

Episode 7: Welcome Keith Mages

Omar Brown:

Welcome to Libraries Out Loud, a podcast produced by the University at Buffalo Libraries.

I'm your host, Omar Brown, evening supervisor in the Silverman Library on the UB's North campus.

In each episode of 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.

Dr. Keith Mages is the curator of the University of Buffalo's Robert L. Brown History of Medicine collection.

He returns to UB after five years in New York City as the Norton M. Lugar, MD, Clinical Medical Librarian at the Samuel J. Wood Library of Weill Cornell Medicine. Prior to his time at Weill Cornell,

Keith worked closely with former curator, Linda Lohr as an Assistant Librarian at the History of Medicine Collection.

Keith has a Bachelor's in nursing and an MLS and Library Information Science from the University at Buffalo and an MSN,

in advanced practice child and adolescent psychiatric nursing from Yale University, as well as a Ph.D. in the History of Nursing from the University of Pennsylvania.

Keith is thrilled to be back working with Robert L. Brown History of Medicine collection and is looking forward to sharing its impressive resources with members of UB, Western New York, and a greater global community.

And the interviewer for this episode is Brian Sajecki

Brian Sajecki

It's wonderful that you have a Ph.D., so what made you decide to pursue a Ph.D. in the first place beyond librarianship?

Keith Mages

Sure. Sure. Yeah.

Actually, it was my experiences working as a practicum student with Linda Lohr in the Robert L. Brown History of Medicine collection.

I had arrived to that collection as a library student who had a background as a nurse and had my masters and undergraduate degree in nursing,

and I know quite a bit about modern health care information and knowledge.

But when I got to work with Linda and the History of Medicine, I realized there's a whole spectrum of history of the health sciences that had no idea about you don't really learn those things and there's not time for it in modern education of the health professions.

So the more I worked with her, I thought, there's so much here.

How can I learn more about this? And I thought, well, let's get a Ph.D. because that's my actual time.

I can delve into the history of medicine and learn more about these specialty areas that I was so fascinated by.

Brian Sajecki

Wow. So you worked with Linda then for a number of years then?

Keith Mages

Yeah, yeah.

So the first time around I worked with her was as a practicum student, and then I worked as a student assistant at the Health Sciences Library.

So I had the pleasure of working with Linda for about probably two to three years then in those capacities.

Then when I came back after I finished my Ph.D. program at the University of Pennsylvania,

I moved back to the area and she was able to get a line open for an assistant librarianship role in the history of medicine collection,

which it was a part time role. But I was thrilled to come back and be able to work with her for about four years in that capacity.

So I think I was there from about 2011 to 2015 or 16.

Brian Sajecki

So under her tutelage, what do you think is the most important thing you may have learned from her

about the collection and maybe about just the history of medicine within itself?

Keith Mages

Sure. Sure. Yeah. She was an incredible teacher, a very generous teacher.

She had a love for that collection and it really sparked kind of a joint.

Anybody who worked with her and just seeing how she would interact with patrons when they would

come in and ask a question how she would almost instantly know if not the answer to it.

She would know where to go to find the answer, whether it be online or in the physical collection itself.

And so that kind of collaboration that she always brought, you know, she would tell these stories.

She would work with the patrons and educate them, but also learn from them.

And you know, why were they coming in? What was their story that brought them here?

And so it was really this, this great relationship that she always grew with the folks that came to the collection.

And so that really inspired me to to learn more about not only the collection itself, the history of medicine, but also how to work with folks and educate them and get them excited, too.

Brian Sajecki

Well, her attitude was infectious. It was it was very nice working with her.

Keith Mages

Yeah

Brian Sajecki

We actually a couple of my colleagues and I actually went on a tour when I first was brought on many years ago,

and she was just so excited about the collection. And she had these little these little pieces, these little pockets that, you know,

she was waiting to kind of just be a little cliffhanger and be like something to show you back there.

But hold on, there's something else. So I love it.

She's she was phenomenal. So is there anything specifically that you miss about her now that she has passed?

Keith Mages

Yeah, I mean, there's so much. I think one of the things that was really lovely about her is that she.

Never, never took herself too seriously, so even though she was a found of wisdom and knowledge, she didn't see yourself that way.

She she saw something I think is a sponge. Somebody want to learn more and more.

And so this is kind of gracious scholar attitude that she had that don't often see in academic academia.

But she was someone I don't think she would call herself a scholar, but she certainly was because she was so interested in the subject matter and

in learning from the folks that were in it and in the research that she had, and she would just always be there to teach you.

And so that's not that I've taken over her role in the collection.

I keep expecting her to come out of the stacks any moment now, you know, because I'm so used to her being there and I have already.

There's been a couple of reference questions that have come through and like,

if only Linda were here because I know that she would know exactly where in the collection I can find this.

I know it's here somewhere. But I have to be hunting and pecking for it more because I know what she'd be like.

Oh, just go to that corner in the back stacks. You've got that.

Brian Sajecki

So do you think you have a lot to learn yet about this collection, even though you're well versed with it based on your experiences?

Keith Mages

Yeah. Yes, I do. There's just since I've been gone, they have acquired more.

So there's there's new acquisitions. Matt, who was the former assistant librarian, and Linda have worked closely with Marie Elia and have many cataloged or created

finding aids and helped to organize some of our manuscript collections. So I don't know much about what's physically in those collections.

Those are what's kind of sitting on the back shelf. So they took a much deeper dive into those.

So I'm excited to learn more about the resources we have there.

And yeah, it's really just again about learning everything we the collection has.

It has over, I think about twenty-eight thousand volumes in it, so it's a fairly decent size collection.

So there's a lot to brush up on.

Brian Sajecki

Yeah, I believe it. Is anything of specialty interest to you within the field of medical history or even within the collection or both?

Any specific artifacts or any sect of a medical history,

anything really stand out to you as something when you think about it, you say that that calls to me.

Keith Mages

Sure. Well, one of the things in the collection are. Two of the things that I think are really interesting are the death masks that we have there.

So that's not an unusual item that I think a medical collection has.

But I think especially these days, medicine and health care in general is getting more comfortable with death and making,

you know, a good death, something to to look into.

So there's tangential to medical history, but what we have in the collection is the Roswell Park's Death Mask and the Edgar McGuire's Death Mask.

So Roswell Park, many people know, was the founder of Roswell Park, the Cancer Institute, a physician on the faculty here at UB.

Edgar McGuire, folks may not know as much, but he was another physician, he worked closely with with.

Roswell Park was also a very well-known physician here in Buffalo, and his daughter was in the Cravens who donated many,

many instruments that we have in the collection, the instruments and collection in the Edgar McGuire instrument collection.

So we have his death mask too and I find those really fascinating just to get back to what the death

masks are is because, you know, those are created for individuals that were....folks in a position of authority, of power, of cultural influence.

And so what's interesting about them is that, you know, when these people died, someone thought, let's get a plaster model, exactly,

wrap it around the head, get the facial features and then have this, this model, this mask ready so that we can create sculptures and statues.

So that's kind of what the thought behind death masks are is that they're going to be a likeness of the person of the face so that if statues are put up in their honor, they've got them ready to go so they can have that likeness, which is kind of fascinating

Brian Sajecki

That is incredibly fascinating.

And like you said, I like what that you brought up the idea of how it changes the way that death is perceived a little bit.

Is it? Are they the only death masks available for for the for both gentlemen?

Keith Mages

You know, that's a great question. I think that Roswell Park, from what I remember, might have one the Cancer Institute may have one also.

I don't know about Edgar McGuire having one available besides that one. If anybody does want to make a sculpture or a statue,

let us know because you're welcome to use it and create your own plaster face from it and use it.

Yeah, that's a great question. I don't know where the other examples might be....interesting.

Brian Sajecki

Very, very interesting

So moving on a little bit here, do you think that you'll be collaborating with other academic libraries that have strong medical history collections?

And if so, which might stand out to you that our aspirational partners in the process?

Keith Mages

I would love to. That's a great question. So I've got I've got kind of two strands of thinking on that end.

One of them is thinking about working with more of the Western New York, Central New York medical universities. So Strong and University of Rochester,

the Miner library, they've got a great historical collection. Upstate Medical College over in Syracuse has another really nice Archives and Special collections. I think it would be wonderful if we could kind of collaborate between us

and maybe some local institutions, think about the history of medicine in general in the western New York and some generic regions,

and maybe develop kind of a traveling show, if you will, where we could go.

Maybe I could go to Syracuse, the University of Rochester curator or archivist and go there as well,

and we can meet with the local folks there and talk about how medicine education has developed across the region.

And then maybe go to some local areas and kind of commute together when things kind of get back to normal.

I think that can be really fun.

Brian Sajecki

Yeah, absolutely.

Keith Mages

The other thing I'd like to do is it's possibly the third UB Medical School had an amazing specimen collection, anatomical and specimen museum.

I'm not sure when you enter the tour, if you remember seeing there was a photograph of the medical school used to be on,

the third one was on high street, very close to a buffalo general is now. And within it was this anatomical and pathological museum.

Two stories. It had articulated skeletons. It had specimen jars.

It had a rider, a male skeleton on a horse that was over or like a story tall pretty much

This horse was arching up and had a spear that the man had a spear

I don't know what they were trying to do besides the glory and grandeur of medicine and anatomy.

I don't think I can recreate that, but what I would love to do is maybe bring together some of this specimens or the skeletons.

Right now, we don't know where many of these are.

Rumor is that when they moved to our south campus, which was a new campus at the time in the 50s,

that these were, most of them were donated to the Science Museum. But I don't think it's ever been confirmed.

And from everyone I spoke with in medical school, no one knows where these collections have gone.

Regardless, I would love to put together maybe a memorial kind of thing of what the collection looked like at some point in time.

I imagine we've got that.

We got that still, blow that up to almost like a life size background and then maybe work with places like the Dittrich Museum or the Mutter Museum.

The Dittrich is in Cleveland in Case Western Reserve. The Mutter is in Philadelphia or the Warren Anatomical Museum at Harvard,

and maybe borrow some of their collections just briefly for an in-person kind of re-creation of the space.

I think that'd be so great. Such a great way to collect connect with our other museum collections that are out there in the history of medicine,

but then also show some of our students, faculty staff what we used to have and what it was for.

And then we can also weave into that now the whole ethical discussions around human specimens and human remains

and kind of bring it up to date with what will we do today in these situations and what do they tell us?

So what were they used for in the past and how can we live for them to date in the present?

I think it'll be fascinating. So pie in the sky ideas? Yeah.

Brian Sajecki

Hey, perhaps. But either way, it it seems like it would be not not only a wonderful exhibition of sorts,

but also artistic and educational kind of fostering more conversations.

and people in Buffalo, if you've grown up in the western New York area, take pride in the history and the rich history.

And this is probably a sector, but that they don't they don't typically think of, right when they're driving down town or passing the University of Buffalo, either campus. Yes, that so much has changed, especially within the last one hundred, one hundred and fifty years.

Just so many things are not the same.

And it's a shame that that that a lot of those specimens are, you know, kind of difficult to find if they are still even in existence.

Keith Mages

That's it. I mean, they have such a story to tell now and again.

It's not only just of the specimens themselves, but thinking about how they were acquired.

And I don't know if I'll ever find that that out for some of these.

But just thinking about, you know, what were the stories, what were the people, what were the lives of these came from?

So not only diving into how they influenced practitioners education, but also who were the folks behind them?

And, you know, putting those stories together, somebody can kind of learn and grow.

Brian Sajecki

Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. So the University of Buffalo actually is going to be acquiring a 360 degree camera soon.

Do you think that you could use that technology to create some sort of immersive experience for patrons?

Keith Mages

Yeah. You know, I was really, congratulations on that, by the way. I know that you were integral in getting that funding for that.

So, yeah, I would love to use it. Obviously, I think that just having the physical space of the collection.

Captured in 360 will be wonderful to show that especially now during these these winging times, hopefully of COVID, that those could still be,

you know, seen it and immersed in the actual physical space because it does have some wonderful things.

Aside from that, there's a couple of things that come to mind. One of the things that I would love to do is put together.

Vesalius was as a anatomist from 1500s Italy, and I would love to put together.

He has a series of plates that depict the human body in various forms of dissection.

So, you know, around that time, some of the first times were legal.

Dissection was available mostly from folks who were convicted, criminals who were executed.

So they were able to get more bodies at this time.

And he was one of the first to really be able to show skeletons, show the different fascia of the body,

different layers of the human body in pretty representative and exact ways.

And so because of this, he has these really great images that that that were developed.

There's thoughts that may be developed by somebody from Titian studio. I don't know if you've seen that or not.

So there's this there's links to like ancient or, you know, fathers of Italian art also involved with this.

But Vesalius was the one who was doing the dissections and overseeing the creation of these these plates.

But I love to do is maybe put these plates in a 360 circle.

And then we can have the circle spin from kind of, you know,

the body as a whole piece to the different fascia of the different layers being exposed until it gets to just a skeleton.

I think that could be really cool.

Brian Sajecki

That would be really awesome.

Keith Mages

Yeah, I've never seen a kind of put together that way before,

so you can kind of see it's almost like a recreation of the dance of death that that people have seen,

especially in that time period where it was, you know, skeletons dancing, moving with living people.

I've heard that, you know Vesalius recreated that, but in this medical way.

And so this could be a way to kind of show that transition. So that could be kind of fun.

Brian Sajecki

Absolutely.

I think within our conversation, we've seen that, you have really shown just how artistic the whole idea is of medicine

and just the preservation of all these artifacts within the collection itself.

So that's really interesting, and I hope that people take advantage of of the collection and come to visit you.

So are there tours going on now or is it open?

Keith Mages

So right now, it's open by appointment only. As of September, we will be going to more normal hours.

I believe it'll be from 10 to four ish throughout the week.

Appointments are always are always appreciated, though, because I am a solo librarian at this point of time.

Solo curator, so I'm not always there if I have to go teach somewhere else or I'm off for a meeting somewhere.

So just make sure someone is there for you if you do come. Feel free to email me.

Can I get my email address? kcmages@buffalo.edu

if you have any questions or you want to come visit, please. People can come any time, though, and I'll make time for it.

I would love people to come in person.

Brian Sajecki

Absolutely. Yeah. So my last and final question for you.

Keith Mages

Sure.

Brian Sajecki

What do you envision for the future of the History of Medicine collection?

Well, I think through what we've kind of touched on with so far through this interview is that I love collaboration too,

and that's something I got from Linda, and I want to continue that.

So I would love to work with faculty, students, staff and then external organizations to really show what the collection has...to connect with folks.

We can keep getting the messages out.

The wonderful, fascinating, morbid, but also inspiring stories that medicine has to offer and health health sciences in general.

Not just medicine either. I want to make sure we stress that too. Its the History of Medicine collection, but it's also collects all of the Health Sciences.

But yeah, I want I want to get out there and have to have the next phase of the collection be immersive in the community, too.

So that's what I would love to do is figure out how to work more closely with these other organizations with people inside the University.

But then maybe you don't see so often that don't come into the collection and maybe come to them.

So just just to keep the doors open and moving.

Yeah, great. Myself moving.

Brian Sajecki

Yeah. Well, thank you for sitting down with me.

Thank you. It was great to learn so much, and I hope our listeners feel the same.

Keith Mages

Yes. Yes, great. I thank you for having me. It was wonderful.

Omar Brown

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Libraries Out Loud.

Stay tuned for the next look at the UB Libraries on campus.