside, community members who maybe are interested in the research that those faculty did while they were part of the University. And it also includes their teaching materials, course materials and things like that.

Omar Brown

OK, excellent. Could you tell me about the Archives project documenting the UB community experience during the COVID 19 pandemic?

Sarah Cogley

Sure, I'd be happy to. So, when the pandemic started back in early 2020, I noticed on different professional archives listservs that I belong to that there were posts about circulating that were about how college and university archives and also museums were going to document this time in history because we knew that this was something that we had never experienced before. So, I decided I talked with my colleagues, and we decided that we wanted to kind of capture this moment in time and we wanted to do it in as broad a way as possible. So, one of the things that we did was we started a collection that we call documenting the University at Buffalo Community Experience during COVID 19. And this collection contains materials that are contributed by University of Buffalo community members, faculty, staff, and students. They, and our hope is that the materials that are part of this collection will provide firsthand accounts of what this experience has been like for people. And we the collection will include things like essays, poems of reflection, text documents, digital images, audio files, video files, things like that. So, we've opened it up to the community so that they can contribute any type of documentation that they wish to. It will be added to the University Archives in the future. It will

be made accessible to researchers who want to study what the pandemic was like for the University community. So, this is a collection that I would say is falls into a category that are somewhat falls into a category known in the archives world as Grief Based Collections. And what I mean by that are collections that are created by archivists, often during times of crisis or major events such as I know that there are other colleges and universities, thankfully not UB, but have collections in their archives that maybe document violence that has happened on campus, whether that be shootings or civil unrest or student protests on campus, things like that. They document kind of sensitive times in the institution's history. So, this is a collection that is kind of a little bit similar to that. And the fact that, you know, the pandemic has been really difficult for everyone in a lot of different ways. And so we're trying to be sensitive to that by building a collection that will hopefully capture people's experiences. So, yeah, so I got together with my colleagues and we decided that this was one of the ways that we wanted to, to document the pandemic. So, in addition to this collection about the UB community experience, we're also trying to capture more of an internal perspective to the University. So, anybody who's familiar with UB knows that we now have a COVID 19 dashboard, which is a website on the University's main page, right? And I think it has things like statistics about how many cases are on campus, also links to useful resources about health and safety and the reopening of campus. And you know how many people are on campus at a time and things like that, just really it's a lot of useful information, and it's the main tool that the University uses to communicate with it, with its community, about COVID. So, we started crawling or capturing that website, and we do that on a daily basis because the numbers change every day. So, we are hoping that through crawling websites like that and also capturing other kind of internal UB Communications. So, stuff that maybe the College of Arts and Sciences is sending to its students or to its faculty members about, you know, how you can, how teaching may have been impacted by COVID. And however, you know, things are online now, that type of thing. We're hoping that if we kind of capture a sample of that type of communication as well, that we'll get a good kind of cross-section representation of how people have been impacted by the pandemic. I guess one other thing related to the student perspective, we also capture the Spectrum, the student newspaper. When the pandemic started in March, and everyone was sent home. The Spectrum used to be published in print and online. But when we went remote, it only became available in digital format, and we have a long run in the University Archives of the student newspaper. I mean, going back a long, long time. So, we wanted to continue to capture that even though it was only in digital format. So, we create a web archive of the Spectrum as well. So, it's important to capture kind of what the students, what their perspective is like.

Omar Brown

You know, Sarah, I have never heard of this Grief Based Collection. Can you elaborate more on what that is and what was the impact of having such a collection?

Sarah Cogley

Yeah. So, I think that, you know, thankfully, thankfully, we haven't had significant events like school shootings and things like that, right? They have not impacted our campus, which I'm very grateful for. But they have impacted other college campuses across the country. And that's just one example there. You know, there are many events that happen on college campuses,

but Archives at these various, on these various campuses have created collections that document those events in the campus' history. So sometimes that means that Archivists or Library staff members Librarians will go about, you know, walk across campus and, you know, maybe capture posters or something that that have been put up about, you know, protests on campus or things like that after the events because they want to make sure that they have a record of that in in the Archives. So, it's, it's things like that. In fact, back when there was a lot of student protests during the Vietnam War on campus here, the Archivist at the time went out and went to those sites and did that very thing, made sure, you know, if there were leaflets on the ground, you kind of pick those up. And she actually picked up a tear gas canister that that was used during the protests. And so, we have that in the Archives. So, it's that type of thing. And students love to see those materials when they come to the University Archives because they're really, you know, they're very interesting, right? You know, it's an important time in the in the history of the University and of student activism as well. So, it's kind of, collections like that that we're hoping to continue building in the University Archives. And this is a little different because it's the first time that we're collecting material that is born digital and we're doing it in real time. So, that makes this collection about the community experience during the pandemic unique to us. So, we're very excited about it.

Omar Brown

How do you envision the material from this collection being used by future scholars, in particular historians?

Sarah Cogley

I would not be surprised if we see researchers who are interested in issues like public health who want to use this collection. Also, researchers who are interested in the history of education because certainly the way that faculty are delivering education and students are involved in the learning process has changed quite dramatically, I think, during COVID, a lot of classes are only online now, and so we've had two faculty have kind of had to adapt and use different tools. So, I think that researchers who are interested in that will be will find this collection useful. Instructional methods and things like that, history of higher education. So, I think also that students, we often have students come in to use the University Archives and they can be really introspective. And sometimes they're just very curious about what student life was like in the past. And so, by creating collections like this, building collections like this, and asking students to participate in building a collection like this, I think that it's going to be a really rich resource for future students who are interested in this time. And then more broadly, I think people who are interested in topics about the history of Western New York. So, a kind of a related example in terms of health and environmental history. We have collections about the Love Canal disaster in Niagara Falls and documentation of that environmental health crisis. So, I think that the collection that we're building now around the COVID 19 pandemic will be an asset for researchers who are interested in that type of issue as well. So, I think that it's going to be kind of a multi-use collection. That's what we hope for.

Omar Brown

Can you expand a little bit more about this Love Canal disaster?

Sarah Cogley

Yeah. So, I'm not I'm not an expert on this, but I can tell you that in the Love Canal neighborhood, which is just kind of south of the city of Niagara Falls, there was an environmental health crisis because there were barrels of toxins that were buried underground that were from a company that was located adjacent to this neighborhood. And those chemicals and toxins over time leached into the groundwater. There's also a school. There's a school in that neighborhood. And so there were of far reaching health issues for the families that lived in those areas, lived in that neighborhood specifically, the Love Canal neighborhood. And so, it actually, Jimmy Carter was president at the time. And what you now, people are familiar with Superfund sites that are designated by the U.S. government. The Love Canal disaster was the very first Superfund. So, and it's a collection. We have many different collections that are related to the Love Canal environmental disaster. And it's one of our, these collections are very popular. We have a lot of researchers who come in to look at the collections. So, we hope that that's something that, ah, the collections that we're creating around COVID will provide as well.

Omar Brown

What types of material are you collecting, and have you collected anything so far that has been particularly surprising?

Sarah Cogley

Yeah, we have. So, on our website, on the University Archives website, we have a page that's dedicated specifically to this project-documenting the community UB Community Experience during COVID 19, and we encourage faculty, staff and students to submit almost anything, so we accept text documents. So, if you have been journaling during this experience or you have class material that's related to the to the COVID pandemic, or you just have kind of like thoughts about what's going on, we accept text documents in any form. You know, you can send us Word, you can send us PDF text files, but we also welcome things like video files, audio and digital images. So, we've had we have a staff member here at the University who's very interested in the environment, and he sent us a blog that he created and he had one specific post that was about Victory Gardens in Buffalo and how during World War II, people created Victory Gardens. And that and they have seen kind of a resurgence during the COVID 19 pandemic, where people wanted to really kind of grow their own food. So, that's one example. Something that surprised me, we also received a Tik Tok video. This came to us, I think, as a MP4 file. But the Tik Tok video was a class assignment actually. And so, for, I think, for a French literature class. And so, I thought that that was a really great example of how students are using social media and how they can be really kind of creative in the way that they are responding to class assignments, especially during this kind of like crazy time when classes are remote and all of our communication is kind of digital. We don't really, we're not in-person

anymore. So other things we've had people submit recordings of themselves that they've captured on Zoom, just kind of talking about what it's like to teach during COVID 19. And just reflecting on that kind of experience. So, we've received a lot of different types of formats, text, audio, blog posts, things like that. So really, I think if somebody is interested in contributing to this collection, you're not, If you're not sure if it's what we want, just reach out to us and we can share that with you. Yeah, we encourage people to contribute.

Omar Brown

What are your thoughts about being a part of this project to preserve history?

Sarah Cogley

So, it's been interesting. I kind of look at it two different ways. First, as an Archivist, we kind of follow a Code of Ethics and the, you know, the mission of the University Archives is to preserve the history of the University, and I think that, I know people throw the word unprecedented out a lot these days, a lot these days, but for good reason. I think nothing like this has ever happened in the history of the University. And so, it is my responsibility and my colleagues' responsibility in the University Archives, to really try to capture documentation of this event. It's, you know, it's our mission, it's our goal. And I think it's really, really important, especially because all of this documentation is created in a digital format, which we know can be fleeting at times. Right. So, I think from a personal perspective, it's been interesting to be a part of a project like this. When we first transitioned to working from home, I think a lot of people felt disconnected from their work environment and their work community. And starting a project like this gave me a way to feel like I was doing something, doing something maybe that would be important. And also, you know, one of our goals with this project is to make sure that people who are interested in contributing to this collection, that they feel like their voices are heard, that their experience is important and that it's really a part of the University's kind of history as a whole. So that's kind of what it's been like for me.

Omar Brown

Oh, that's great. That's great. Before we sign off, is there anything else you want to share with our listeners?

Sarah Cogley

I would like to say that we have already made accessible contributions to this collection. So, if listeners want to kind of see what other people have already contributed to the collection, they can find that online. So, you can find it through the University Archives website, which is. I believe I'm going to get this right, it's <https://library.buffalo.edu/archives/> And if you go to our Collections page, you can do just a simple search for COVID and the collection will come up. And so, you can see a little bit of information about who it is that's contributed to the collection and actually view the files. So, I hope people will check that out and we just, it's going to be an

ongoing collection. Some people have asked, when are you going to stop accepting donations to this collection? And the answer is that we don't have an end date to this. I think that we'll keep it open as long as people are interested in the collection. So, that's about it.

Omar Brown

This brings us to the end of our podcast. And Sarah, I want to thank you for joining us today.

Sarah Cogley

Sure. Well, thanks for having me here today.

Omar Brown

Here is some additional information from UB Archives. Members of the UB community are invited to submit materials such as text documents, video and audio files and photographs by completing the submission form located on the University Archives website or by emailing lib-archives@buffalo.edu Please join us for the next episode when Libraries Out Loud explores the variety of Sustainability initiatives at UB to help celebrate Earth Day 2021.