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HISTORY NEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Why Old Places
MATTER

Speaking
History
to **POWER**

Training Professionals
for **History
Institutions**

Keeping History
ABOVE WATER





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Courtesy Joseph Giordano

ON THE COVER

Constructed from 1871 through 1901, the Philadelphia City Hall was the tallest habitable building in the world until 1908. In 2007, the American Institute of Architects voted it number 21 on its list of Americans' 150 favorite structures in the United States.

INSIDE: TECHNICAL LEAFLET

Staying Connected: Developing and Maintaining Emergency Contact Lists

By Jessica Unger

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GRAPPLING WITH Unfolding Events

By Jason Crabill, Melanie A. Adams, and Kyle McKoy

- * Police violence against African-Americans in cities including Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Chicago sparks protests in the streets and ultimately contributes to the creation of a public #blacklivesmatter movement.
- * A Kentucky county clerk refuses to issue marriage licenses in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling, citing religious freedom.
- * The governor of Indiana signs into law the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, then rescinds his signature in the wake of boycotts and massive, nationwide protests and debate over religious freedom and gay rights.
- * Congregants in a historic Charleston, South Carolina, black church are shot and killed by a white supremacist terrorist, leading to—among other things—a debate over, and public removal of, the Confederate flag on the statehouse grounds.

- * A massive, coordinated attack in Paris leads to worldwide debates over refugees, followed by a majority of governors in the United States publicly opposing the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states.

* * * * *

These are just some of the major cultural issues that communities near and far have grappled with in the twelve months preceding the writing of this article. Who knows how many more will have become part of the public consciousness and discussion by the time you are reading it in the pages of *History News*. Cultural heritage institutions of all sizes, in major cities and in small towns, staffed by full-time paid professionals or by an army of part-time unpaid

Member of the audience at the Commemoration of Srebrenica.





A Visual Journey:
From AIDS to Marriage
Equality exhibit
opening event at the
Eugene and Marilyn
Glick Indiana History
Center.

Indiana Historical Society/Ed Stewart

volunteers, all face the possibility that an issue like any one of these may drop on their doorstep or affect their community at any time. In fact, at least one of the issues above probably already has.

So what can our institutions do about this? What should institutions be doing to prepare for the unexpected? And at an even more basic level, what is any particular institution's responsibility to its community when one of these situations occurs?

These were all questions posed during a roundtable discussion at the 2015 AASLH Annual Meeting, in a session titled, "Pop Up: Unfolding Events." The conversations were wide-ranging, engaging, insightful, and at times provocative. More questions were raised than were answered, and ultimately the discussion landed on the idea that, while there is no perfect solution for handling situations like these when they appear, we can all do more to be better prepared to respond when they do. And while each organization faces its own unique set of variables—and there are no one-size-fits-all answers to any of these questions—there are some basic, scalable ideas that all institutions can consider and apply to their own unique situations.

STEPS TO CONSIDER

Plan in Advance

As famous baseball player and philosopher Yogi Berra is credited as saying, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else." This is especially true when planning for the unexpected. Just as a good disaster plan is built on the solid ground work of developing contingencies and relationships that can spring into action when disaster strikes, so too can proactive, strategic thinking help an organization prepare for the "un-preparable."

Organizational Buy-In

One of the hallmarks of creating a response to unplanned-for events is that they often go hand-in-hand with strong emotions like fear, anger, mistrust, confusion, or defiance. In order for an organization to respond to these events most effectively—whether as an active collector of history as it is happening, a safe space for the community to hold difficult conversations, or a vocal advocate for a position in a particular debate—the organization as a whole needs to be on the same page. From the leadership on one end to the frontline staff on the other, everyone needs to understand, and be willing to stand behind, the role they have defined for the institution. Which brings us to our next point.

Define Your Scope

What events are we going to respond to? To what extent are we going to respond? These are some of the most basic and important questions any organization must face when determining how to approach building a thoughtful and effective set of responses. Every good set of mission, vision, and values statements helps an institution define its inherent strengths, its realized or aspirational niche, and its perceived value to the community, as well as aids in setting a limited range of responsibilities and expectations in the face of unlimited possibilities. The same holds true for any organization trying to be proactive in its community. Determining in broad strokes what sorts of situations should warrant small-, medium-, or large-scale responses is the first step in defining the organization's scope of response. The second step is to determine what the available tools should be for each of those levels of response. When is a public statement of principle or an editorial in the local paper called for? When should the response be a set of public programs that help put the events of the day in historical context? And what events should warrant a large-scale, game-changing response the likes of which are usually only reserved for the most dramatic of events?

Community Engagement

All cultural heritage institutions are engaged in their communities to one extent or another. It's why we exist in the first place. That said, some of the toughest challenges facing us today revolve around the very concept of community engagement and relevance. Who is your audience? Who is your community? Has your organization been able to adapt to the changing demographics of the community it was designed to serve? Does your mission allow for that? Answering these questions will not only help you deal with questions of relevance and community value but doing so will also position your organization to better handle the sorts of unexpected events or issues that it may face now or in the future.

Leveraging Everyday Work

There is probably no need to reinvent the wheel. Much of our everyday work is already about connecting people to the history that surrounds them and seeking to find relevance in that. In some cases it may not be that different from where you'll end up if you try to incorporate preparing for unexpected events into the DNA of your organization. Are there things you are doing now that already prepare you for the unexpected—or would with some minor tweaking? Leverage and build off of those activities. Once you build relationships, maintain them. Look for ways to extend what you do outside of your own space. Make sure the community has a voice in the work that you do. The truth is that if you address the other steps suggested above, the accumulated effect should be represented in how you do this work. And that can have a big effect on whether you are ready when it is time to jump.

UNFOLDING EVENTS IN ACTION: THE MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

So, what does this look like in the real world? First, let's look at the Missouri Historical Society. Over the years, the institution has earned a strong reputation for serving as a space to learn about and discuss difficult topics that affect its community. From issues of educational inequality to race to housing segregation, the museum has spent the last two decades providing opportunities for the community to grapple with these ongoing issues. Instead of only responding to a specific local, regional, or national event when it happens, the Missouri Historical Society is proactively and constantly providing programs that reflect community issues and the rel-



*Author Nelson Price, Jeanne White-Ginder, and Greg Louganis sign books at the book launch program for **The Quiet Hero: A Life of Ryan White.***

evancy of history, which positions them to be responsive in both short- and long-term ways.

This became especially apparent in the days and months following the death of Michael Brown in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson. In fact, at the time of this writing, almost eighteen months after the events in Ferguson, the Missouri Historical Society continues

to develop and facilitate programs that address deep-seated issues of inequality in the region. The institution did not simply respond to the events in Ferguson, it instead continued doing the types of programs they had been doing for more than a decade—programs that encourage the community to come to the museum and have difficult conversations on issues of race, class, education, and housing. By working with community organizations, the Missouri Historical Society is able to remain relevant and explore these issues in a way that allows all voices to be heard.

In order to be prepared to facilitate topics that may result in heated discussion and uncomfortable confrontations, museums must first look at their institutional mission and values. Are the conversations you want to have in line with the type of organization you want to be? Do you have the necessary trust of the community to host such conversations? Do you have the skills or access to the right community partners to develop a successful program? Fortunately, the institution's mission encourages the exploration of relevant topics and how they connect to the region's history.

The Missouri Historical Society did not become a safe space in the community overnight. The creation of a space of trust took years and included work done by all museum departments, from the executive office to exhibitions to visitor services. It is not enough for one department to decide it wants to address challenging topics. It has to be infused throughout the institution and reflected in the organization's language and actions.

As time went on, some members of the St. Louis community openly discussed "Ferguson fatigue"—a weariness of discussing Ferguson and the inequalities it brought to light. Despite this challenge, the institution encountered scant pushback as it continued to explore topics of regional concern. Because of the depth and breadth of community partnerships, the institution is able to address topics in a variety of ways, from theater to music to documentaries. It is also able to find ways to connect back to the history, such as programs on the founding of the St. Louis police department, citizenship issues explored through the Dred Scott decision, and housing segregation addressed in the restricted covenants popular in many St. Louis neighborhoods.

As events continue to unfold around the country and the world, it is important for history organizations to learn how to use history to contextualize the events and make them relevant for their audiences. The society uses its resources to create opportunities for dialogue that lead toward understanding and positive change.

But the response to Ferguson is just one example of this principle in action. Starting with the exhibition, *Race: Are We So Different?* eight years ago, the organization designated a yearly theme. These themes have included race, class, homelessness, and hunger. The 2015 annual theme was immigration with the title, *Finding Home: An Immigration Series*. This year-long series included two exhibitions: one on German immigrants who traveled to St. Louis in 1834, and another more recent look at immigrants who made St. Louis home in the late twentieth century. Through these exhibitions and programs such as lectures, documentaries, panels, and a naturalization ceremony, the St. Louis community learned about what it was like to be an immigrant at different points in time.

More than fifteen years ago, the Missouri Historical Society established a relationship with the Bosnian community when it hosted an exhibition for the fifth anniversary of Srebrenica, the Bosnian genocide that brought more than 8,000 refugees to St. Louis. This year, as part of its immigrant series, the society further developed this relationship by not only hosting the twentieth anniversary of Srebrenica, but creating a series entitled *Bosnia 101*.

The institution developed this three-part series in conjunction with the Bosnian community to provide a forum for St. Louisans to learn about the people and culture of Bosnia. The program started with a presentation by the International Institute, the organization responsible for relocating the Bosnians when they arrived in St. Louis. They spoke about the politics of Bosnia, the Srebrenica genocide, and the aftermath of the war. Grbic, a local Bosnian restaurant hosted the second program, which had a more festive tone as it explored Bosnian life and culture. The final program looked at what the Bosnian community brought to St. Louis and the positive impact of the refugees' relocation. This series welcomed eighty people at each session and was well-received. Many participants said they knew Bosnians came to St. Louis, but they didn't know why or much about the culture. This series allowed the Bosnian community to share its story with the wider community and for the latter to learn about their neighbors.

With the current political rhetoric around immigration, the Missouri historical society plans to provide two *Immigration 101* programs each year. One will look at historic immigration from western Europe. The second will examine more recent immigrant stories (such as Latinos) or refugee resettlement (e.g., Syrians). Because of the success of the *Bosnian 101* program as well as the historical society's strong partnerships with diverse community organizations, the expanded programs are poised to show that everyone deserves a chance at the American dream.

**Bosnian 101 program at Grbic Restaurant,
a traditional Bosnian-style restaurant in St. Louis.**



Brittany Jones and Alice Hoenigman in front of their prominent place in the A Visual Journey: From AIDS to Marriage Equality exhibition celebrating LGBT history in Indiana.

Indiana Historical Society/Ed Stewart

UNFOLDING EVENTS IN ACTION: INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Indiana Historical Society (IHS) is another example of how organizations can deal with issues that drop at their front door. In March 2015, the state of Indiana became a top news story when Governor Mike Pence signed into law the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The law's passage and signing was met with both strong support and widespread criticism. Opponents of the law claimed it targeted LGBT communities and legalized discrimination against them. Proponents viewed the law as protection for individuals who may be forced to violate their religious beliefs. Thousands protested against the policy locally while many national businesses and cultural organizations called for a boycott of Indiana. The reputation of Indiana, known worldwide for its "Hoosier Hospitality," was on the line.

This tempestuous time happened to align with public programs coming from a number of initiatives the organization had been pursuing for some time. In 2014, IHS presented a museum theater piece and community conversation titled *Will You Marry Me?*, which profiled legal and cultural prohibitions on who could or could not marry in different periods over time. Also in 2014, IHS launched an LGBT collecting initiative, recording more than fifty oral histories and acquiring several large collections including more than 60,000 photographs taken over three decades by Indianapolis photographer Mark A. Lee.

Additionally, the IHS Press published a new book in its youth biography series, *The Quiet Hero: The Life of Ryan*



White, by Nelson Price. The book marked the twentieth anniversary of Ryan White's death and told the story of the middle school hemophiliac student who was blocked from attending school after acquiring HIV/AIDS from a blood transfusion. Ryan's situation had to be addressed by the courts and advanced the fight against discrimination, educated the public about the disease, and increased medical care and research.

IHS had planned a book launch on April 1, 2015, that was to include a panel discussion with the author, Ryan's mother and AIDS activist Jeanne White-Ginder, and Olympic Diving champion Greg Louganis who had become a close

friend of Ryan's. In March leading up to this event, several members of the Indiana legislature backed off on their support for RFRA while Governor Pence continued to defend the new law, which included a disastrous interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC. This interview caused an avalanche of negative reaction. Out-of-state organizations threatened to cancel conventions in Indianapolis and major corporations such as Eli Lilly, Cummins, Roche, and Angie's List denounced what they perceived as a negative climate for recruiting and retaining a highly qualified workforce.

This brought IHS into the fray on a national level. The IHS is the host of Developing History Leaders @SHA (formerly the Seminar for Historical Administration or SHA), sponsored by a number of partnering organizations and institutions. As RFRA continued to be debated nationally and Hoosier leaders worked on a fix, the SHA partners debated moving the seminar out of Indiana in 2015. Like many other businesses, cultural institutions, and professional associations caught in the middle, IHS faced a dilemma. While it wanted to continue to offer SHA a home, it would not defend RFRA and its implications particularly because it would overturn Indianapolis's own antidiscrimination codes that specifically included LGBT Hoosiers. Meanwhile, key IHS leaders, staff, and board members worked behind-the-scenes with VisitIndy, the Indianapolis Arts Council, and its mayor who helped lead the movement. Blue circular stickers began appearing on doors and windows of businesses and cultural organizations stating, "This business serves everyone" in support of a grassroots effort to create distance from the law.



Nine-year-old Dominique Denny shares her story as part of the transgender community in the exhibit A Visual Journey: From AIDS to Marriage Equality.

Indiana Historical Society/Ed Stewart

On April 1, IHS readied for a far larger-than-ever expected audience as Jeanne White-Ginder and Greg Louganis provided media interviews connecting Ryan's life and sacrifice with the present situation. IHS President and CEO John Herbst opened the program observing, "Here everyone is welcome and IHS is committed to telling everyone's story." The evening demonstrated to the staff, the board, and the audience that IHS is a leader in the community.

One day later, the legislature passed a fix to the original bill that did not overturn local ordinances. The partners decided to keep SHA in Indianapolis. And the Indiana Historical Society continues to do its work in surrounding communities. The debate on RFRA continues.

From events we can prepare for to those that no one sees coming, museums,

historic houses, and other cultural heritage institutions are uniquely positioned to be a beacon of light in the stormy seas of an uncertain world. Whether we are providing historical context that helps place current events within the larger human experience or are creating safe spaces for difficult conversations to occur, our organizations can help foster positive social growth and help our communities to heal, as long as we put ourselves in the right position to do so.

In some other famous words attributed to Yogi Berra, "The future ain't what it used to be." In reality, we may not have the ability to predict the future as well as Berra could, but the reality is that no matter what we do to prepare, we will have to face the future when it arrives. Which begs the question: are you doing all you can to be ready when the future comes? ●



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