

COVID-19 & Oshawa

Documenting a Global Pandemic on a Local Level



On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic and very quickly our everyday lives changed.



I am an archivist and suddenly I find myself living through a worldwide event that will no doubt be studied by all sorts of researchers in the future. As an archivist, it is my responsibility to collect on the pandemic and its impact on a local level. I am also a person whose focus tends to be on the human story, on the social impact and how historic events are influenced and impacted by human decisions.

From an archival point of view, I wanted to document the human response, the personal stories and ensure that they are preserved for future researchers, along side the official government response to the pandemic.

The Archival Record

- According to Martha Jane K. Zachert, author of *Personal Records as Historical Sources*, official records supply the skeleton of the history, the bare bones of events. By adding personal records the story fleshes out and quickens to life.
- "Personal records are usually more spontaneous and intimate than other records. Typically written at or very near the occurrence of the events they describe, they frequently serve as vivid first-hand witness of at least one point of view concerning these events." Zachert

I approached the staff with a request. I asked each of them to journal this time. The focus was to be on whatever was on their mind at the time they wrote. The idea was to document the impact of the pandemic on each of them. Each staff member agreed to journal with the idea that this writing would be added to the archival record.

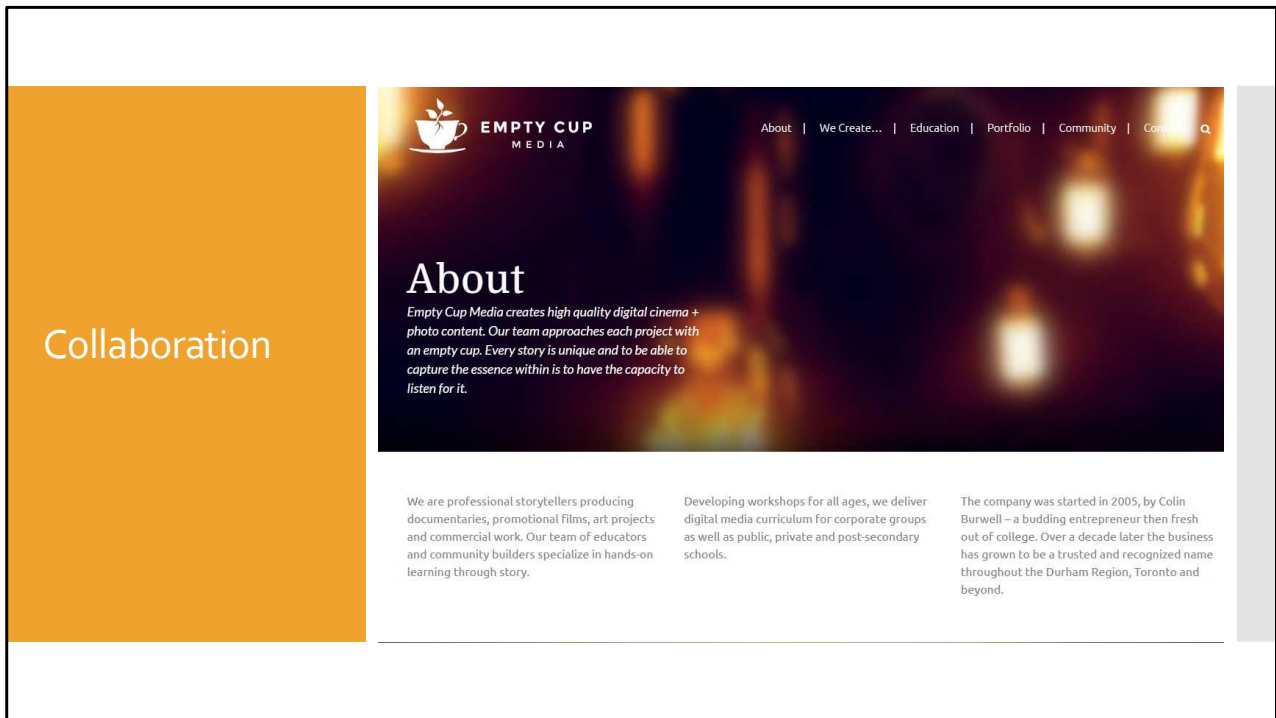
Journals, personal correspondence, diaries are the types of primary records that help us to understand the human context of historic events. As an archivist, personal accounts of historic events are research gems. Two of my most favourite collections in the archives are of a personal nature and I am well aware that journals and diaries of this time period will one day be important social history references for those researching the human experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My hope was that we could begin creating the primary source material that will be important to future researchers and would become a part of the archival record of this event. I considered the types of records we wish we had related to other similar events, such as the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, and I set out to ensure that these were created and collected.



I then asked if they would be comfortable sharing their journals, or at least part of it, online. My thought process for this request was that museums are places of connection, with the past, with our community, with beauty, with knowledge, and by sharing our experiences with the community hopefully we would help to maintain and strengthen those connections.

The rest of the staff readily agreed as they saw the benefit in documenting the impact on the institution, as well as the people behind the institution. We are also approaching other cultural organizations and businesses to add their voices to the record. For example, a local craft brewery shifted to producing hand sanitizer when it became clear we were facing shortages. They have agreed to write a piece on why they shifted production, as well as documenting what their line looks like as it produces hand sanitizer as well as beer.



As I was discussing my plans with the staff, our Community Engagement Coordinator, Lisa Terech, mentioned that a local media company Empty Cup Media had launched their own project documenting COVID-19 and that perhaps we could get in contact with them to see about working together.

Colin had started his project with the idea that he would collect video, still photography and interviews with Oshawa residents documenting the impact of the pandemic locally. The videos and phone interviews will be compiled into a short documentary examining our community during this time.

I emailed Colin and asked if he might be interested in collaborating to collect these stories.

Steps Taken




- Present idea to OM staff
- Set up website
- Divide project tasks between OM and Empty Cup
- Begin developing journal entries for the website
- Connect with participants
- Connect participants with Empty Cup

- Launch project to community
- Outline desired outcomes with OM
- Begin filming around Oshawa
- Begin recording interviews
- Connect with OM staff to combine entries

The benefit of collaborating is that each group brings with it different skill sets and different areas of expertise.

Both the Museum and Empty Cup are skilled at collecting stories, we just approach it in different ways. I am looking to Colin to learn from his expertise in collecting current stories. We have taken on several oral history projects, but in those we have the benefit of being removed from the focus and understand what questions will help to fill in the historic record gap. Current collecting is more challenging and we are benefitting from Colin's experience.

The Museum has a built in audience who already enjoy history through story telling. Colin is able to access these built in audience to, hopefully, find participants.

We have shared goals, as well as different desired outcomes. Each partner understands that this is a pivotal time in our history and wants to collect the stories of people's experiences.

Colin has a release form that his participants sign and he and I are in discussions about him donating the content that he has collected to the archival collection. This

will be our first major digital collection and we are still trying to determine the process.

Ongoing Collecting

- This is the start of our collecting efforts related to COVID-19 and it is passive collecting
- It will be included with the official government response as part of the documentary record
- The stories collected may become part of a documentary produced by Empty Cup
- In the process of developing a policy and procedures related to collecting post COVID-19
- New policy will allow for more active collecting of artefacts related to the pandemic

The online journal and the potential documentary with Empty Cup are a relatively passive form of collecting but it will be combined with more active collecting once the state of emergency is lifted and we begin to examine life post COVID-19. Along side the online journal, several members of the community approached me after the launched the project to inquire about personal journals. They have offered to document their experiences in personal journals that will be donated to the archives once this is completed. I have had initial discussions with each of these community members about restricted access to these journals for a set number of years. This will allow the participants to be as open and personal in their writing as they want, with the knowledge that their writing will not be accessible to the public for a set number of years.

We are contemplating how we are going to archive the online journal. Do we archive it digitally, through Archive IT or do we simply screen shot and save hard copies of the web pages. At this time it is unclear and may come down to budget concerns.

I am hopeful that this collecting, along with the collecting of the official response to the pandemic and eventually artefacts from this time, will provide future researchers with a great deal of primary source material to assist with their research.

Thank you

- Further questions: email Jennifer at archivist@oshawamuseum.org