

Say What?

Talking Points on the Value of Archives

Imagine yourself on an elevator with a friendly stranger who innocently inquires what you do for a living. You say with enthusiasm, “I’m an archivist!” The stranger gives you “that” blank look and you know she’s thinking, “Say what?” Seizing the opportunity to evangelize, and knowing there are precious few seconds left before the elevator arrives at your floor, you eloquently explain your professional calling. . . .



Lisa Lewis took her boss’s advice and entered SAA’s “Best Elevator Speech” Contest conducted in celebration of American Archives Month 2007. The associate archivist for the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge says it was easy to compose her 28-word entry because she had already developed a simple explanation to help anyone who is unfamiliar with the profession to understand what she does for a living.

Her winning entry:

“Archivists bring the past to the present. They’re records collectors and protectors, keepers of memory. They organize unique, historical materials, making them available for current and future research.”

Honorable mention honors went to Jacquelyn Ferry of the Wisconsin Historical Society for her entry:

Archivists acquire, manage, preserve, and help patrons identify and use historically significant collections of unique materials, such as government records, manuscripts, photographs, films, and sound recordings.

Your repository probably already does outreach. But does it tell the broader story of archives and archivists? Add to your ongoing efforts some

simple language that describes what an archives is, who uses archives, why archives are important, and what archivists do.

Lisa and Jacquelyn give you permission to use their “elevator speeches” for starters!

Here are some other talking points:

- In the course of daily life, individuals, organizations, and governments create and keep information about their activities. Archivists are professionals who assess, collect, organize, preserve, maintain control of, and provide access to the portions of this information that have lasting value. Archivists keep records that have enduring value as reliable memories of the past, and they help people find and understand the information they need in those records.
- These records, and the places in which they are kept, are called “archives.” Archival records take many forms, including correspondence, diaries, financial and legal documents, photographs, video or sound recordings, and electronic records.
- An archives serves to strengthen collective memory by creating a reliable information bank that provides access to an irreplaceable asset – an organization’s, government’s, or society’s primary sources.
- Archival records are essential to support society’s increasing demand for accountability and transparency in government and public and private institutions.
- Archival records protect the rights, property, and identity of our citizens.
- Archivists play a key role in ensuring that the digital records being created today will be accessible when needed in the future.
- American Archives Month is a time to focus on the importance of records of enduring value and to enhance public recognition for the people and programs that are responsible for maintaining our communities’ vital historical records.