



Archives in Context

Season 5 Episode 3: Archivists Call-In

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SPEAKERS

Chris Burns, Anna Trammell, April Anderson-Zorn, Anonymous Call-in, Marcella Huggard

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Anna Trammell 00:10

From the Society of American Archivists, this is *Archives in Context*, a podcast highlighting archival literature and technologies, and most importantly, the people behind them.

Anna Trammell 00:27

Hi, Chris.

Chris Burns 00:29

Hi, Anna. How are you?

Anna Trammell 00:31

Well, I'm glad that we've made it to 2021. We're recording this in mid-January. You know, to say that 2020 was challenging is the understatement of the century. But you know, I've just been thinking about how we've been coming up on the one year anniversary of when many of us moved to working remotely, and just reflecting on 2020, and the personal and professional challenges that we've all been- been facing. And I was just wondering about your experience and the transition to working from home, and what it felt like, and what you were thinking about a year ago when all this was really starting to unfold?

Chris Burns 01:22

Yeah, boy. It feels like a lifetime ago. Yeah, I remember sort of distinctly the sort of run up to it. And I'm curious to hear what it was like for you out in Washington, where things sort of got rolling a little earlier than they did on the East Coast and elsewhere in the country. In Vermont it was sort of mid-March where it looked like we were going to be moving to remote work. And then it became a lot of thinking about, what are people going to do? And how long are we going to be out for. And where am I gonna work in my house? And what are the children gonna do when they should be in school? And I'm really proud workwise of some of the scrambling we

did around that point to scan a lot of things and then shift into some transcription projects for some of our staff that would have had a harder time finding things to do remotely than- than some of us who work on digital projects and could do metadata cleanup, etc. So, we did a lot of great work to scramble, but it was really uncertain. And it was really uncertain, just, you know, we didn't have the testing regime that we have now, we didn't know how widespread the virus was, you didn't know if you were gonna catch it. It was a very anxious-anxious early few months, both in terms of work and in terms of family and in terms of just wearying about everyone's sort of potential health ramifications. What was that period like for you?

Anna Trammell 03:13

Yeah, so you mentioned that- that I live in Washington, and I live in Tacoma, which is just about forty minutes from Seattle. So, you were hearing this news coming out, and it being covered as kind of this international news story. And then there was an outbreak in Seattle, and it was just getting closer and closer to home. So, the university where- where I was working in Tacoma had to pivot pretty quickly, quicker than, you know, probably many universities and other states, to remote learning and remote working. And I'm sure that you know, many of our listeners had a similar experience that you're describing, just kind of it feeling so jarring to suddenly be removed for the foreseeable future from our collections and from our colleagues. So, at the time I was supervising another archivist and five student employees. So really, for me, I was just struggling to figure out, you know, how do you transition to remote work, make sure everyone has a project that they can work on remotely, when we may not even be seeing each other again for months? Or in the situation some of the students were graduating, so maybe I'd never have the opportunity to see them or work with them in person again. So figuring out not only how you can support them as a- as a supervisor, but how you can just provide support for someone who's going through this really, you know, traumatic and jarring experience, especially for a student whose education is suddenly disrupted as well as their, you know, work life, and they're having to move out of their dorm and move back home. So that's really what I remember most about those early weeks, and you know, thinking that, you know, I'd be back at work much more quickly than- than it ended up being, you know. I'm still not working, still working remotely now and just going in every once in a while. So that's really what characterized it for me, just trying to think about how to support the people I was working with from a distance, which is something I've had no experience with. And you know, our work is so reliant on working with researchers in person and working with the materials in person, but I'm proud of the work that we were able to do and some of the projects that we were able to accomplish during that time. It wasn't what I thought 2020 was going to look like, we, you know, had a couple of grant projects going that really relied on being with the physical materials that we had to get extensions on or had to fundamentally change. So, it wasn't what I thought the semester would look like, but it ended up, you know, working out. And we were able to accomplish a lot with our digital collections. So, I'm really, really grateful for that and was just so impressed by the work of our student employees during that transition.

Chris Burns 06:15

Yeah, I feel the same. I feel like we got some really interesting work done; it wasn't what we had planned. And increasingly, as I saw what- what other archivists and librarians were doing in their own work, I saw all of the- the amazing things that other folks were doing that sometimes led me to feel like we should be doing more and different types of projects. But I'm glad of what we kind of latched on to and what we were able to- and proud of what we were able to latch on to and produce. But it did make me more and more curious about how other

archivists were- were kind of coping and what other archivists were kind of doing. And clearly you had a similar thought because you came up with this very creative idea for this podcast episode.

Anna Trammell 07:16

Yeah, so we've been talking about just these profound personal and professional challenges, and when we first started thinking about having the special call-in episode, this is a first for the *Archives in Context* podcast, we wanted to pursue an episode that was related to COVID-19 and just the general chaos of 2020. And I think we initially thought about asking people to talk about their experiences and- and some of the challenges that members of our profession are facing right now. But the more we thought about it and talked about it, I think we really started leaning more towards organizing this episode in a more positive way and really focus on how members of the archives community are coping and you know, taking care of themselves throughout the pandemic. So, we organized our first call-in episode, and we came up with a list of prompts that people could respond to. So, we asked members of the archives profession, SAA members, to leave us a voicemail or email us with their response to one of these questions. What have you done to practice self care this year? How have you found joy in 2020? In this difficult time, what advice do you have for your fellow archivists? And what are you thankful for this year?

Chris Burns 08:44

And we- we were very pleased to get a number of responses from all of you. Several of you took us up on the offer to submit your responses via email, and Anna and I will take turns reading those responses, and several of you took advantage of the ability to leave your voicemail and we will play those as well. And the first one comes from April Anderson-Zorn.

Automated Voicemail Message 09:13

Please leave a message after the tone.

April Anderson-Zorn 09:18

Hi, *Archives in Context*. My name is April Anderson-Zorn, and I'm the University Archivist at Illinois State University. My advice and self care is wrapped up in my COVID pregnancy experience. I became pregnant in late 2019, and my spouse and I bought a house in mid-March right as everything shut down. We panic-moved while I was seven months pregnant, all while I was trying to work from home finding virtual ways to keep our late semester students and researchers happy, trying to do virtual archive sessions. It was incredibly stressful. So, so incredibly stressful that I'm sure that's what brought my daughter into the world a month early and landed me in the hospital for a week. So, what did I do to chill out? I watched all, and I mean all, of the Disney history and planning YouTube channels and Instagram accounts that I could find; I may be a little bit of a Disney nerd. I planned our family's dream vacation, both something affordable and I know that we can afford, but something also completely outrageous that even the lottery won't be able to afford for us. I've been saying that my self care regimen is all about embracing escapism. There is nothing wrong with a little escapism during a pandemic. I don't worry- or don't worry about work, and patrons, and students, and deadlines every second like I always do, I always worry about those things. I always say embrace what you're passionate about and escape into it. I know that in the few minutes that I take to read the news in the morning, but as soon as my blood pressure starts to pound and believe me it does start to pound, I turn it to Disney news, and it will start to drop. So, planning a trip

that I know that my family and I will not be taking for some time, because of present circumstances, it has been surprisingly soothing to plan that trip. We know it's going to happen one day; it's just not going to happen today. So, with that said, here's what I'm thankful for in 2020. That my family is healthy and safe in our new home. I know that one day, some day, we're going to take that vacation that I've been meticulously planning. But for now, when I feel the pressure of work, and deadlines, and pandemic work issues, and students and researchers needing materials for finals week, I take a breath, I open a tab on my browser, and I do a few minutes of escapism travel planning. So that's my advice for my fellow archivists. Just open a tab on your browser and embrace your escapism. Thanks, *Archives in Context* for spreading some positivity. Have a really great day. This was great. Bye.

Anna Trammell 11:37

"I feel very thankful/fortunate to live in Western Massachusetts, where I have access to beautiful trails in the woods to hike, mountains to climb, not Everest, but still, and if willing to travel a few hours away, the beach and ocean to replenish my soul. Having two dogs that need daily walks also help with my COVID sanity level."

Chris Burns 12:04

"Hello from Oklahoma. I'm a retired congressional archivist as of 2014. As an archivist, I was processing Senator Domenici's collection at New Mexico State University (NMSU). I'm also an author with a series of mysteries telling the stories of Sydney St. John, an archivist in Oklahoma. Once into the pandemic, I decided to turn to writing a thriller about, you guessed it, an archivist. This time, Cora Brennan is a congressional archivist in Washington. Much of my time now is spent in researching for the book. Once I have the information I need I write frantically. My goal is to finish the novel before the pandemic ends, it keeps me off the streets and out of trouble. In between I try to find ways to exercise and take walks in our neighborhood, mask in hand."

Anna Trammell 12:57

"I've rallied all of my family, friends, healthcare professionals, and my spiritual guide to create a supportive atmosphere around me. I need to be honest with others about my attitude instead of trying to tough it out on my own. This is a necessary way of life which helps my mind, body, and spirit. Most of the older volunteer staff at my closed-off repository aren't tech-savvy enough to have online interactions together. We haven't seen each other as a group since February. We were very tight knit. My New Year's resolution is to help get most of us back together over a web meeting rather than just the occasional email. This gives me one more positive thing to look forward to in the future. Be well."

Anonymous Call-in 13:43

To practice self care this year, I've let myself rest when I need to rest, and that includes, you know, taking many naps or lunchtime naps during the day. Since I'm working at home, an advice to fellow archivists is if you can turn down a meeting, then turn it down and not- not have guilt about not doing back to back meetings. I know not everyone has that option, but don't feel obligated to attend every meeting or to ask people to reschedule for another time.

Chris Burns 14:12

"I have been fortunate enough to be able to work in my archives for the entirety of COVID-19, except for about five weeks when I worked from home. I am so grateful that I have been able to work during this difficult time. I love what I do, and I look forward to it each day. This year with COVID we have had little to no foot traffic in our facility, but we have had communications with our patrons through email and phone conversations. Being able to talk to our researchers and helping them any way we can is why I'm an archivist. This year I have found joy in the records themselves. Being a county archivist, one of my joys is collecting and preserving local historical and genealogical records. Like most archives, we have a backlog of records that need to be processed, and during 2020 we have been able to make a dent in that backlog. In doing so, I have been so happy to see so much local historical records, photographs, and artifacts that are now ready for researchers to enjoy. At the Houston County, Tennessee Archives, we are turning a bad situation into a good one and looking for all the silver linings we can find.

Anna Trammell 15:23

"My name is Christie, and I work for a grant-funded project digitizing New Jersey newspapers. This time has taught me a lot about flexibility and resourcefulness. My coworkers and I have had to change our workflow, which presented us the opportunity to write blogs on articles we have found and raise awareness of this content on social media. Although production has slowed down, we were able to take a step back and find ways to reach out to a broader audience. To conclude, the advice that I have for fellow archivists is to take advantage of this downtime to educate communities on your collection. This is especially important considering many institutions are facing budget cuts. Also, keeping a consistent routine would help prevent losing sight of the bigger picture."

Chris Burns 16:15

"Advice from a Canadian: get out of bed each day, shower, get dressed, and put a smile on your face."

Anna Trammell 16:26

"Don't watch the news."

Chris Burns 16:28

"Phone at least five people each day."

Anna Trammell 16:31

"Start to clean your closets."

Chris Burns 16:33

"Discover all those projects you started but never finished. Now is the time to work on them."

Anna Trammell 16:39

"Do something each day that will have a visual effect so you can see your accomplishments."

Anna Trammell 16:46

"Join a group; a Facebook group, chat group, make a group."

Chris Burns 16:46

"Eat well."

Chris Burns 16:51

"Perhaps start an online business."

Anna Trammell 16:54

"Do something that requires you to reach out to people. Don't expect them to reach out to you."

Chris Burns 17:00

"Do something with your hands: knit, sew, woodwork, cook. Just be creative each and every day. It is that visual satisfaction of seeing your daily accomplishments that will get you through."

Anna Trammell 17:12

"Don't waste your life watching reruns or scrolling for hours."

Chris Burns 17:18

"Get outside daily. Walk at least 6,000 steps."

Anna Trammell 17:22

"Move your furniture around. Change your curtains. Do something you can see."

Chris Burns 17:28

"Write a book. Read a book."

Anna Trammell 17:31

"Learn the guitar, piano, saxophone. Take a painting class. These can all be done online."

Chris Burns 17:36

"Use your computer time wisely."

Anna Trammell 17:40

"Get your exercise."

Chris Burns 17:42

"Cook your meals. Look up recipes. Be creative."

Anna Trammell 17:45

"Try to keep a consistent bedtime."

Chris Burns 17:50

"Appreciate what you have."

Anna Trammell 17:52

"Learn to entertain yourself."

Chris Burns 17:55

"Take time to reflect."

Anna Trammell 17:57

"Have patience and be compassionate."

Chris Burns 17:59

"We will get through this."

Marcella Huggard 18:05

Hi, this is Marcella Huggard leaving a voicemail for the *Archives in Context* special episode. I have found the need to create my own structures this year. First I'm working from home, and then I'm working from home part of the time and in the office part of the time. I don't have a home office. I have a projector, a laptop, and kitchen table. So I make sure at 4:30 or 5 p.m. every day to put the laptop to sleep and turn off the projector and put them out of the way so we can eat dinner. I have a notepad where I take notes to remind myself of things I need to do when I get to the office; check the extents of this collection, print out that article to read, look up the accession file for that other collection, and for when I get home from the office. This is my advice to you, if you haven't done it for yourself. Find your structures, maybe your working hours has to be 8 p.m. to midnight, or maybe you need everything on your smartphone. Whatever the case, find your structures and stick to them as much as possible to give your life some order, to give yourself some control over those things that you can control. Thank you.

Anna Trammell 19:10

So those are all of our submissions that we received for the special call-in episode, and I hope that our listeners will just be able to learn from others in the archives community. I know that personally for me, it's been really helpful to talk to others who are facing similar challenges just as a way to recognize, you know, that I'm not alone even though it can feel that way when I'm working remotely and- and disconnected from my colleagues. So I hope that our listeners found those submissions from other members of our community helpful.

Chris Burns 19:45

And we want to be sure we end by thanking all of our submitters for their participation. I learned a lot from- from what they're all doing. I hope you did as well. We hope you all are doing well out there with your own work, and family, and personal lives. I want to thank Anna for this really creative idea. We hope to do more with this call-in type episode in the future. That's all from me.

Anna Trammell 20:22

Thanks, Chris.

Chris Burns 20:24

Thank you.

Anna Trammell 20:27

You've just listened to an episode of *Archives in Context*, the official podcast of the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Bethany Anderson, Chris Burns, JoyEllen Freeman (Williams), Nicole Milano, Colleen McFarland Rademaker, and Anna Trammell. Opinions expressed in this podcast are our own and are not reflective of a particular institution. Be sure to like us on iTunes if you enjoyed what you heard and join us again next time.