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Response to the Unthinkable: Collecting and Archiving Condolence and Temporary Memorial Materials following Public Tragedies

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Handbook of Research on Disaster Management and Contingency Planning in Modern Libraries

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Chapter 25
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ABSTRACT

From Oklahoma City to Columbine to the Boston Marathon finish line, individuals around the world have responded to violent mass deaths publicized in mainstream media by creating ever-larger temporary memorials and sending expressions of sympathy—such as letters, flowers, tokens, and mementos—by the tens and even hundreds of thousands. Increasingly, there is an expectation that some, if not all, of the condolence and temporary memorial items will be kept or saved. This unusual and unexpected task of archiving so-called "spontaneous shrines" often falls to libraries and archives and few protocols, if any, exist for librarians and archivists in this role. This chapter aims to provide insight and guidance to librarians or archivists who must develop their own unique response to unanticipated and unthinkable tragedies. Response strategies are covered in both a discussion of the history and literature surrounding temporary memorials and three disaster case studies: the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire Tragedy, the 2007 Virginia Tech Campus Shooting, and the 2012 Sandy Hook School Tragedy.

We've all become a nation of hoarders.
   – Dr. Erika Doss, American University

INTRODUCTION

From Oklahoma City to Columbine, from Aurora to the Boston Marathon finish line, individuals around the world have responded to violent mass deaths publicized in mainstream media by creating ever-larger temporary memorials and sending expressions of sympathy—such as letters, flowers, tokens, and mementos—by the tens and even hundreds of thousands. Increasingly, there is an expectation that some, if not all, of the condolence and temporary memorial items will be kept or saved in some way for future generations to look back upon to help document the event and

the public outpouring of grief and sympathy that followed. This unusual and unexpected task of archiving so-called "spontaneous shrines" often falls to libraries and archives. Few protocols, if any, exist to guide librarians and archivists with this monumental undertaking, which is further complicated by each tragedy's uniqueness as well as the singular character of the event's surrounding community. Acknowledging that singularity and thus eschewing the notion of a standard protocol or tragedy response, this chapter instead aims to provide insight and guidance to librarians or archivists who might find themselves in the position of developing their own unique response to unanticipated and unthinkable tragedies.

Responses to these kinds of events are covered in both a discussion of the history and literature surrounding temporary memorials and three disaster case studies: the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire Tragedy, the 2007 Virginia Tech Campus Shooting, and the 2012 Sandy Hook School Tragedy. Drawing inspiration from these distinctive cases, this author proposes some general "best practices" and a list of essential questions for librarians and archivists to consider when responding to the unthinkable.

THE STORY OF THE STUFF: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Western world, spontaneous shrines are a "primary way to mourn those who have died a sudden or shocking death, and to acknowledge the circumstances of the deaths" (Santino, 2006, p. 5). Coined by folklorist Jack Santino (1992) in an article about death ritual in Northern Ireland, the term "spontaneous shrines" refers to such phenomena as the Mourning Wall at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, the panoply of messages on plywood barriers and missing persons posters at "Ground Zero" in New York City following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, and even the temporary roadside memorials and urban corner shrines of teddy bears, votive candles, and cards following automobile accidents or drive-by shootings.

This practice was first heavily theorized in Santino's seminal book, *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (2006) and "spontaneous shrine" has hence become both a widely used and contested term. Newer theorists, such as Doss (2008, 2010) and Sturken (2007), opt instead for the phrase "temporary memorial," due to both the often secular dimensions of this kind of commemoration and to emphasize the ephemeral but not necessarily spontaneous nature of the practice. Other common terms include "performative memorials," "makeshift memorials," "ephemeral memorials," and "spontaneous memorials."

While memorial practice itself is millennia old, the contemporary practice of creating large-scale temporary memorials in the Western world exploded in the 1990s, growing and evolving alongside the 24-hour news cycle and birth of the Internet, and is largely characterized by leaving teddy bears, cards, candles, and other items at sites of violent death (Milne, 2009). Much of the theoretical attention, at least in the United States, has focused on national tragedies, such as the Oklahoma City bombing (Brown, 1999; Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998; Sturken, 2007) and 9/11 attacks (Gardner, 2002; Haskins, 2007; K. Jones, Zagacki, & Lewis, 2007; Otto, 2014), and to a lesser extent roadside memorials (Clark, 2006; Santino, 2006), the bonfire collapse at Texas A&M (Grider, 2002), and the shooting at Columbine High School (Grider, 2007; Spencer & Muschert, 2009). This existing body of literature focuses heavily on anthropological and ethnographic practices.[1] More recent publications additionally explore the implications for cultural studies and material culture, including the dimension of public affect versus private mourning—how these memorials serve as repositories for

grief and memorialize death, especially by those not directly experiencing the death of a loved one.[2]

Evolving alongside this mourning ritual are museum and institutional collections preserving the "stuff" of temporary memorials, though their appearance and discussion in the professional literature is limited, especially in the field of libraries and information sciences (LIS). Experts agree that the careful archival preservation of temporary memorial condolence materials is similarly a recent phenomenon dating back, at least in the United States, to the 1980s when the National Park Service began collecting "memorabilia" items left at the Vietnam War Memorial (Doss, 2010). The artifacts that compose the National Park Service's collection were photographed and briefly examined in a catalog-style book in 1995 (Allen, 1995).

Perhaps the two most discussed tragedy-related collections in the United States are the September 11th Digital Archives and Oklahoma City National Memorial Archives. Both are covered in detail in Doss's *Memorial Mania* (2010) and Sturken's *Tourists of History* (2007), though these examinations focus on the cultural, historical, and sociological implications of the materials, rather than as objects selected for and housed within an archival setting. In addition to these books, the formation of digital collections pertaining to the 9/11 attacks have been considered by both historians, such as Gardner (2002), as well as information professionals, such as Wallace & Stuchell (2011) and Pearson (2005). While Wallace (2011) analyzes the assembly and creation of the 9/11 Commission Archive in *Archival Science*, emphasis of the article is on access control of government records and accountability. Pearson, by contrast, explores the struggle of New York City museums in recording the terrorist attacks, including various attempts to collect artifacts relating to the tragedy (Pearson, 2005). The formation of the collection at Oklahoma City has been briefly explored by the collection's curator in *Perspectives on History* (Brown, 1999).

Most other references to such condolence collections are usually found in journals of anthropology, archeology, grief studies, and American studies/cultural studies/public history and in a consideration about what these objects mean or represent about our culture.[3] The practical, logistical and archival concerns of such collections, however, are largely eschewed in favor of discussions that explore the materiality of grief, the role these objects play in our collective consciousness and cultural memory. Perhaps the notable exceptions to this rule are the writings of Purcell (2012) in *Journal of Archival Organization* and Fox et al. (2008) in *Traumatology* which have described some of the process of creating an archival collection and digital library of remembrance following the April 16, 2007 shooting on the Virginia Tech campus. Additionally, Brier & Brown's report that describes the creation of the September 11th Digital Archive by George Mason University's Center for History and New Media and City University of New York's American Social History Project in *Radical History Review* covers some of the logistical and managerial challenges of that collection effort (Brier & Brown, 2011).

Writings in disaster management, too, rarely address the curation and preservation of condolence material following crises, as they are concentrated on the immediate concerns of patron safety or damage to existing collection materials and structures. Some recent articles that touch on some aspect of the library's engagement with public grief include Shelton's (2009) analysis of condolence messages on Facebook in the aftermath of campus shootings, including Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University (which also includes suggestions for how ways community college libraries can incorporate Facebook into their security planning) and a 2011 personal essay on photographs and memory documents at libraries in East Japan following the earthquake and tsunami (Kakiguchi, 2011).

Recent literature in the archives and LIS field does, however, address issues at the periphery of

creating collections of grief materials. Collective and social memory is a well-discussed area in the professional literature.[4] In recent years there has also been discussion on the changing nature of archives and what they contain; the definition for what constitutes a record is evolving to include digital media from photographs to email records and that the power of archives lies in the *meaning* of the information collected and how it can be interpreted (Greene, 2002). Additionally, recent discussions about social media, digital collections, crowd-sourced collections and public-produced annotations also have relevance to this topic, since condolence collections are often created to preserve, in part, an immediate and timely outpouring of public sentiment.[5] In particular, discussions such as those by Rhodes (2014) and Erde (2014) on documenting the Occupy Wall Street movement sheds some light on how libraries might respond to significant social events happening in the moment.

Despite the lack of direct critical attention, these "archives of grief" and condolence artifact collections are becoming more widespread. From the September 11th museum that opened in spring 2014 to the Northeastern University Libraries' crowd-sourced digital collection of remembrances following the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, there is a growing and diverse collection practice that remains at this point largely unexplored in professional literature, especially in the theory of practice in archival and information sciences.

These expanding collection practices—especially those that rise to a scale and scope of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, which encompasses thousands of items now held in off-site storage facilities—raise a number of important questions for the curators of our cultural memory to consider. Among them are: *For whom are these items being kept? What purpose does each archive serve? Does each have a future value and use?*

To begin to address these pertinent and timely questions, the chapter that follows explores three modern instances of a large-scale outpouring of condolence materials, the resulting materials management of those objects, and what kind of collection, if any, was created to preserve these materials.

THE THINGS WE KEEP: THREE DISASTER RESPONSE CASE STUDIES

To explore contemporary responses to unthinkable anthropogenic disasters, what follows are three disaster-response case studies based on original research about the response to those events. Each case study begins with a description of the inciting incident then chronicles the efforts to track, manage, and preserve condolence items by individuals and organizations in that community.

In the three sections that follow, we will examine:

- the thorough archeological preservation of the complete temporary memorial at Texas A&M following the 1999 bonfire collapse, now stored in a permanent, off-site library archive;
- the selection and preservation at Virginia Tech of a representative sampling of the more than 90,000 "lots" of materials received in the aftermath of the 2007 campus shooting in Special Collections and the creation of an online, digital condolence archive; and
- the disparate material management and preservation efforts in Newtown, Connecticut, following the Sandy Hook School shooting in 2012, involving the influx of more then 500,000 letters, 65,000 teddy bears, and tens of thousands of other gifts and temporary memorial items.

Methodology

The case studies presented in this chapter are the result of qualitative analyses of events and the subsequent conclusions result from an in-depth analysis of this relatively small sample of three cases/tragedy responses. As with many case studies in the LIS field, this one "attempts, on one hand, to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the event under study but at the same time to develop more general theoretical statements about regularities in the observed phenomena" (Fidel, 1984).

Data about each case presented herein was gathered through three processes: direct observation, interviews, and examination of available documentation (e.g. finding aids, any scholarly articles referring to the cases, photographic documentation, etc.) as well as the resulting archival collection for each site. Unless otherwise cited, the information contained in this chapter is the result of original research.

The selection of the subjects was made for both theoretical and practical reasons: Virginia Tech was the first site to be examined and the inspiration for this study as the author was present during the 2007 campus shooting and resided in Blacksburg for several years following the tragedy. After researching other catastrophes within the last two decades, Texas A&M was selected as a suitable comparison both because of its similar setting to Virginia Tech and its historical importance: A&M is likewise a land-grant and rurally situated university with similar militaristic traditions;[6] it is also one of the earliest examples of the modern temporary memorial phenomenon and the only known example where all items from a so-called spontaneous shrine were preserved.

Sandy Hook was subsequently added when the events began happening while the author was researching the Virginia Tech case study; the tragedy response there offered a second opportunity to observe the phenomenon directly as it was progressing. In contrast to the other two sites, the response at Sandy Hook reached an unforeseen scale and took place outside of a university context, providing considerable points of contrast and comparison to the other cases.

Interviews took the form of both informal and formal conversations. Casual conversations included phone calls and emails with the individuals responsible for managing the condolence materials at all three sites. Formal conversations took place as video recorded interviews, which were transcribed prior to analysis for this book chapter.

News footage, archival video documentation, and photographs were consulted for Texas A&M and Virginia Tech in addition to trips to both universities' resulting archives. In the case of Sandy Hook, documentation materials (e.g. photographs, home movies, and notes/journals) from the town and from individuals interviewed were consulted but the majority of the observation took place firsthand and was videotaped by the author over the course of 2013 during four site visits to Newtown.

Limitations to this research and analysis include the lack of prior research in the LIS field about preservation of temporary memorial materials and that much of the data about cases was self-reported by those directly responsible for managing grief materials. While attempts have been made to verify claims, corroborate accounts, and avoid issues of selective memory, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration, these are inherent risks of self-reported data.

It should also be noted that the scope of the case studies is limited. Further questions not explored in this chapter include cost/benefit analysis of the resources required to create condolence collections, identification and analysis of the users of these grief archives, and the longitudinal impact of keeping these archives open and accessible for research.

Texas A&M Bonfire Memorabilia Collection

On November 18, 1999, the Aggie bonfire went terribly wrong. Until that time, Texas A&M University students had a nearly century-old tradition of constructing a giant bonfire and burning it before the game with the university's archrival, the University of Texas-Austin. Shortly before 3:00AM that morning in 1999, however, the 59-foot high stack consisting of about 5,000 logs that had been built suddenly collapsed and killed 12 students and injured 27 others still working on the structure. Within a few hours, thousands of people gathered on the Texas A&M campus both to grieve and to leave objects at the growing spontaneous shrine along the security fence surrounding the accident site.

Professor Sylvia Grider, a folklorist in A&M's Department of Anthropology, was alerted to the memorial by her students and visited the developing shrine just two nights after it had collapsed. Grider recounted her initial encounter, saying,

I drove out there…and what I saw, of course, was the shrine that was developing on the security fence that the police had put up around the collapsed bonfire. And, it was at night and the media were there with all of their lights and so it was well-lit. There were hundreds, probably thousands of people out there. And, I knew then, that this was going to be my new research project—to deal with the artifacts in that shrine and to understand what that shrine was all about. (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014)

Indeed, Grider completely transformed her research agenda following the bonfire. In the immediate days and weeks, she became the chief consultant for University officials about the bonfire memorial and the fate of its growing contents.

At this point in history, the large scale and scope of A&M's temporary memorial was part of a new phenomenon, preceded by the flowers left after Princess Diana's death, items left at the Oklahoma City bombing site's fence, and the acres of memorial objects left at Columbine High School after the shooting there. Grider consulted the professional literature for guidance but "the situation at A&M was so dynamic that having read all of the literature wasn't particularly helpful … because of the way that people brought material to the shrine, what they were bringing, and then such complications as the weather conditions" (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014). The shrine at Texas A&M revealed to Grider the singular character of each community's response to tragedy and how the University had to adapt to meet the ever-dynamic situation.

Working with a group of student volunteers, Grider decided to use an archaeological paradigm on how to gather "artifacts," meaning all of the materials left by mourners at the site of the bonfire collapse. Graduate students in the department of Anthropology that were trained in archaeological methodology were the crew chiefs and many community members participated in some way, from bringing boxed lunches to feed the volunteers to offering up supplies. The collection period took place just before Thanksgiving and lasted a few days. Grider most recalls the exhaustive nature of the collection process:

We got everything. I'll never forget toward the end of the period when we were collecting, the weather was awful. It was sleeting and the wind was blowing. I looked up and there were students on their hands and knees crawling around the fence to pick up every plastic flower petal, anything that had been overlooked—they were picking it up. They wanted to say that we had collected everything that had been left at the bonfire site. That, to me, is one reason that this collection of artifacts that are now in the archives at A&M are so important: we have an unedited collection. It's everything that was left out there during the period that we collected. (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014)

Figure 1. Everything from the site was saved--from matchboxes to flower petals

Figure 2. All materials, including this miniature bonfire model made of cinnamon sticks, have been carefully sealed due to their exposure to the elements at the outdoor memorial

Grider elaborated that organic matter not suitable for archiving was placed in a special university compost pile that was later added to landscaping on the site of the permanent bonfire memorial.

The genre and quantity of items that appeared and were collected fall into what Grider considers a "syntax" or "vocabulary" of shrines. She explains,

The kinds of artifacts that are most common are whatever people have with them when they go to visit the shrine. Then, the other items are what people deliberately bring with them to the shrines and those fall into different categories: One category is what you can go buy quickly at the local convenience store or the Walmart. This results in popular culture repetition of hearts, flowers, angels, and religious icons—whatever people can easily buy. Another category is what people prepare in advance to bring to the shrine— artworks. These are objects they have made at home specifically to take and put in the shrine and range from posters and banners to paintings to sculptures. (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014)

Despite this common vocabulary to shrines, Grider also observed that at each shrine there is additionally "an idiosyncratic category of artifacts—artifacts that pertain to that specific event." For the bonfire memorial, these idiosyncratic artifacts were objects that pertained specifically to Texas A&M—from university-branded clothing and football-related "12th man towels" to items specifically associated with the bonfire event itself, such as "pots"—helmets worn by students during the bonfire construction—and "grodies"—the soiled clothing worn by students during the week of making the bonfire.[7]

Though the collection and preservation of the bonfire memorabilia was both thorough and careful, it has never been put on display and is currently kept at a secure off-site facility along with other University records archives. There is a private index of the collection—a spreadsheet that runs nearly 4000 rows long. About the decision to keep this archive private, Grider elaborates,

As far as I know, it probably never will [be put on display]. All of those artifacts carry an enormous emotional burden in this community and in the life of A&M because those artifacts are the material representation of how this community responded to one of the biggest catastrophes that has ever hit this community or the university. It was a defining event in the life of the university. So, those artifacts are just the silent sentinels that say, 'We were here. We stood vigil.' …All the artifacts, they've been cataloged, they've been described, they are in archival boxes, and they are living over at the archives. What they do is they stay there. People in the community seem to be perfectly satisfied knowing that the artifacts are there. They are safe; nobody bothers them. (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014)

To this point, apart from Grider's own initial research articles, the Texas A&M archives have not been consulted or used by researchers or scholars. The closed nature of this unedited collection brings to light more questions: *For whom does this archive exist? Is there an institutional value in an archive that is not consulted? What resources should be allocated to preserving a collection that must remain private?* Perhaps some insight into these questions can be gleaned from Grider's explanations of the purpose and meaning of temporary memorials:

There's just not a simple answer to what a shrine means. …The word "shrine" is a clue that the actual catastrophe site is something that people want to see, to visit, and to try to understand through visitation, that pilgrimage, and then the leaving of mementos—regardless of what they are, regardless of how mundane. The teddy bear or the plastic flowers from Walmart, all of that taken together takes on a sacred or luminous aura that this is a place set apart. It's temporary–it's

Figure 3. "They just stay there," says Grider of the items in the A&M Collection

Figure 4. A view of the Texas A&M Bonfire Memorabilia Collection in storage at Texas A&M

ephemeral. But for the time that the shrine is in place and the artifacts are in place, it is a sacred site, and people react to it as though it is something set apart from the everyday. (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014)

In her research Grider has also examined the grieving period for communities following catastrophes and estimates that it would take a community at least twenty-five years to reckon with a tragic event and approach it in any objec-

tive way. At this time, fifteen years later, there are no known plans to make the Texas A&M bonfire collection public at a later date.

The case at Texas A&M demands engagement with questions about the purpose of collecting and maintaining so-called grief archives that any archivist must reckon with in dealing with a grief-stricken community. Because of the sacred nature of these sites, perhaps these objects, too, have this same aura and meaning that makes them worth keeping, even if they are never to again see the light of day.

Virginia Tech April 16, 2007 Condolence Archive

On April 16, 2007, the college town of Blacksburg, Virginia, experienced the unthinkable: 32 faculty and students were killed in a mass shooting on the Virginia Tech campus. Unlike what happened at Texas A&M, the response to the tragedy went well beyond local borders—it was global. In the immediate wake, intense media coverage of the events ensued and people around the world responded by sending condolence items, ranging from signed banners from other schools and universities to original music compositions and sound recordings about the victims to a NASCAR racing car hood that was driven around the racetrack to honor the lives lost.

While Virginia Tech did similarly experience the development of a large spontaneous shrine on the University Drillfield (a large, grassy field in the center of campus) where students erected large white plywood boards for written messages and expressions of grief, the flood of incoming mail and packages was unprecedented. By best estimates (a precise log was not kept), Virginia Tech received at least 90,000 "lots" of condolence items from all 50 states in the US and from 80 countries. A lot might contain one item (for example, one single quilt) or as many as 32,000 items, such as one gift of origami cranes. University archivist Tamara Kennelly, who assumed responsibility

for organizing the material coming in, explained that in addition to these counted materials there were thousands of untracked items received by the student union and given away, such as donations of food, bracelets, and care packages. Just one day after the tragedy, Kennelly received an email from a colleague at Syracuse University who had managed a collection of condolence materials following the Lockerbie air disaster. It was this email prompting that pushed Kennelly to commit to preserving some of the materials coming in to campus and being placed on the growing shrine (T. Kennelly, personal communication, January 9, 2013).

The inundation of packages raised unique problems: space for receiving, organizing, and processing the materials was a primary concern; manpower was another. Budget resources were equally limited and the then-director of Special Collections did not wish to save more than 500 cubic feet worth of materials for an archival collection. Kennelly, the staff of the Squires Student Center, and community volunteers, however, worked together to cope with these challenges. As items arrived, they were placed in a University Center Ballroom, which became a de facto mail sorting and archival processing facility. Items earmarked for the families of particular victims were redirected to them. Volunteers tagged the remaining materials and organized them according to their point of origin, if known, and then logged that information into an Excel spreadsheet. Finally, incoming objects, especially those that could not be kept due to their size, were photographed. According to the project archivist, these original photographs were taken due to the limited amount of physical space available to permanently house the collection:

We thought if we had an image that would be a way of capturing items and keeping them in another form. When we moved the collection back to the library [from a temporary storage and processing center] in the fall of 2008, we no longer had funds

or access to photographers, so materials received after that time were not photographed. (T. Kennelly, personal communication, April 6, 2011)

Some materials were so large they had to be transported and displayed in the Cassel Coliseum sports facility to be photographed aerially. After being photographed, selected items were arranged, described and housed in archival containers. After the initial months, this processing moved to an offsite facility, Virginia Tech's Corporate Research Center, for the continued processing, description, and archiving of materials.

Selection also posed challenges, as did the fact that, like the bonfire memorial at A&M, outdoor materials fell prey to the weather and elements. Kennelly explains that a number of materials, either because of their kind or quantity, were not considered for inclusion:

We repurposed items. For example, we received many scarves and lap blankets. Some of these were offered to the local women's shelter or to similar places where people were in need. We felt that the items had been sent to give comfort and to be used. Items also were made available through Squires Student Center for students and the general public. [Paper] Cranes, bracelets, cards, wristbands, ornaments, teddy bears, and all kinds of food were there for the taking. We did not attempt to record or keep flowers received. Some materials sat out on the Drillfield and even though they were moved under tents when it started raining they were affected by the moisture. We had to be careful not to introduce mold or mildew into our collection and some items had become unreadable or too fragile to keep. (T. Kennelly, personal communication, April 6, 2011)

Beyond these practical concerns, Virginia Tech received counsel from a task force that included experts from the Library of Congress as well as advice from individual archivists at institutions who had documented their own tragedies, includ-

ing Syracuse University, Oklahoma State University, and Texas A&M (Purcell, 2012). Ultimately, Virginia Tech was advised by these experts to keep approximately 5-10% of the materials to create a representative collection.

Sylvia Grider, who spearheaded the bonfire collection at Texas A&M, was one of the consultants who offered advice to Virginia Tech. She made a site visit and remarked on the incredible number of artifacts in the form of artworks sent to the university as display pieces—something that made this response unique and particular to the historical event. Grider explained how this made the work of creating the collection at Virginia Tech very different:

We had to talk about the differentiation between the artifacts that [were simply mailed to the University and those that] had been left outside... Those mailed artifacts were in sort of a different category. They had different emotional work to do being outside on the campus versus these pieces that had been sent as display pieces that were kept in the student center. It was instructive to me to realize how these shrines–how popular reaction is constantly evolving. (S. Grider, personal communication, March 18, 2014)

As is written on the Virginia Tech Libraries' website, the process of selection for this collection was "guided by the principles of the archival profession to impartially organize, preserve, and make accessible the analog and digital resources documenting the events of that day and subsequently." More specifically, the process of deciding which materials to keep was a labored one and was informed by the aforementioned consultants and archivists who formed an emergency response committee to assist Virginia Tech with their influx of condolence items. As a result of that committee's input, selection criteria were developed for which of the logged items should be kept permanently. It was determined that any

materials for the permanent collection should meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. Reflections of popular culture—what Marshall Fishwick, [Virginia Tech's] professor of popular culture, might find interesting, (e.g., there are very marked differences in banners from California vs. Texas vs. Northeast).

2. Sociological interest—e.g., Columbine survivors, places impacted by other tragedies, people mentioning their experiences of loss through violence, their thoughts on related issues (e.g., gun control, mental health services), or cards from people incarcerated, materials reflecting incredible impact of this event on people of all ages.

3. Personal messages to victims or to Cho [the shooter] included on the item. Note: Items that are specifically and uniquely designated for a particular person or family would be directed to them.

4. Materials that help to personalize those whose lives were lost.

5. Materials from Student Senate, UUSA [University Unions & Student Activities], Student Government, or similar groups at other institutions of particular interest to UUSA.

6. The weird, outliers—Library of Congress staff emphasized this.

7. Aesthetics—especially attractive or expressive materials.

8. Materials from engineering schools in other places that express a special connection to our engineering school.

9. Materials from departments of of foreign language and literature as that was a department with two classes attacked during the shootings. (Note: We actually received a set of materials sent to our Dept. of Foreign Language and Literature).

10. Materials from Resident Advisers—one of the first 2 victims was a resident adviser.

11. Unique and special materials—flag flown in Iraq, flag flown at half-mast over Statue of Liberty, Washington Nationals autographed VT hats worn at their game, lighted sign created by VT students, T-shirts created by other institutions to sell and raise money for Hokie Spirit fund.

12. Things from institutions like us—SCHEV peers, ACC peers, other "Tech" or A&M schools.

13. Things from institutions different from us—Harvard, Stanford.

14. Cross-section of materials from various types of places—church groups, businesses, civic group, home school.

15. Geography—foreign materials, materials signed in many different languages, materials from Korea or Koreans[8], materials demonstrating geographical expanse of senders. (T. Kennelly, "Criteria for Selection of Materials for the Permanent Prevail Archive," personal communication, April 6, 2011)

Beyond the above criteria, Kennelly felt that a strict policy of just keeping a sample from each package was overly restrictive. So, she took it upon herself to read every letter, every banner to make sure the selection process was not inhibited by space constraints alone:

I actually unrolled every banner—some of them were really big—and read them. I read what was on them and if they had something that was a little different. …I [also] felt it was important to keep a set rather than just keeping the best one, such as a card from the kid who could write the best, because I wanted to get the sense of that whole set of data. (T. Kennelly, personal communication, January 9, 2013)

Using the principles described above, of the 90,000 lots of items logged, approximately 7,000 of those lots were accessioned for inclusion in the permanent physical collection and approximately

Figure 5. A, 5B, 5C, 5D: The array of items and expressions sent to Virginia Tech

7,064 items were photographed and selected for inclusion in the digital collection available online. Some items were photographed but not kept; other items were kept but not photographed or included in the digital collection. Thus, some items exist in only one of these two collections. The physical collection is housed in approximately 500 cubic feet of space, with 517 boxes, 17 map case drawers, and standing racks.

The resulting finding aid for both the online and physical collection spans nearly 300 pages, with exceptional detail to help researchers examine these objects in a material culture context. The detailed "notes" fields indicate where the project archivist has made note of reflections of popular culture, personal notes to victims or the shooter, references to other historical events/shootings, and other significant attributes of the item (not described in traditional metadata fields) and as

outlined in the unique selection criteria detailed earlier in the *Processing & Principles of Selection* section of this case study. Notably, Kennelly decided not to censor distasteful materials in the collection, though many of these are not available on the digital collection site.

According to Kennelly, both the development of the metadata schema and search functionality, such as the ability to search by the name of the person memorialized, for the digital collection was carefully discussed and planned by a large committee at Virginia Tech. These decisions were further informed by discussions and interviews with the task force and archivists at other universities, such as Texas A&M, who had experienced a similar influx of items following a campus tragedy.

Care was taken, however, in the finding aid for the physical collection to note any mentions of specific individuals memorialized in any given text

Figure 6. The main page and search interface for the 4/16 Collection. Notice the browse and search functions.

item or any significant references to the events of 4/16 or other American campus shootings. In lieu of text searching, these special notes help users identify items of potential interest. For instance, a note on a banner item from Arizona State mentions in the finding aid notes, "Seung-Hui Cho's family remembered; special condolences to family of Professor Kevin P. Granata, recognition of his service to editorial board of Human Factors." Unfortunately, this information is not available in the digital library database, but a PDF of the collection finding aid,[9] in Encoded Archival Description (EAD) format, is readily available online to help researchers find specific mentions without hand sorting through each banner, book, or set of cards. While the text used in notes does not use a controlled vocabulary, it can be searched using the find function available in most PDF viewers.

The processing, arrangement, and description of the 4/16 Collection began in July 2007 and

Figure 7. An example of browsing using the option "We Remember" and the name of shooting victim "Librescu, Liviu" from the drop-down menu

was completed nearly three years later, in summer 2010. When asked, Kennelly explained her intent in working so long and hard on this project:

The guiding principle in my mind of being an archivist is to document the history of the University and to make sure its roots in the past are not severed. Sometimes what you find in the history of the University are things you can be proud of. But other times, things that maybe were not so great happened yet it seems important to document those, to learn from those things, too, so that students and researchers can know where we came from and where we're going. (T. Kennelly, personal communication, January 9, 2013)

While the Texas A&M collection has been kept in a closed archive and never been displayed, the Virginia Tech April 16 Condolence Archive has had quite the opposite life. Each year, Kennelly and others in Special Collections have organized public displays of items from the collection in gallery and library spaces on campus. While not heavily consulted in person, the physical archive

itself is open for research and the online digital collection has no access restrictions. Kennelly hopes the collection, and its continued visible presence on campus, helps healing and remembrance, in addition to serving as a resource for scholars and researchers:

In this time, in this digital age, the tragedy was overwhelmingly on television. We're way out in the southwest of Virginia, this small community, and suddenly there [were responses] from people all over, from schoolchildren in Shanghai, from the English School of Ding Ding Dang in Korea. … What does this say about who we are as a people and how we grieve? …These pieces can be looked at as material culture

…Just in the way that we might look at a pottery shard from a tomb in the past and ask "what does that say, what does that express about those people and that time?' I think that these pieces, in a way, have something to say, too. (T. Kennelly, personal communication, January 9, 2013)

Figure 8. Virginia Tech opened its special collections archive for the 2014 anniversary of the shooting

Figure 9. The 2014 anniversary exhibition included items on display from the April 16th Condolence Archive

As the next case study demonstrates, the exceptional care and detail put into the Virginia Tech Condolence Archives has made it an exemplary collection for others looking to collect and preserve temporary memorials and condolence materials.

Sandy Hook School Shooting

On Friday, December 14, 2012, twenty school children and six adult staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary lost their lives in a mass shooting carried out by a lone shooter who then shot and killed himself. As with the events at Virginia Tech, news coverage began almost immediately. Newtown, Connecticut, a town of 27,000 residents, could never have anticipated the scale and scope of the public response.

By the following Monday, a large shrine had developed along the "Hook" – a quaint shop-lined stretch of road in Sandy Hook leading up to the school. The streets were lined with stuffed animals, votive candles, flowers, Christmas trees, and decorations. Like Virginia Tech, there was both a localized temporary memorial and also a massive influx of mailed materials. According to the town tax assessor, Chris Kelsey, on the Tuesday following the shooting a Budget truck full of teddy bears pulled up outside the town hall, a harbinger of the barrage of items to follow (C. Kelsey, personal communication, March 27, 2013).

In anticipation, Kelsey secured 80,000 square feet of warehouse space by Wednesday, December 19, 2012, just five days after the shooting, to help with the forthcoming deluge of packages. By the weekend before Christmas, the warehouse was

full of toys, school supplies, and countless other donations. Kelsey called upon fellow government employees as the initial work crew and then reached out to Robin Fitzgerald, the director of the Newtown Volunteer Task Force to send more help. The day after Christmas, a faith-based non-profit, the Adventist Community Services (ACS), sent trained reinforcements. This group, which typically helps communities deal with the donations following natural disasters, adapted their honed disaster response skills to help Newtown and relieve the exhausted local workforce. In the immediate days of the ACS support, between 50 and 60 volunteers worked daily to sort toys.

Following the tragedy, mail to the victims' families was also diverted to the warehouse for sorting and processing. According to Kelsey, there were often "tractor trailer loads that were just backed up and trucks would kind of stack up at the loading docks." In the initial months, they saw the arrival of at least three UPS and FedEx trucks each day (C. Kelsey, personal communication, March 27, 2013). Donations reached their peak on New Year's Eve—that night, over 100 volunteers were required to process the incoming material. Around that same time, Kelsey agreed to a number of press interviews and in each one asked the public to stop sending materials.

Figure 10. Some of the nearly 65,000 donated teddy bears await boxing and re-gifting in Newtown's donations warehouse (©2013. Chris Kelsey. Used with permission)

Despite communications via CNN, morning news programs, and an American Red Cross press release, Newtown was unsuccessful at stopping the tide of materials. Before things slowed down by late spring 2013, Newtown received some 65,000 teddy bears along with tens of thousands of other donations of toys and school supplies. To reduce the growing accumulation, the town hosted several toy giveaways in anticipation of the holidays. Following that, ACS coordinated the re-gifting of material to causes around the country and the globe. Donations were re-gifted to places as far away as Haiti, Kenya, and India.

The donations sent to the town, however, were only part of the story. In addition to the packages and donations, there was also a flood of traditional mail—letters, cards, and papers—that amounted to more than half a million mailings. This mail accumulated rapidly and was placed in bins that lined the hallways of the town hall for nearly two months so the public could view the letters. Kelsey described having the materials there, in front of all the town workers offices, as "working in a wake" (C. Kelsey, personal communication, March 27, 2013).

Initially, the envelopes on incoming mail were discarded to save space. This proved problematic, however, when in January Newtown's volunteer task force set out to read and respond to every letter. Re-tracing the address origin posed a tough task for these volunteers and subsequent envelopes were kept. The group of volunteers worked in two shifts and read every letter that came into town. Among the expressions of sympathy were checks and cash donations as well as pledges of larger donations to be given or already given in the

Figure 11. Boxed teddy bears await their new homes in the donations sorting facility overseen by Newtown tax assessor Chris Kelsey (©2013. Ross MacDonald. Used with permission)

victims' names. A running spreadsheet of these offers runs some six hundred pages long.

Among the store-bought cards and donation pledges were also countless handmade expressions. From children's artwork to decoupage to paper cutouts, the variety and beauty of this correspondence spoke to residents. Overwhelmed and exhausted from managing these materials along with the donations warehouse and temporary memorial, discussion among town officials considered the eventual fate of these bulky letters. Rumors spread that they would be incinerated, along with the unsalvageable materials from the outdoor shrines, into a "sacred soil"—an ash to be incorporated into a permanent memorial at a later date.

Two Newtown residents, Yolie Moreno and Ross MacDonald, independently visited the town hall and found these mailings so moving they each began documentation efforts to preserve the letters. MacDonald alerted the *New York Times* and *Mother Jones* magazine about the possible plans to burn the letters and began taking pictures with his cell phone and posting them onto a blog entitled, "Letters to Newtown." Both news outlets covered the story; *Mother Jones* also created an activist video and sponsored a Tumblr blog in an effort to save the letters. Moreno, meanwhile, gathered up a group of volunteers with the ambitious goal to photograph each and every letter sent to Newtown. She began work first at the town hall and later expanded to a donated storefront, dubbed the Newtown Healing Arts Center, which operated in the spring and early summer of 2013, for a total of about six months. There, Moreno sorted letters by state and country of origin and then began scanning them with help from volunteers on two donated Xerox machines. The subsequent scans were stored on donated Dropbox cloud storage.

Communication between these two simultaneous but independent efforts was sparse due to the different outlooks of the activists. MacDonald draws heavily upon archives for his work as a film propmaker; he hoped his efforts would spawn an unedited, historical archive. Moreno, on the other hand, self-described her documentation project as "an act of love" that is about "sharing love," not an archival effort. Illustrative of their difference of perspective, Moreno willfully discarded distasteful letters so that no one would see them, deeming them unfit for preservation.

In the midst of these two competing efforts, Newtown's C.H. Booth Library, a public library with fewer than a dozen staff, also sparked the idea to start a preservation effort of their own. The town's sole reference librarian, Andrea Zimmermann, describes how the idea came about:

When I returned back after the first of the year, there was an envelope on my desk and it had newspaper clippings from the LA Times and other areas around the country. There was no return address, no note….then we got two more envelopes, I think from the same person, with more clippings. …I started to think this must be a librarian who's sending this to us, because it was addressed to the local history department of our library. So, that was the moment where we knew we wanted to do something to preserve some of the information that was coming in. (A. Zimmermann, personal communication, March 27, 2013)

Zimmermann began discussions with Kelsey and other town officials and decided to select one to two thousand letters for a representative archive to be placed online and approximately five thousand letters for a physical collection to be housed at the state's library and maintained on behalf of Newtown. She began researching protocols for scanning and photographing letters and creating a finding aid and made contact with the Connecticut State Library and the Connecticut Historical Society to discuss options. As she recalled,

Just by happenstance, the first person I was able to contact was Tamara Kennelly at Virginia Tech, the archivist there. That day, my built-up stress

Figure 12. Volunteers in Newtown sort through mail on display in the town hall (©2013. Yolie Moreno. Used with permission)

Figure 13. "It was like working in a wake," Chris Kelsey said of having these expressions on display for more than two months (©2013. Yolie Moreno. Used with permission)

and frustrating that I wasn't doing anything fast enough or had the knowledge to do this on my own just dissipated. I was getting really worried about everything actually ever happening and I spoke with her and she really understood what we were going through, having been through it herself in their university community. …We are going to be using the finding aid that she's created for Virginia Tech. It is really a model finding aid for the collection that we will have of our size and nature. (A. Zimmermann, personal communication, March 27, 2013)

All the required work, however, took an emotional toll. Zimmermann confided in March 2013,

…I think she [Tamara Kennelly] said in one of her emails that at certain times as you're working through this, it's going to hit you. I have had that happen already and so I think of her and I think, well, it's okay, this is normal. I can get through this. (A. Zimmermann, personal communication, March 27, 2013)

It would be nearly another year before the archives project's completion. In addition to the letters sent to the town, Zimmermann culled condolence items sent directly to the library, items from the municipal town garage where everything taken from the outdoor memorials was stored, and a sampling from the storage facility managed by Kelsey and his team where all the toys and donations were sent. Zimmermann explains,

We decided we needed to create an archive and we wanted it to be a representative sampling. There would be randomness involved in it because material went to the families and…people were allowed to take things, choose things. The schools chose things to hang and quilts and banners and such. Different institutions including government entities also wanted some materials. So, we didn't have our pick of the litter, so to speak. We decided we would see what there was available to us after

people who really had a need for having some of this material really had their choice. (A. Zimmermann, personal communication, March 27, 2013)

Ultimately, items that remained and were selected included paper cranes, teddy bears, Christmas ornaments, a sampling of materials from the outdoor memorial, handmade crosses, and painted wooden stars that showed up around the town in a "random acts of kindness" organized fashion.

Like the project managers at Texas A&M and Virginia Tech, Zimmermann developed a clear vision for the future use of the library's collection:

As a library, we feel all of this that we keep, whether it's digitally formatted or physically housed in the library, it needs to be kept for a purpose. Our whole project is a preservation project—something the community can come and reference when they would like to see this material, if they ever would. Right now, I think it's overwhelming and maybe they don't want to see any of it. …But for researchers and scholarship to access the material it needs to be catalogued, it needs to be accessible, it needs to be organized so it's useful. That's our whole premise for the project we're doing, which differs from other projects in the community that are going on now….We have the full support of the town. (A. Zimmermann, personal communication, March 27, 2013)

While some items, such as a 700-piece cloth "peace quilt" were put on immediate display at the public library, any items with the portraits of victims were considered for the permanent collection but remained in locked storage. Zimmermann explained they might one day be exhibited as part of an anniversary collection but it was too soon for such sensitive items to be publicly shown. Overall, Zimmerman's selection process was inclusive yet sensitive to the needs of the community. She explained some of these restrictions, saying,

Figure 14. A & 14B: Andrea Zimmermann shows some of items in temporary storage that have been selected for the Newtown library's archive

The other type of material that we wouldn't even digitize or put online that we don't have now but we're hoping to get is what the Library of Congress would call "distasteful material." That is, distasteful letters, such as conspiracy theory letters, that have come into town. I don't think they were kept. I think they were so upsetting at the time. No one realized that there would be this big of a response and that, in our eyes now, if we had some of those materials it would be a fuller picture of the communication sent to the town. It's a very, very tiny proportion from what I understand, but it's still a part of the story that I think that needs to be preserved, even though we wouldn't put that out necessarily in a display. (A. Zimmermann, personal communication, March 27, 2013)

In December 2013, nearly a year after the tragedy, the library had made their selections and secured donations of a photo scanner and archival supplies and housings for the items. Through Zimmermann's grant writing and outreach, Iron Mountain, a national records storage and man-

agement company, came on board as a corporate sponsor to donate lifetime storage of the materials in a secure facility.

By late 2014, a digital collection of approximately 1,000 items was made available to the public as the "Condolence Archive Project of the C.H. Booth Library, Newtown" on the Connecticut state library's digital collections. While not as detailed or extensive as the Virginia Tech 4/16 Collection, the Newtown archive demonstrates a bricolage among different organizations and entities working to provide an archival solution without the pre-existing infrastructure and resources of a university environment.

As the library stepped up its archival efforts, their actions impacted the other community preservation efforts in Newtown. In March 2013, shortly after the library began planning for its eventual collection, Ross MacDonald wound down his "Letters to Newtown" blog and activist campaign. While he believed an unedited archive would be best for posterity, he felt the library was a capable and competent entity for making deci-

Figure 15. The introductory text to the "Condolence Archive Project of the C.H. Booth Library, Newtown" on the Connecticut State Library's website

Figure 16. An example of an item display and metadata from the condolence collection

sions on behalf of the town, even if the scope of its collection would be limited (R. MacDonald, personal communication, March 27, 2013). Yolie Moreno's independent but town sanctioned efforts, however, continued.

Moreno and her volunteers inhabited the donated "Newtown Healing Arts Center" space through the first half of 2013, reading, sorting and scanning letters on the Xerox scanners. Letters were sorted by state and country before being scanned on the donated Xerox machines and uploaded to folders on sponsored Dropbox cloud storage. Handmade cards and cards or letters addressed to first responders were singled out to inclusion

Figure 17. Yolie Moreno (in hat) works alongside volunteers to sort and read letters to Newtown in the Newtown Healing Arts Space. (©2013. Yolie Moreno. Used with permission.)

in special scanning categories. Oversized letters were photographed by volunteers.

When the rent-free space was sold in early summer, Moreno and her volunteers had nowhere to finish their work, so Moreno transported a POD portable storage unit containing the unscanned letters to her property. Moreno then began an improvised method of documentation for the remaining letters, especially the larger mailings of artwork sent from schools across the country: she would lay out a white tarp on the floor of her barn, arrange hundreds of letters and artworks on top of it, and then take an overhead photograph from the barn's hay loft.

To provide access to these scanned and photographed expressions, Moreno worked with her contact at Xerox to create a public website of image galleries, which launched on December 14, 2013, the first anniversary of the shooting at www.embracingnewtown.com.

While the interface itself is rudimentary compared to a digital collection database—there are no search features, no metadata, and only a basic sorting into different groups or galleries—the project accomplished Moreno's goal of "sharing the love" that was sent to Newtown.

As Moreno took her photographs, she also selected which artworks and letters not selected by the library should be kept by the town (for an undetermined fate/future use) and what should join other materials designated for the "sacred soil" project. The rumors that first swirled about burning materials eventually became a reality in November of 2013.

The sacred soil idea itself came out of a desire among town administrators to respectfully dispose

Figure 18. Moreno's improvised storage for the letters to Newtown

Figure 19. Yolie Moreno arranges letters for an aerial photograph on the floor of her barn

Figure 20. Photo galleries on the Embracing Newtown website created by Moreno
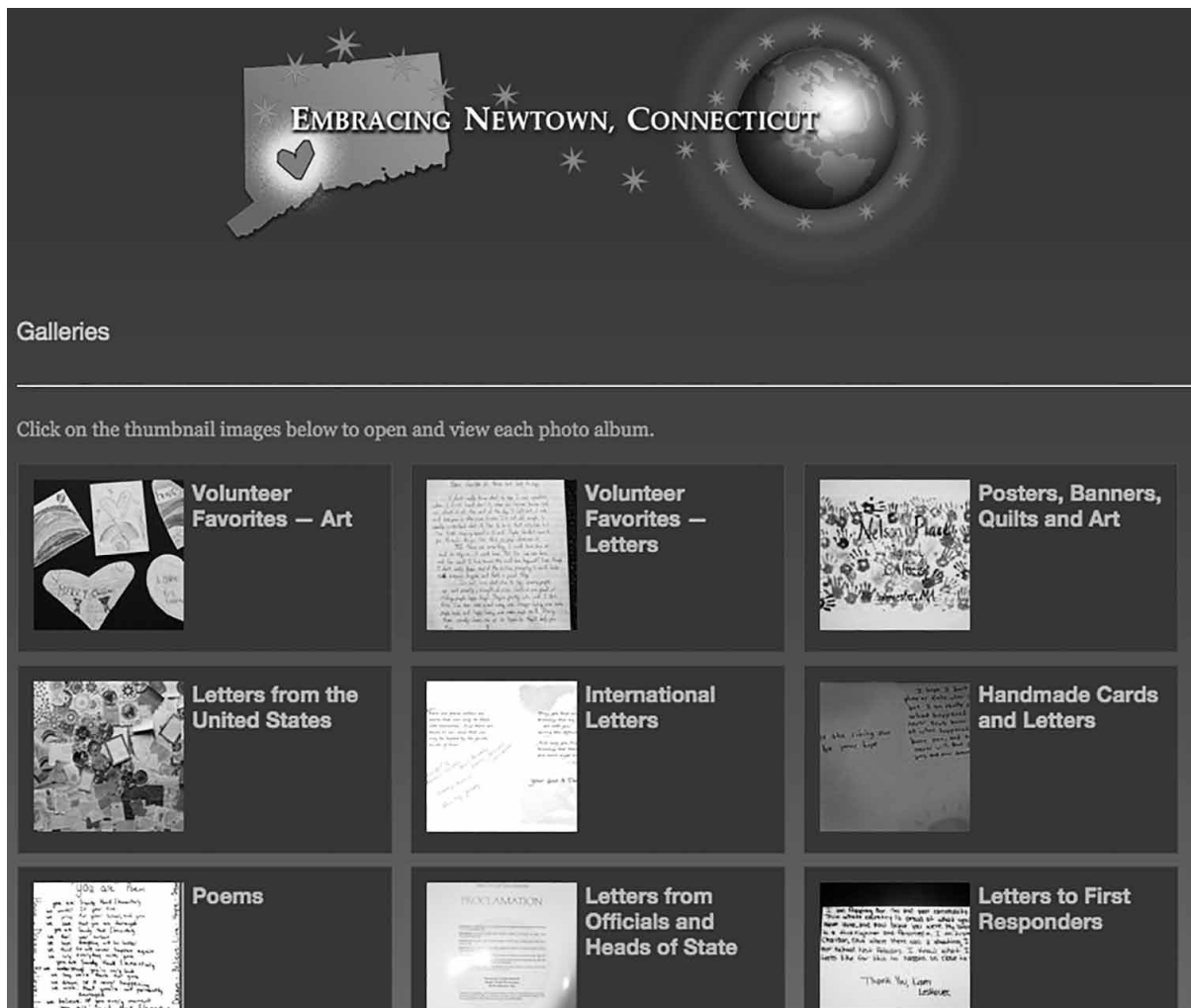
of any unwanted or unsuitable materials donated to the town. Items selected for this disposition would be "cremated" or incinerated in a waste facility that normally processes trash for Newtown and the surrounding towns. The resulting ash would then be incorporated into bricks or soil that would compose part of a permanent memorial to be determined at a later date.

Selections for sacred soil came from a number of different facilities and for a variety of needs. For instance, most of the items left outdoors as part of the temporary memorials along the Hook were waterlogged, moldy, broken, or damaged and were not suitable for the library's small archival collection. These items alone were enough to clog the town's highway garage facility that normally houses snow removal equipment. There were also items addressed to the victims' families or that were personalized with names and images of the victims that came to Kelsey's processing warehouse but which the families did not wish to keep or to have re-purposed—these items were also designated to become sacred soil.

Other items came from the letters and expressions documented by Moreno but not selected for long-term preservation. From the more than half

Figure 21. A single item view on the Embracing Newtown website
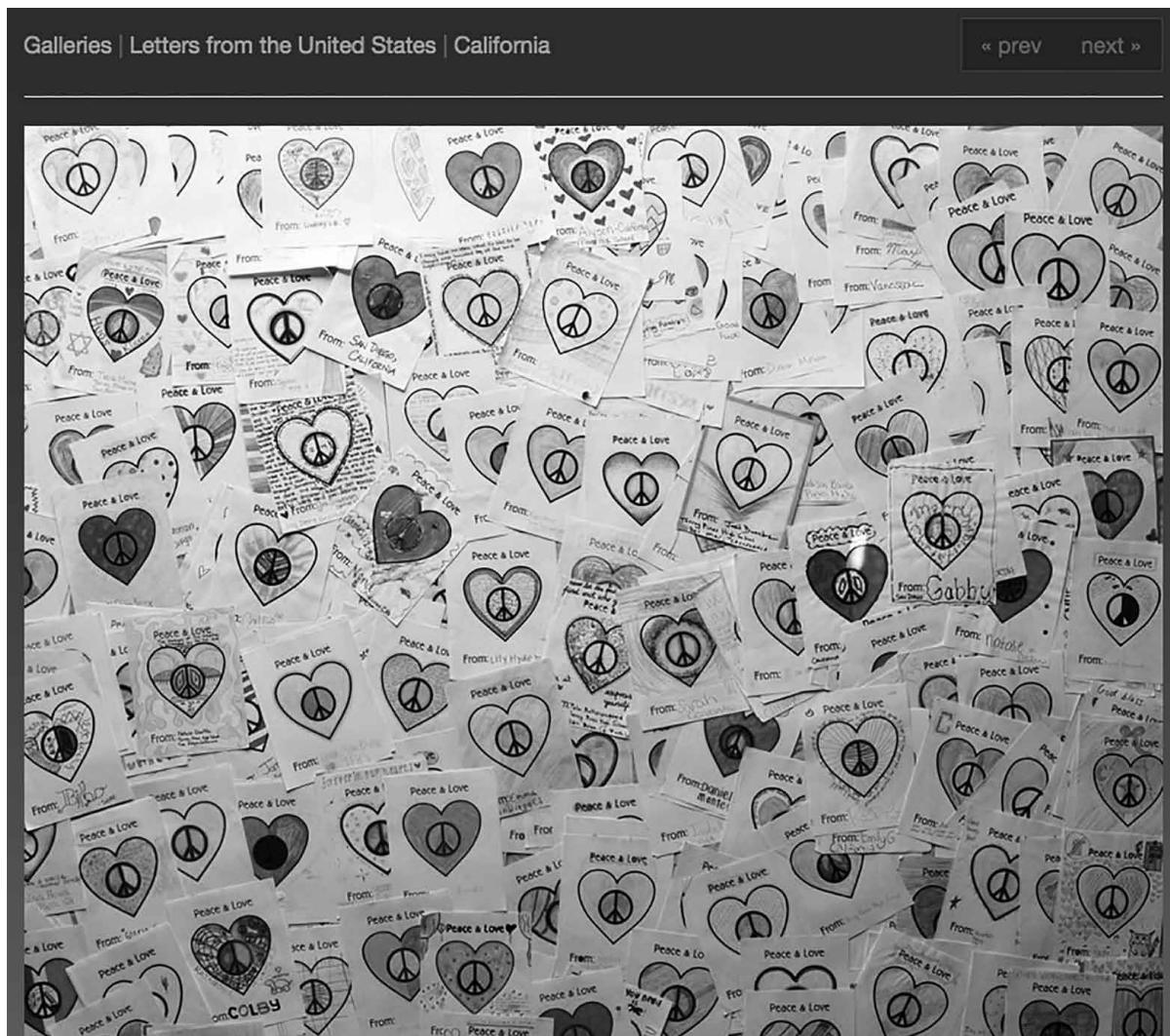
a million letters to Newtown, the library wished to collect no more than a few thousand for its permanent collection; the rest would remain property of the town. After they were scanned by Moreno for her documentation project, the sheer quantity presented a storage issue and the emotional burden for those responsible for them.

The town also received mass mailings of non-letters and cards, which Moreno sorted alongside the letters and from which she made selections. For example, in response to a Facebook campaign to decorate Newtown in paper snowflakes, a

supposed wish of one of the victims, Newtown received nearly nine semi-trucks worth of packages of paper snowflakes. Unless singled out for preservation by Moreno or the library, these non-letter mailed items were marked for incineration. Just before Thanksgiving 2013, four semi trucks worth of memorial material and other donations were burned down to a single three-foot by three-foot box of ash.

Before the second anniversary of the Sandy Hook shooting, a committee was formed to discuss plans for a permanent memorial using the sacred

Figure 22. Yolie Moreno sorts through discarded items in the Newtown Highway garage

soil, but as of this writing (January 2015) no concrete plans are in place. Letters not selected for the archive and not incinerated as part of sacred soil await an as-of-yet undetermined fate by the town, which is their custodian.

Issues, Controversies, and Questions

The rise of new mourning practices and the increasing scope and scale of public response to tragedy raise a number of issues and concerns for the receiving communities. First, there are the sheer logistical concerns of what to do with all the "stuff." The resources required for the quantities of items being sent can be costly, human resource intensive, and emotionally draining for the affected community. There are also problems about the kinds of items: first, whether or not

they are considered "appropriate"[10] and secondly what to do with the materials if they are deemed "inappropriate" (i.e. to redirect, discard, or dispose of them). The balance between sensitivity for the senders and for the receiving community is an added burden to local citizens, institutional employees, and administrators coping with the aftermath of a public tragedy. Lastly, there is the question of privacy: the media attention that mass casualty accidents and crimes garner can be an intrusive and unwanted invasion of privacy for a community, especially the victims and their families. Communicating with the media and insuring a respectful media presence poses an additional challenge for crisis managers.

As the cases of Texas A&M, Virginia Tech, and Newtown demonstrate, each tragedy, the local and global response, and the wishes of its home community regarding each of the challenges above are

Figure 23. Outdoor memorial items wait in storage in the Newtown Highway garage before their incineration into "sacred soil" (©2013 Ross MacDonald, used with permission)

Figure 24. Discarded items piled up for incineration at a waste facility

singular. Creating a standard protocol or response strategy would neglect the unique aspects of any tragedy and/or community. Rather than attempt to solve unpredictable issues, this author proposes instead a list of suggested questions for librarians, archivists, and community officials to consider as they develop a response to the influx of materials that often accompany such unthinkable tragedies.

First, consider how your community and/or institution might cope with the practical, logistical concerns of a local or even global tragedy response.

Some specific questions to consider about space and logistics include:

- Where might materials arrive or might you anticipate receiving them in your community? (Keep in mind that some spaces, especially shrine locations, might not be predictable in advance of a tragedy.)
- Where might you direct incoming materials for processing?
- What available spaces are best equipped to handle these materials?
- What agencies (e.g. US Postal Service, local police department, campus security, etc.) should be contacted about contingency planning?
- Are there spaces in the community where items sent to comfort can be easily redistributed or left for the taking?
- Who are the appropriate entities to handle media requests for information and/or to coordinate statements to the media on behalf of the community?
- What temporary resources (i.e. volunteer task forces, emergency funds, etc.) might be drawn upon to help with the crisis?

Next, as you determine whether or not there is something unique, historical, or exceptional about this response that is worth preserving for future generations, consider the practical concerns of creating a condolence archive.

Consider each of the following:

Archival Mission and Purpose

- What will be the overall purpose or function of the archive or collection?
- Will it be public/private/a combination of the two?
- How might future generations use these materials?
- What would be the ideal impact of the archive?
- How accessible and usable will the archive interface need to be?
- For how long will this collection exist or remain accessible? (i.e. Should it be available year-round or only for anniversaries? Is it something to preserve in perpetuity?)

Selection and Processing

- How will items be selected for the collection?
- Who will be responsible for making selections? Are there any groups or consultants who should be involved in the decision-making process?
- Are there any peer institutions or sites of similar crises where you might look to for guidance or as examples?
- Will "distasteful" or objectionable materials be included? Why or why not?
- What will happen to materials not chosen for inclusion?
- Will the community and/or donors be informed of these decisions and decision-making processes? Why or why not?
- Is there adequate funding, staffing, volunteers, or in-kind support available for the human resources, materials preparation and cost of archival preservation materials? If not, how will resources be secured (e.g. grants, partner intuitions, sustaining budgets)?

- Who will be responsible for organizing and maintaining the collection?

Collection Format and Use

- How will potential users interact with and access the collection (e.g. online, in person, etc.)?
- Are there any special considerations, such as new metadata fields or limiters, that might be helpful or needed by potential users?
- Are there any sample finding aids, such as those from Virginia Tech or Newtown, that might be drawn upon for inspiration?
- Will any items have access restrictions? For instance, will some materials be kept private and released at a later date?
- How will users learn about the existence of the collection?

Long-Term Preservation and Access

- How and where will the physical archive be stored?
- What supplies are needed (e.g. archival housings, server storage and hosting, etc.)?
- Is there a maintenance plan for any digital aspects of the collection?
- Is the archives/storage facility equipped for the long-term storage and preservation needs of the items?
- Are there any corporate sponsors who can assist with this task?
- What are the plans for this collection in 5 years? 10 years? 50 years?

As these questions help to illuminate, responding to a tragedy and creating a condolence archive is a significant task. Indeed, it's often a multi-year project that requires substantial resources and cooperation among different partner groups or organizations. Texas A&M, Virginia Tech, and Newtown each had different resources and took different approaches to managing their condolence items. There are, however, a number of lessons that may be gleaned from these three different experiences.

Lessons Learned and Suggested Best Practices for Condolence Material Managers

Based on the interviews with individuals involved in managing these unthinkable tragedies, the following are ten suggested best practices for those who find themselves in the role of materials manager:

1. *First, Let the Materials Do as They Were Intended: Provide Comfort*

Feel free to document or track quantities of items as they come in, but let victims, their families, community organizations, and community members choose and make use of the materials as they see fit before selection for inclusion in an archive. Depending upon the quantity and type of items received, consider re-gifting to communities in greater need.

Both Virginia Tech and Newtown found this to be a helpful approach to lessen the quantity of materials to manage and to maximize the good that the materials were intended to do. For instance, at Virginia Tech officials left many of the tens of thousands of paper cranes out in large fishbowls throughout the student center for the taking by community members. Excess quilts, scarves, and garments were donated to local women's shelters. In Newtown, town officials hosted a toy giveaway at the town hall open to all residents. Other toys, school supplies, and teddy bears not needed or desired by local residents were sorted, packaged, and donated to other non-profits around the globe with the assistant of Adventist Community Services.

2. *As Early as Possible in the Process, Make Sure Official Communications and Press Releases Communicate the Community's Needs, or Lack Thereof, for Certain Types of Donations. Leverage Social Media to Spread the Word*

More than a month passed before Newtown publicly requested that people not send materials. Had these announcements been swifter, the response might have been quelled sooner. In anticipation of the first anniversary, Newtown approached the media early and with persistence, making several public statements that (a) they did not wish for the public to send any more stuff and (b) that media reporters not visit Newtown and grant them private mourning. These statements, coming from the official auspices of the town selectman, were resoundingly successful and the town did not face an inundation of material following the first anniversary.

3. *Whenever Possible, Share the Burden Among Different Organizational Departments or Entities*

Both at Virginia Tech and Newtown, several groups pooled resources or divided labor to make tasks more manageable. In Newtown, response efforts were shared among town officials, the Newtown Volunteer Task Force, volunteers coordinated by Adventist Community Services, as well as several new group efforts that sprang up, including the Newtown Healing Arts Center (http://www.healingnewtown.org/) developed and managed by the Newtown Cultural Arts Commission. There were also dozens of additional individual community efforts and projects not described in this chapter but many of which are detailed in a self-published volume entitled *Newtown, Moving Forward: A Community Faces the Future After Adversity* (Cohen, 2013).

Working within the university structure, Virginia Tech relied on a number of departments and groups. For instance, student health services coordinated counseling services for those affected and student activities organizations took responsibility for items left on campus, such as large plywood message boards with thousands of signatures. Packages sent to campus were received by the student activities office and first logged and organized at the student union before being transferred to an off-site location for archival processing. For additional advice about how to handle the administrative challenges of creating a condolence collection within a university, consult Aaron Purcell's article about how entities worked together at Virginia Tech, entitled, "More Than Flowers Left Behind: Building an Archival Collection and Remembering April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech" (2012).

4. *Seek Outside Assistance for Managing Donations*

While universities might have a number of departments or student organizations to draw upon for assistance, Newtown found itself in great need of human resources. Consider reaching out to organizations such as the Red Cross or Adventist Community Services (ACS), who offers free disaster relief, or local volunteer task forces to manage large tasks.

The Newtown Volunteer Task Force acted quickly to set up a 1-800 hotline to handle the numerous inquiries coming into town. Staffed daily by dozens of volunteers, this center not only answered phones but also coordinated volunteers to read all of the mail received by Newtown and respond with "thank you" cards when possible. At its donation peak, the donations warehouse managed by town tax assessor Chris Kelsey relied on over 100 volunteers to sort and process items received. Were it not for the expert volunteer teams of ACS, the coordination of such a task force would have been impossible.

5. *Educate Volunteers About Any Archival Practices That Might Helpful*

In the early days after the Sandy Hook school shooting, inexperienced volunteers and town officials discarded return envelopes for mail and donations coming in. The lack of addresses often made accounting for donations (such as enclosed cash) challenging and thwarted community efforts to reply to the cards and to organize the mail by point of origin for the archival collection.

While volunteers need not be trained in all aspects of archival processing or principles, origin date (such as envelopes with postmarks and return addresses) should ideally be kept or such information may be recorded in some alternate way. Volunteers at Virginia Tech logged receipt information for three-dimensional objects in a simple spreadsheet and tagged all items with corresponding hand-written identifiers. This simple processing made the creation of finding aids and metadata for each object much richer for long-term research and analysis of the global dimension of the tragedy response.

6. *Consider the Needs of Researchers with Decades of Remove from the Present Emotion. Think Carefully Before Discarding "Distasteful" Materials*

The Newtown library struggled to locate any examples of "distasteful" materials for its collection because individual volunteers found these letters offensive and disposed of them. Inclusion of a representative sampling of offensive material, such as conspiracy theorist claims, messages to the crime's perpetrator, etc., is important for scholarly and historical research that might be done many years down the road. It's essential to remind volunteers and others without an archivist's critical distance that it is important to keep these materials and that decisions about what to display if/when/never can be made a later time and

done with sensitivity for the community. Virginia Tech, for example, preserved distasteful materials but chose not to digitize or photograph them for inclusion in its online collection.

For additional discussion of the challenges and reasoning for collecting potentially offensive archival material, see the case studies of Stevens (2001), about building a controversial collection about the Vietnam War; Devlin (2010) and Herrada (2003) about an archival collection pertaining to the Unibomber Ted Kaczynski; and Boles (1994) about the acquisition of materials covering the Klu Klux Klan.

7. *Involve Community Stakeholders and Local Information Professionals in Your Decision-Making Process. Based on Your Situation, You May Also Consider Inviting Outside Experts or Advisors from Other Institutions to Guide Your Process*

Virginia Tech invited a group of experts from the Library of Congress to consult on their collection and also received consultation from individuals at a variety of institutions, including an archivist at Syracuse University who dealt with the aftermath of Pan AM Lockerbie tragedy; Sylvia Grider, as well as the head of Special Collections at Texas A&M; and individuals from Oklahoma State University and Bluffton University, who experienced a plane crash and a bus accident that killed members of the school baseball team, respectively. Both Newtown and Northern Illinois University, in turn, contacted the archivist at Virginia Tech when faced with their school shootings.

Reach out to other institutions and individuals who have managed a crisis. Professional listservs may also be of help, particularly if there are specific tasks or processes where you'd like assistance.

Keep the local community informed of decisions to avoid reactionary responses and unnecessary duplication of efforts. If possible, look for a central point of contact for inquiries for donations

and community efforts. Newtown relied largely on its Volunteer Task Force 1-800 line; Virginia Tech primarily used its Office of Student Activities and Office of University Relations to handle public inquiries.

8. *Make the Best Decisions You Can with the Timeline and Resources You Have. Each Situation is Unique. There's No One-Size Fits All Answer or One Ideal Response*

An unthinkable tragedy is, by definition, unexpected, unpredictable, and challenging. There is rarely time or energy for perfectionism. Because of its setting, Virginia Tech did not struggle with issues of space or volunteers—there was adequate room to sort all incoming mail on campus in the student center and there were ample student and community volunteers to handle the scale of incoming donations. Not all communities, however, have the built-in infrastructure of a university.

While Newtown did not immanently possess adequate space or resources for the flood of materials that came in, the quick action of individuals, such as tax assessor Chris Kelsey and Volunteer Task Force leader Robin Fitzgerald meant Newtown was poised to receive donations in a short turnaround time.

Keep in mind that sometimes an imperfect but immediate response is better than a "perfect" response down the road. While Newtown made mistakes early on from an archival perspective (e.g. discarding return envelopes, destroying distasteful materials, etc.) and there were communication breakdowns among different efforts, ultimately, the community felt involved in receiving and appreciating the materials coming in. Letters were put on display in large mail bins at the town hall for all citizens to appreciate for six weeks, all were invited to toy giveaways, and the temporary memorials along with Hook were lit with Christmas lights through the holiday season.

While working to create an adequate historical record of the response, keep in mind that even the best archive cannot recreate the visual and emotional experience of the memorial itself. Accept that a perfect record for something so ephemeral is impossible and embrace imperfection.

9. *Reach Out Directly to Others Who Have Experienced Similar Crises*

Both Andrea Zimmermann and Chris Kelsey of Newtown expressed great relief when they were able to get in touch with Tamara Kennelly of Virginia Tech. (Kennelly was similarly grateful for the help of Sylvia Grider at Texas A&M.) While joining the rarified community of condolence item managers is a far from desirable situation, it is a supportive and welcoming community.

10. *Be Aware of the Toll of Working with Grief Materials. Seek Supportive Resources as You Undertake this Work*

Dealing with the objects from temporary memorials and grief archives can be an emotionally, physically, and spiritually taxing activity. It is important to attend to the well-being of one's self as well as other staff tasked with processing such materials.

Materials managers assume leadership roles in a unique situation: it's both an imminent community emergency, often requiring long hours of non-stop work, and a trauma, involving emotional pain that must be processed to deal with the influx of materials. Even if the processing, cataloging, tagging, etc. of these materials may be, on one level, the same set of tasks that a person would perform as part of their normal job duties as an archivist, engaging with these objects on a daily basis can be "like working in a wake," as Chris Kelsey put it. The potential psychological toll of working with condolence material over a sustained period of time is real; to go into this work without preparing for that impact is akin to a soldier

going to war without attending bootcamp. All of the individuals interviewed for these case studies discussed the emotional burden of their role. It's advisable to seek assistance—from colleagues, mental health professionals, and/or supportive communities—to help cope with any symptoms of trauma or post-traumatic stress. This author found the monograph *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Van der Kolk, 2014) particularly helpful.

ARCHIVING GRIEF?: FURTHER QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

What obligation or responsibility, if any, do communities receiving condolence materials have to collect or preserve these items for the future? What is the role of the librarian or archivist in dealing with condolence materials? What do the increasing number of "archives of grief" tell us about who and what is deemed memorable in American history?

These questions have been largely unaddressed in the literature on spontaneous shrines, which has primarily focused on the practice of making memorials and their contents rather than the long-term preservation practice of saving and archiving these materials. While professional literature has covered the cultural significance of new mourning rituals, the meaning of spontaneous shrines, and the implications of these practices of consumption-driven expressions of grief, few, if any, have addressed the practical and logistical considerations of how to manage such a crisis and the flood of condolences that follow. This chapter has attempted to remedy this gap by exploring three unique crises where a community attempted to archive and preserve some of the massive temporary memorial and condolence materials received following an unexpected tragedy.

Because each tragedy and the ensuing response is unique, there can be no single protocol or response strategy. Instead, by presenting the three different cases of the Texas A&M Bonfire Memorabilia Collection, the April 16th Condolence Archives at Virginia Tech, and Newtown's response to the Sandy Hook School shooting, this chapter asserts that these larger, theoretical questions are perhaps best answered by the assemblage of practitioners as they cope and respond in the moment and to the unique long-term needs of their home community. Drawing inspiration from the three case studies covered, this chapter has proposed some general "best practices" and a list of essential questions for librarians and archivists to consider when responding to the unthinkable.

Beyond the cases explored here, responses to tragedy in the form of grief archives continue to evolve. The crowd-sourced collection of remembrances following the Boston Marathon bombing housed online by Northeastern University or the new September 11th museum that opened in spring of 2014 present opportunities for future discussion, research, and examination by library and information professionals as we learn new ways to respond to and document our communal grief and mourning for future generations.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Anthropogenic: Any disaster that is caused by humans as opposed to acts of nature (e.g. floods, tornadoes, etc.).

Bereavement: The state of loss, be it cognitive, emotional, or physiological.

Condolence Materials: A mailing, such as a card or letter, or object, sent in sympathy to a site of tragedy.

Grief: A response to loss that may manifest itself through physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, spiritual, or philosophical dimensions.

Material Culture: The physical evidence of a culture in the objects or things they make or have made, use, or consume.

Mass Shooting: The act of murdering many people, typically at the same time, in a short span of time, by firearm.

Public Tragedy: Any tragic event, such as a mass shooting or accident, in which lives are lost that is covered in depth by national and/or international news media.

Spontaneous Shrines: A term first used by scholars Jack Santino and Sylvia Grider to describe the collections of condolence materials left at sites of death or tragedy.

Temporary Memorials: Coined by Erika Doss as an alternative to "spontaneous shrines," this term emphasizes the ephemeral and organized aspects of the collections of objects left at sites of tragedy.

ENDNOTES

[1] For some ethnographic and public history-focused discussions, see Doss (2002); Felman and Laub (1991); Grider (2007); Haney, Leimer, and Lowery (1997); and Stengs (2003).

[2] In particular, see the recent books by Doss (2010) and Sturken (2007).

[3] See, especially, Doss (2008); Grider (2002); Hass (1998); K. Jones et al. (2007); and Otto (2014) for discussion of temporary memorial materials and condolence collections in other disciplinary contexts.

[4] See Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009); Jacobsen, Punzalan, and Hedstrom (2013)

for a few recent examples of discussions of the roles of archives in collective memory across different continents. Additionally, a 2002 special double issue of *Archival Science* examines the themes of "archives, records, and power" with attention to memory and remembrance through the ways "archivists continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive" (Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

[5]   See, for instance, Acker and Brubaker (2014); Espley, Carpentier, Pop, and Medjkoune (2014); Hellum (2013); Vassilakaki and Garoufallou (2014); and Zastrow (2014).

[6]   Texas A&M and Virginia Tech are both Senior Military Colleges and two of just three public universities with a full-time, volunteer Corps of Cadets.

[7]   For additional discussion on the objects left at Texas A&M's shrine, see Grider's content analysis in Santino, 2006, Chapter 9.

[8]   The shooter at Virginia Tech was a South Korean citizen with U.S. permanent resident status.

[9]   The PDF of the finding aid is available online here: http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=vt/viblbv00656.xml (accessed December 30, 2014).

[10]   For one pertinent discussion on the appropriateness of memorial responses, see Grider (2007).