Archives in Context

Season 7 Episode 2: Cheryl Oestreicher

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SPEAKERS

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Chris Burns 00:27

Welcome to this episode of the Archives in Context podcast. My name is Chris Burns, and I'm here with Anna Trammell.

Anna Trammell 00:34

Hi everyone.

Chris Burns 00:35

Today we are talking to Cheryl Oestreicher. Cheryl is the head of Special Collections and Archives and a professor at Boise State University. She is the author of *Reference and Access for Archives and Manuscripts*, which was published by SAA in 2020 as part of the Archival Fundamentals Series. Thanks for joining us today Cheryl.

Cheryl Oestreicher 00:56

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Anna Trammell 00:57

So Cheryl, to start off with, I'm interested in learning more about your experience in reference and access work. So can you tell us about a particularly memorable reference interaction you've had professionally, or a time that maybe an experience with a user challenged you to rethink something about your archives program?

Cheryl Oestreicher 01:20

Yes, one of the most memorable interactions I've had was actually one of the most unusual ones that I have never experienced since. I was contacted by someone from the Make a Wish Foundation, who- someone- a boy,

a young boy, who was on the autism spectrum. For some reason, one of the things that helped calm him down were seeing maps of Boise. And so through the Make a Wish Foundation, they got the money and came out here- the family came out here, and I set up maps and brought out a whole bunch of them, and they spent maybe an hour in there looking at them. And afterwards, the boy's mother said to me, just expressed such gratitude of like, this was such an amazing experience. And it's something that I have- I often think of because you don't get those kinds of interactions very often, where it's- you see, you physically can see how much something has made a difference. It's- and it's not the most common. And I've had so many other memorable ones, too. Another one with a child, a fourth grader, Idaho had- for their public schools, they have Idaho history as part of the fourth grade curriculum, and this one girl came in and found a few things her mother brought her and she didn't, of course, come on her own. And was just- all she could say was thank you and was just so excited about seeing it. And so, I don't know, I think that seeing the reactions like that are what make it really memorable.

And with challenges, I think there isn't always one specific interaction that I think of with the challenge, other than the continuing one we all deal with is the question of 'why can't you just digitize everything', but we'll leave that one aside. But I think about how- what potential barriers there are, or what I see people sort of react to that might make the experience more difficult for them. Or, I don't want to say less pleasant, but kind of that. And I- working at an academic institution, think about that with students a lot. And we used to always require students to fill out our registration form and go through that whole process, and after a while I thought, you know, they- and part of it was to teach them, this is what you'll have to do at other archives, you know, so that they understand that, but I also want them to feel more welcome and to not have to think about one more layer of bureaucracy, because students have so many layers of bureaucracy. So we stopped requiring students to do those kinds of things. And so that's what I think about is not necessarily a one time thing, but an ongoing kind of thing. Are there patterns that I see that are that people are saying, 'why do you do this?' Or, 'what do you do?' and how we can amend that to make it to improve our services and improve our program.

Chris Burns 04:37
So your book starts off by taking us through the history of reference services and how we've slowly shifted, and most archives from a reference model focused- focused on limited users to a much broader public user base and you gave some great examples in your last answer about that. Can you summarize a bit of that history for us?

Cheryl Oestreicher 04:59
Certainly. As I did the research for this book, and of course, being an archivist and a historian, I got really, really into looking at the history of reference, probably a little more than I really needed to, but it was really fun. And it was interesting to see how consistent some of it was throughout the years, you know, just policies. So you know, of course, no food and drink, things have changed a little bit, because we no longer need to say no typewriters and no smoking, because that just generally isn't allowed. But that was, those are a couple of the other consistent ones and- and that there were forms that people filled out. And you know, a lot of what we do for the procedural part has remained the same. But I think where the biggest shift that happened was, you know, right around 60s-70s, the rise of social history and other kinds of things where it wasn't so much of a- only certain people can come or you need a letter of introduction, or you have to write to us and explain your whole project, and we'll determine whether it's deemed worthy or not, to the we want everyone to come in as much as

possible. And- and there definitely was a shift with that, and some places did still allow the public I mean, that did start, of course, with the state archives, when those were established, those are meant for the public. So there were, you know, different types of users even like what we still have today. But probably, it was starting in the 70s and later that you would see more journalists or filmmakers, or some of the other media, that kind of group that we- that many of us work with, on- whether on a regular basis or on an occasional basis and- and more of the shift in attitude, that archives are really for the public, and not just for specific people. And we continue to do that. I think actually, what I- what I think about too that has changed that a lot is community archives, and how those have emerged to address the history, culture, everything around the community, and often run by a community. And that is still changing, not just access, but how the profession looks at what constitutes an archives.

Anna Trammell 07:25
So throughout your book you keep reminding readers that access is really at the core of everything that we do, and you use this phrase 'from acquisition to advocacy'. And I think that's something that of course, we're all aware of, but it's easy to lose sight of that, especially for archivists who may not regularly work directly with the public. So talk to us about how access really informs all areas of archival practice.

Cheryl Oestreicher 07:54
Yeah, I have, and I'm not exactly sure how I evolved into this, but somewhere along the way, as I grew in the profession, and in my career, I just continually focus on access. And so everything that I do, I think about how will this help people find us, or use us, or contact us, learn about our collections, participate, however it might be. And- and so that's sort of the core that- and that I do with everything that I do. So as I work with donors, my automatic thing is well, do I think someone will use this? And of course, we all know we do occasionally take things that might not ever be used. But sometimes we we do that for the good relations, and- but to think about how- what would I do. Would I use this for an exhibit? How can I do a program with it? How could I incorporate it into student instruction? Or to- will there be someone in the public in the community who would be interested that we have this? And then that goes through with all stages. So the acquisition, and then when we get to the processing part of it, what are the terms that we would use to try to get the most hits on it? How can we describe it? How can we make it really easy for researchers to use and find what they need in this and- and then just to kind of keep going. And so I just think that you know, this is also part of the shift from reference in some ways where it was just 'we're just gonna sit back and wait for people to come to us' as opposed to how can we just make- do more so that more people will be aware of what it is we have, and- and I just- for me it's- it's nice to have that focus so that it's not thinking of everything as a separate, but having that one main point from which everything else branches out for. And- and I think that can be used even in different types of archives, you know, it's because not everyone is for the public and that's okay. You know, I- I do talk about that in the book, that there's different kinds of publics. So corporate archives, might never have anyone from outside the company use that. But then the company still is their public. And so how can they do more to- or how can they address those kinds of issues too and help create that awareness and access to whomever it might be? Whether it's a private institution, government, you know, any- any kind of religious archives, of course, other places that tribal, that might not have access to everyone, and that's okay, too. It's- but you can still do that serving, whatever and however you define your- what your public is.

Chris Burns 10:54

So staying on the theme of access, but- but looking at- at some particular types of access, digital collections and virtual access are the biggest areas of change in access and reference since the last manual on this topic was published by SAA, which was back in 2005. Can you describe how technology has changed how we and how our users conceptualize access? And how that informs reference work?

Cheryl Oestreicher 11:25

Yeah, I think there's no question that all of us would agree that technology has transformed everything that we do to some extent. And I think that besides just the equipment, the technology, the systems, software, all of those kinds of things, part of what technology changed for us, in regards to access is our attitude. So it used to be when we didn't have things online, or we didn't have that option, reference archivists were the gatekeepers, and it's like, you had to go through us to access everything. And so- and we're the experts, and we know it all, and you have to talk to us and do that kind of thing. And I, of course, I'm generalizing here, I know, not everyone would have done that. But by pushing it out in different ways then we no longer have to be the gatekeeper. And that helps broaden the access where it's- you can, you know, create a digital collection that you know, people are interested in, people look for, and maybe they'll find the information and we don't have that interaction. And that's okay, because that means more people are accessing it, more people can find it through Google or search engines, or whatever it might be. And I know that I'm sure all of us can talk about how someone found a photo that online that we had, and they're like, 'can I use that for my book?', which they might not have ever known that photo existed without it being online. So, it's a huge shift in that and a good one, so that we can reach more people.

You know, in the book, I talk about sort of accidental users, where they wouldn't know that things existed without finding them through whatever kind of search that they might have done. But there's still an important part of who- who it is and how they find us and think all of us can say that, you know, oh, they found you on the website, or I didn't know you had this collection, or can you tell me more about it? And so they get some of that information, and they don't have to try to go to different institutions or look in NUCMC, or some of these other places, they can find it through a wide variety of means. But it's also then the whole, why isn't everything digitized, of course, where we have that, and archivists know how much time and effort, and money, and equipment, and staffing, and that it takes, and the users don't always understand that... some of them do, and some don't, but that'll I think, continue to be a challenge that we'll all always have to deal with. But that doesn't mean you know, we can't try and educate people on why copyright is important and how we can't just do it and to take that into consideration. But you know, it is kind of a never ending effort that we need to make for that.

Anna Trammell 14:26

Just to kind of follow up on that question. Do you think that, or is there anything you want to say about how COVID-19 maybe changed the way that we do things in archives or the way user expectations during this period when maybe they weren't allowed to come in and use material in person or maybe we were prioritizing getting more content online while working remotely? Is there anything you want to comment on kind of the way that that caused us to shift or users to shift their expectations?

Cheryl Oestreicher 15:01

Yeah, I think that it was sort of this impetus for everyone to kind of look at like, well, how are we doing things because, you know, before that, not that we couldn't work from home or do something if you're working on that, but it was never part of like our- what we thought we could do. And then suddenly, it's like, wow, we actually can do a lot at home. Of course, we do need our physical collection, so it's not 100%. And then, you know, like what we did here at Boise State is, you know, the campus shut down, no one was allowed on without special permission. I received special permission, so I could continue to fulfill digital requests, reproduction requests for our patrons. And instead of sitting at a scanner, I started doing more photographing, so that it would go a little quicker, and then I didn't have to create the metadata, and I didn't worry as much. I mean I still did file naming and some of that kind of thing, but to expedite it, and so then it got me thinking, well can we do that more? And then it- you know, so sometimes we still do, but you know, we- we have reverted back, and then we didn't charge anyone, so we suspended our fees, because I kept thinking like, it didn't, I didn't like the idea of charging people for something when they could have come in normally on their own to do it, where we wouldn't have done that. So it helped me rethink our fees. And I think that we all have thought about it in so many different ways. And then, you know, different types of remote reference, where instead of just answering via email, or talking on the phone; setting up video cameras so people could look at things. And, you know, doing some of those kinds of things. You know, there's there's a lot of things. And so I think that, you know, largely a lot of us have reverted back to pre-pandemic. But I do think that a lot of people have also taken that into think about like, well, how can we change things? And why don't we do this, and maybe we can consider this and- and I think that's it's always a good thing to do that. And hopefully, some of those changes won't need to be implemented again for another pandemic, but just more as a it'll better serve our users.

Anna Trammell 17:14

So thinking about future changes and shifts that may be on the horizon for archives, how do you envision reference and access changing? And I'm curious what changes you're most optimistic about and what worries you?

Cheryl Oestreicher 17:31

So let's start with the worries first, because then we can end on a more positive note. I think what worries me the most more is just the proliferation of electronic records, and the different formats, and the files, and how are we going to capture them? And do we need to continue to need specialized software to make them accessible, you know. Then do we need all the Microsoft, and then do we need Adobe, and this, and this, and this, and it can kind of go on. There's some stability in being able to convert files into- into readable formats and more preservable formats, but, you know, there's going to be new things that come out, you know, that's the nature of how- how it works now. And I also think about more of, it's so easy for people to click a delete button, than, I mean, people, you know, you put something in a filing cabinet, you still know it's there, but until that filing cabinet gets full, you don't think about it, and then when it's full, then you really go thinking through it. But as opposed to, oh, I have this file on my computer, I don't need that anymore so you just delete it, like you don't always give the same thought to that and how much has been lost and that we might never have access to. Of course, we don't want every single record that's ever been created, nor should we ever try, because that's an impossible task. But how can we do more to educate people on that, and I think, you know, with some technology or, and software, the word archive has become a bit ubiquitous in that respect. So at least it kind of

is out there in ways that, while it might not be the way we think of it, at least it might be more of a familiar concept. So that's, that's kind of my worry, and the increased expectation that, well, it's a digital file so why can't you put that online and why, you know, continuing that. But even with that, you know, so many archivists are, and others are doing so much great work with trying to capture this, and social media, and all of those kinds of things to make sure that- that those records are preserved for the future.

And as far as like other things, I think about with how we could do more to partner with our users and researchers on access and you know, with what I said a minute ago about, I took all these photos of these files for our patrons. And of course, we allow digital photography. I know not everyone does, but we do. And we were pretty flexible and- and on that, and so well why can't they give us those files, and maybe we can have them fill out just a little bit of metadata, not to create a full inventory, but here's a few words that were in there, and how to engage them in the process so that they feel committed to what we're doing and more informed about what we're trying to do. And how can we, you know, do that. So it is it's a much more collaborative process. And, you know, I always struggle, as I'm sure a lot of us do with, but I want to have the best metadata I can possibly have. And I want to have the highest quality image of everything I can possibly have. And it's allowing ourselves to rethink that idea too with- with some of this. So, what if I take a picture with my phone to send, I do this regularly to send because it's quicker than scanning, and I send it to someone, like, well, maybe I could put that online? Does it need to be perfect? Absolutely not. And so how can we continue to rethink how we do it so that we could increase that, and I'm talking about digital access, but you know, with everything too, little bits of information about our collections, and- and all of that. So I just think, yeah, well, the future will be interesting. And then I also fantasize about like, a virtual reality tour of the archives. And wouldn't that be kind of fun? And I know, some people have done that. What are ways that I dream about like, could there be this computer with a camera setup, where for remote access- where the archivist doesn't have to be there, but the researcher could push a button and then this computer or machine or something would flip the page for them of a folder so that, you know, we could set up that kind of remote access instead of scanning everything. And if they wanted to take a picture or snapshot of it, they could or you know, I don't know that- that's if I, if I had the technological mind to create something like that, I wish I could. But that- that's for someone else to figure out. So I don't know, mostly, I just think I hope that we keep exploring and thinking about what we can do.

Chris Burns 22:29
So you've- you've written such a wonderful book, such an important contribution to the profession. Congratulations on that and thank you. I particularly, this may speak to my own wonky side; love the legal regulations chapter. Having all that information in one place is super handy as a reference tool. I'm wondering what the main thing you hope that readers will learn or take away from reading your new book?

Cheryl Oestreicher 23:02
Yes, thank you for the compliments. I'd say the legal chapter was one of the most challenging ones to write. It's difficult to summarize some of that, but it also- I learned a lot by doing that one, too. Mostly what I hope that people will learn or takeaway is that there is no one way to do anything, and that everyone can do- adapt and establish things in ways that work best for them, for their patrons, for their institution, whatever it might be. And I think having that flexibility is important. And so to- and to be able to take it- and I do say this throughout the book is to take these ideas and- and modify them. And it's like, okay, well, I like this part of it, but I like this

part of it. And that's kind of how I've grown in my career. I've worked at mostly academic institutions, but I had an internship at a museum, I've worked at a public library, I worked at a historical society. And so I take something, and I've worked at large and small academic institutions. So I take something from all of those places where it's like, oh, this is how they did it, and I learned from that. That doesn't need to be exactly how we do it here, but maybe we do this little part or whatever. And so that's what I think about is that to be open to the modifications, and to take it and do whatever you want with it and run with it, and then go forth and then share what you do so that the rest of us can learn from you as well.

Anna Trammell 24:40
Okay, so the time has come, as we always do, we ask everyone that we interview to answer this question. So Cheryl, what, if you could have any superpower what would it be and why?

Cheryl Oestreicher 24:55
Well I've thought of two, and I couldn't decide between the two. So there's, if I could have an archives superpower, I would abscond with copyright and digitize everything in an instant that had like the most amazing metadata and make it accessible to everybody. But personally, I would love to be able to fly anywhere at super speed so that- I love to travel and so that I could just go wherever I wanted to, and travel wherever I wanted, and stay for a little bit, stay for days and do that kind of thing, but be able to go everywhere, was sort of what I, as I thought about that I kept picturing Superman and him, you know, going around the world, and I forget which- which movie that was, if that was Superman 1,2,3, where he like reverses time by going around the world. And it's like, you don't need to reverse time but to be able to fly all over the place, I think would be really fun. Or in an invisible plane like Wonder Woman.

Anna Trammell 25:57
I thought maybe your response would be something related to being able to actually create this like reading room archive that you- or reading group robot that you described.

Cheryl Oestreicher 26:07
Oh, there's that too. Actually, I wouldn't mind a technological superpower, as well. Yeah, too many to choose from.

Chris Burns 26:16
So thank you so much for talking with us today, Cheryl. Congratulations on the book again. We're really so grateful to you for for having taken the time to write the book, and do all that research, and put all this information in one place. And again for spending the time talking with Anna and I today.

Cheryl Oestreicher 26:36
Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Outro 26:39
You've just listened to an episode of the Archives in Context podcast, the official podcast of the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Rose Buchanan, Chris Burns, Mary Caldera, Abigail

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