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Rapid-Response Collecting after the Pulse Nightclub Massacre

*Pam Schwartz, Whitney Broadaway, Emilie S. Arnold,
Adam M. Ware, and Jessica Domingo*

ABSTRACT: Five collections and exhibitions professionals from the Orange County Regional History Center, a history museum located in downtown Orlando, Florida, reveal their experiences developing the One Orlando Collection in the wake of the June 12, 2016, Pulse Nightclub massacre. Within days of the event, they began to collect thousands of Pulse-related objects left at public memorials or donated to the museum. Examining the origins of the project through the challenges of field collection, the effect the team's work had on the community, decisions around exhibiting collected objects, and the professional and emotional impacts the job had on the team, this article suggests what other museum professionals in similar situations may be faced with should the unimaginable happen.

KEY WORDS: mass violence, condolence collections, Pulse Nightclub, massacre, LGBTQ, oral history, morale, emergency planning, disaster planning

It Happened to Us

Pam Schwartz, Chief Curator

Our staff awoke the morning of June 12, 2016, to the news that a homegrown terrorist had murdered forty-nine and injured sixty-eight people after last call on Latin Night at Pulse Nightclub, a popular gay club a little over a mile from where we live and work.

When I first heard about it, this had not yet become “the most lethal shooting by a single gunman in modern American history,” nor had it been labeled “terrorism” or “the deadliest hate crime against the American LGBTQ community.” But I still knew history was happening right before my eyes. I immediately drafted a five-page collecting plan for what would become our museum’s “One Orlando Collection Initiative.”

As an outpouring of material tributes from across the world accumulated around Orlando, we focused on how to collect them. We discussed hiring additional staff, collecting artifacts from within the club itself (once the FBI released the scene), gathering oral histories and photographs, recording the international

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response, and ultimately preserving and exhibiting for our community the history of this event of unfathomable violence and hate.

That this event needed to be collected was never a question for us, but there were many others:

- Who owns the memorial items?
- How will the community react to our collecting them?
- What about our current projects of planning the entire museum's redesign?
The seven upcoming exhibitions we have to write, produce, and install?
- When is too soon to collect? To exhibit? To interpret?

Our museum, the Orange County Regional History Center, is a public/private nonprofit history museum with about twenty-five staff members. Four to five of our core staff worked on this initiative, facing a flood of high public emotion, media scrutiny, controlling local politics, and an already grueling exhibitions schedule—not to mention the difficulties of collecting outdoors for days in the record heat of a merciless Orlando summer. We forged ahead to document and collect, not realizing how it would assist our community in both its grieving and healing, or how it would affect our own.

Within months we created an online memorial for the artifacts and photographs we were collecting. The site allowed widespread victims' families and a grieving nation to participate in some small way in the memorialization that was happening across Orlando. Mourners contacted us to share the stories of the items they had left, and we could show our community our preservation in progress.

The memorialization of the Pulse Nightclub shooting is not over. Though we have passed the grim mantle of "the deadliest shooting" on to Las Vegas and as mass violence seems evermore commonplace, each day presents new information, new artifacts, and new appointments to record oral histories. It is an ever-evolving story of impact on our community.

Like many museums, ours has struggled for greater visibility, understanding, and intersectionality in all that we do. Our response to Pulse thrust us into the public eye and allowed us to show our community what reactive and inclusive public history and museum work looks like.

Contained within this article are the personal and professional experiences of our staff members, which we hope will help others understand what their role could be and inspire other museums to discuss how their communities might face the unimaginable.

Rapid-Response Collecting

Whitney Broadaway, Collections Manager

The first site of memorial activity after the shooting was historic Lake Eola in downtown Orlando. After placing Spanish-English bilingual signs at the site on June



Vigil held on June 13, 2016, at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. The beginnings of an incredible temporary memorial collected by History Center staff are visible in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of the Orange County Regional History Center)

23 to let our community understand what we were doing, just eleven days after the shooting, staff arrived with empty boxes and began selecting items for preservation based on their unique nature, apparent significance, condition, and vulnerability to

the elements. As one temporary memorial site grew to four in a matter of weeks, we refined our field collecting and conservation methods to include a table and tent system at the city-designated memorial at the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center (DPAC) and later the sites at the Orlando Regional Medical Center (ORMC), where many of the survivors were treated, and at Pulse Nightclub itself.

From the very beginning, we photographed each item we identified for collection before we laid hands on it, documenting its location and relationship to other objects around it. This picture inventory also served as a comprehensive record due to the sheer quantity of items we collected across weeks in the field; a paper list was impractical. Some items broke through our defenses more than others. I remember collecting signs in the gravel at DPAC. We lifted one poster to reveal a simple sign, black lettering on white, and the words “we will always love you, mom” jumped out at me. I had lost my mother a few years before, and as a mother myself, I was not prepared to encounter those words from grieving children. I was on photo duty at the time and had to quickly turn to face the passing traffic as I sobbed.

Everything that could be safely stored in boxes we packed for later assessment, but some items were either too wet or too dirty, requiring preliminary conservation care. The most common threat was water: we created a drying press using blotting paper to squeeze moisture from paper and signs and removed saturated paper items from plastic sheet protectors.

We persevered through molten candle wax, wasps’ nests, and pools of water rancid with flower petals. The worst encounter came when a horde of spiders rained over us as we removed a portion of a forty-nine-foot Hawaiian lei. Florida’s hot, humid, and rainy summer climate meant the items we were collecting were fraught with sun bleaching, mold, and mildew. Many items at these sites disintegrated before we ever reached them, especially at DPAC where the memorial was placed on a grassy lawn.

Once collected from the memorial site, we temporarily filled every empty History Center office, conference room, and our library with the items. There we double-checked for moisture and allowed the artifacts to air out and acclimatize. At this point, we evaluated anything with mold or mildew for quarantine. After the items sat overnight, they were carefully repacked, temporarily labeled with their collection date and location, and transported to our off-site climate-controlled storage facility thirty minutes away. This became our grueling schedule: collecting across multiple memorial sites, then processing and transporting those items, before finally beginning work on our regular daily tasks. This process often started at seven thirty in the morning and ended after ten o’clock at night, lasting for more than thirty-one days.

One Year Later, an Exhibition

Emilie S. Arnold, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions

Following the massacre, the History Center hosted two exhibitions displaying One Orlando Collection objects. The first, *Pride, Prejudice & Protest: GLBT History of*



History Center staff beginning to collect artifacts from inside Pulse Nightclub after its release from the FBI. (Photo courtesy of the Orange County Regional History Center)

Greater Orlando, had been in the planning stages for months when the shooting occurred. With a scheduled opening date in October, we took action to design a twenty-foot wall to honor the murdered, incorporating a small selection of powerful memorial objects. The following June, our Spanish-English bilingual, one-year remembrance exhibition, *One Year Later: Reflecting on Orlando's Pulse Nightclub Massacre*, filled 3,200 square feet.

As an exhibition curator and member of Orlando's grieving community, my work at the memorials gave me a deep familiarity with the most extraordinary objects, images, and oral histories we'd gathered. Many items left indelible impressions on me and demanded display in an exhibition. At Pulse Nightclub, for example, mourners picked stones out of a gravel berm and personalized them with markers. That's where I found a three-sided stone bearing the words "Because of this, my mom showed me love," a message that both broke and mended my heart. We also found objects of solidarity from other places that experienced mass violence: Newtown, Aurora, Boston, San Bernadino, and New York (9/11).

Some items remain much too raw to exhibit. Spending a day in the broken and bullet-pierced nightclub, we gathered objects that spoke of desperation, death, and survival: a bathroom door and wall riven by bullets, a sagging sink that helped trapped clubgoers climb to safety through a tiny hole high on the wall, a cabinet in which survivors huddled. Although physical testimony to Orlando's darkest days,

we felt it was not time to display these things, especially while the graves of the murdered remain fresh and scores of victims struggle to put the horror of the massacre behind them. With these experiences in mind, I approached our one-year exhibition determined that no matter whom or how our guests mourned or how they responded to the events of that day, they could find themselves reflected in this gallery—and hopefully uplifted by Orlando’s rejection of violence and outpouring of love.

I began by acknowledging those directly involved in the aftermath of the shooting by displaying the names, faces, and ages of the murdered (in this case, using portraits by several Orlando artists). We also designated sections to express gratitude for the scores of law enforcement, medical professionals, and counselors who put themselves on the line as first responders, as well as the local LGBTQ support organizations that became community focal points. We illustrated their stories using objects they donated, along with hundreds of notes and drawings retrieved from the memorials.

The exhibition benefited from an excellent collection of digital photographs from multiple sources. They show Orlando in the first weeks and months after the shooting in ways that make it seem both recent and long ago: buildings throughout the city festooned with rainbow flags, images of mourners attending vigils and fundraisers, and even glimpses of police and reporter activity in the days directly following June 12.

Due to scheduling, *One Year Later* ran for only one week. Admission was free, and the History Center still saw unprecedented visitation in excess of three thousand people. Personal accounts taught us that guests *did* see themselves in our exhibition, whether they empathized with the sentiments it contained or literally found evidence of themselves in Orlando’s recorded history. Photographer J. D. Casto saw his images on display and, as he told us, “hid in a corner and cried.” After visiting to record an oral history for the collection, Chimene Hurst examined a photograph of donors lined up to give blood the morning of June 12 and was startled to find her face in the midst of hundreds of others. Speaking with the *Orlando Sentinel*, Brian Alvear, whose sister Amanda died at Pulse, said, “I think it’s beautiful, I think it’s amazing. . . . I wish it was permanent. It’s sad we’re not going to be able to see it year round or go whenever we want.”¹

Community Impact

Adam M. Ware, *Historian and Research Librarian*

Public historical institutions and collecting bodies occupy an unstable space relative to the communities they serve because they are often a part of the very stories they preserve and interpret. Concurrently, participation in a mass-trauma

¹ Steve Hudak, “Pulse History Exhibit Makes Some Weep, Others Smile,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 16, 2017.

memorial, whether by leaving offerings or merely through attendance, functions as a kind of ritual redress. Memorialization serves to remedy the unbalanced accounts of human experience: by combating feelings of isolation with community unity, the absence of victims with the presence of a material offering, the darkness of loss with a lit candle, or destruction with artistic creation. It is a process of creating meaning out of meaninglessness and order out of chaos. In practical ways, the behaviors of History Center staff helped to catalyze that process, whether through sequential retrieval, photographing, and care processes or through wearing uniform black t-shirts that identified us as History Center professionals.

In the initial phases our work generated curiosity from onlookers. Refining our rapid-response collecting procedures acted to fulfill the History Center's core mission to collect and preserve Central Florida history, while our work became, for the hundreds of visitors with whom we interacted, a real part of the memorials themselves. As a result, our impact as a community resource extended far beyond the immediate fulfillment of our mission. Our work conferred a sense of stability and uniformity that both rendered our triaging tasks manageable and eased the minds of the grieving.

Our presence at the sites provided opportunities to address questions that grew into positive and meaningful interactions that embodied our commitment to service as a community resource. In time, local and national news media included coverage of our work while reporting on the memorials themselves, and spontaneous Q&A exchanges with reporters uploaded via Facebook Live drew responses that revealed deep public support for the tasks that lay ahead of us. By helping people to understand our work in the immediate moment, we saw our work providing comfort to friends and family members eager to combat the fear that their loved ones would be forgotten, or that the immense expression of unity embodied in the sites would evaporate. Firsthand, we saw the value that public history can offer in a time of traumatic crisis.

The presence of homophobic sentiment in the memorials' material record is minimal. In the cases where it appears it includes counteragents. For example, "Action Angel Wings" made and worn by members of the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre Company protected attendees of victims' funerals from the sight and sound of Westboro Baptist Church picketers. Opposition to the work of the initiative and its decolonizing effect on the collections was subtle, couched in concern for its impact on our extant holdings (of largely white, Protestant, and prosperous men). While attending a local genealogical fair, I was approached by a woman lamenting the collection. When I drew connections between our core mission—to collect, preserve, and interpret the material history of Central Florida—and the time-sensitive work of preserving the memorials, she gasped and informed me of her desire "to see someone dig a hole, take a bulldozer, and push all that Pulse stuff in it so [History Center staff] can get back to what matters." This desire to exclude Central Florida's LGBTQ and Latinx citizens in the narrative of Central

Florida history is a chilling and dehumanizing threat that public historians must confront on ethical and practical grounds.

Our work recontextualized how mourners saw and participated in the memorials. As word spread that the History Center would be preserving items, the kinds of items we saw began to change. Art installations became more complex, items registering the presence of particular groups and institutions emerged, and the story of Pulse memorializing underwent changes. The massacre itself, its memorials, and our work as a collecting repository all represent distinct but inseparable microhistories. The interrelationship of the memorials and our collection of them reflected a therapeutic process for all involved.

That therapeutic dimension to the History Center's work extended to currently over two hundred oral histories conducted with survivors, first responders, family members, and community leaders, many of whom found a measure of relief in giving voice to their memories and feelings without being overwhelmed by news media outlets or government bodies. As in conversations with mourners at the sites, these admissions of confidence and trust reflect not only the value the History Center purports to offer its publics, but also the value they clearly perceive in our work.

Institutional Impact

Jessica Domingo, One Orlando Registrar

Prior to the shooting, our departments were already short staffed, relying on volunteers and interns for assistance with some projects. Field collecting added thousands of artifacts that needed to be conserved, cataloged, marked, packed, and stored. It was impossible for an already overwhelmed staff member charged with normal day-to-day operation to assume this responsibility. The institution needed to take on a full-time employee solely dedicated to the care of the Pulse collection.

As a History Center volunteer, I spent two months helping to collect at the memorials before being offered the position of registrar for the One Orlando Collection. As a graduate student in a museum studies program, this presented an opportunity to augment my experience with real, impactful work. I hold a full-time, six-month contract renewable up to two years, and my work continues to this day. The field collecting has been suspended, but donations still come in, a year and a half after the event. Processing the One Orlando Collection has been an exhausting and at times emotional assignment, and it seems to be one that will continue into perpetuity.

Becoming custodians of the memorial sites required a staggering number of man hours. Keeping a regular business schedule was not possible, if we wanted to be 100 percent committed to this project. Days were long. Our small crew turned on our business brains, allowing the weight of this project to stifle our own broken hearts. Only in the privacy of our own homes, held by our loved ones, could we truly break down and release the tears we had been holding in.

Aside from the emotional toll, we also struggled physically, battling sunburn, the threat of mosquito-borne Zika virus, exhaustion, and dehydration. For days we were covered in sweat, stagnant water from vases, rotting flowers, candle wax, and glitter. It is worth acknowledging that none of us ever second guessed this project. We all knew in our hearts it had to be done, despite the toll that it took on us.

During the first week of August 2016, we learned that our field collecting would, in fact, include gathering items from inside Pulse Nightclub. Realizing that this would be an emotionally difficult task, our chief curator allowed us to choose whether to participate. Having myself been a frequent patron of the nightclub years ago, I felt entering the building after such a horrific event would be too much to bear, and I just did not have the emotional strength to endure it after spending so much time completely immersed in the heartfelt sentiments of our grieving community. My coworkers did, spending hours inside preserving remains of violence and the soul of the Pulse that was. It is an experience they can never unlive.

We collected thousands and thousands of items from the various memorial sites, directly from families, and from around the world. Each of us have our favorites, some because they make us smile and others because they adequately express the magnitude of the event. To date, I have cataloged approximately six thousand Pulse-related items, so it is hard to choose just one that really speaks to me. There is a multicolored plush alpaca I call Pedro that (for now) lives on my desk. His feet are dirty from being at the memorial site outside Pulse Nightclub, but he wears a heart-warming smile that helps me get through especially difficult days.

There is also a green-and-white-striped sock monkey that plays a recorded song when its paw is squeezed. Its song, Usher's "Got Us Fallin' in Love," made me cry every time. It took me inside the club that night, and I could imagine all the victims having the time of their lives. For that moment, they were safe, happy, and surrounded by love. The monkey symbolized the joy the victims felt only seconds before everything was taken away. Though our work to preserve the history of our community cannot bring the forty-nine back or take away the pain of all the others who were affected, it can help to heal and serve as a lesson for the generations to come.

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Emilie Arnold, assistant curator of exhibitions, holds a master of heritage preservation degree from Georgia State University and a master of history museum studies degree from the Cooperstown Graduate Program. Emilie is a museum generalist with experiences in all aspects of exhibition development and working familiarity with museum archives and collections.

Whitney Broadaway, collections manager, has been creating museum exhibits and preserving collections since 2006. She was previously the conservator at

University of Central Florida's Special Collections and University Archives, is an internationally exhibited artist, and has a fine arts degree in printmaking and bookbinding from UCF.

Jessica Domingo, One Orlando registrar, is currently pursuing a graduate degree in library science with a concentration in museum studies. She aspires to follow her love for the museum field, to continue to work in collections, and also gain knowledge in historic preservation.

Pam Schwartz, chief curator, has sixteen years of museum experience as a director, curator, consultant, and designer. She is a peer reviewer for the American Alliance of Museums Accreditation and MAP programs. Pam currently serves on the advisory council to the onePULSE Foundation working to build the permanent Pulse Nightclub memorial and museum.

Adam M. Ware, historian and research librarian of the History Center's Joseph L. Brechner Research Center, holds a PhD in American religious history with emphasis in museum studies from Florida State University.