

Jefferson County Public Library
Oral History Project
Interviewees: Sharon Partridge and Karen Jones
Interviewer: Patrick Farrell
Date; October 27, 2010

Note: Interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets.

[Part 1]

SP: Today is October 27, 2010. My name is Sharon Partridge. I work for the Jefferson County Public Library as a reference librarian.

KJ: I'm Karen Jones. I also work for Jeffco as the collections conservator and we're going to be talking about our experience recovering the spontaneous memorials after the Columbine Massacre.

SP: I thought we might start with why we were even involved. Karen and I were major players in a group called the Colorado Preservation Alliance. We were co-editors of the newsletter. We set up the annual meetings and worked on grant proposals. Because of that group we knew a lot of archivists. We knew a lot of librarians---

KJ: ---and conservators.

SP: ---And conservators. So we really had a good feel for who was in the state, who was in that type of field.

KJ: At that time of the---well, after that tragedy and people started bringing mementos to that site. It very quickly grew and I'm not positive whether it was the parks and rec of that part of town, or the state historical society [that] called for a get-together of all the conservators in the area to try to create teams to recover those artifacts. The weekend before that pack-out was scheduled I actually drove down there to get a feel for it, and was just astounded at the quantity of materials, and how it was spread out across all of that property. I have some pictures and I haven't looked at these pictures in years, but they're all of particular little shrines, so they don't even give you the feel for the huge quantity. I would have needed a wide angle, or have been standing on top of a hill, or something like that, but it was astounding, the volume.

SP: I remember the day that Columbine happened.

I was here at work, and one of the people on staff called and said, "There's been a shooting at the Columbine High School."

I just assumed it was one of those drive-by kind of things and didn't pay a lot of attention. Several hours later I was going up the hallway and Pattie Carea [?] had her radio on and just from what I heard it sounded like there was still stuff happening.

I said "Is this about the shooting?"

She said "Yes."

I said "It's still going on?"

She said "Yes."

I said "There could be people bleeding to death."

She said "Yes!"

That was how I found out what was going on.

KJ: I think I heard about it---at that time I was working; doing some contract work up at CSU and their preservation department. I remember driving home from CSU just, like, crying all the way home because that's all that was on the radio news, and it just sounded so horrific.

(The memorial, the spontaneous memorial, just to give people a sense of the kind of work involved---this is something that people started bringing material to Clement Park. Shortly after the Columbine shooting?)

SP: The same day, I think they started bringing---

KJ: The pack-out for this material wasn't until May 10th or somewhere around there, and the shooting had taken place April 20th. This was a few weeks' worth of material. People never stopped bringing material. Of course, it was spring; open to the elements.

SP: April was a very unusual weather month. We had rain, and we had snow, and wind, and you name it.

KJ: I think those bigger institutions that were involved in organizing the pack-out originally had talked to federal authorities. I know shortly after the pack-out started, we had a visit from someone who maintained the archives of the Vietnam memorial in Washington D.C., and she advised the group a little bit more on how to curate a collection like that.

(What kind of materials are we talking about? I mean, it's a range of---)

SP: First, can we talk about the phone calls that Karen made? Because that really made a huge difference on what we were able to do.

KJ: Well one of the first tasks of this group and we all became team leaders of volunteers, so our first responsibility was to start calling vendors in the area to see if we could get supplies donated. That included trucks to transport the material [and] on-site de-humidification. All of this material was being brought to an empty building on the Federal Center campus. The volume took up several rooms. So we needed on-site dehumidification, and based on past experiences, I had some contacts with vendors in the field that were disaster recovery. They were so helpful. They all volunteered their time and their expertise. Randy Benedict at that time, I think his company was called Disaster Restoration, volunteered right away. He had a friend who had onsite dehumidification equipment. I think his name was Randy. He came. We were able to get donation of trucks. I think it was several semi-trailer loads.

SP: Because we filled them up more than once.

KJ: I think the local Home Depots, or Lowes, or whatever it was in the area at that time, donated plastic and---

SP: Gloves---

KJ: I think Americold which is a refrigerator truck service donated the use of a couple of their refrigerator trucks to hold some of that material until it could be moved. There was a huge outpouring of donations, and hundreds of people showed up to actually help with the pack-out.

SP: The park service very wisely had decided it would pick up all the real flowers, and they dried them, and made them into potpourri, and the potpourri was given to all the students at the school. It was an amazing number of flowers. So just them taking the flowers made a difference. Then there were lots of stuffed animals, and those were taken to dry cleaners.

KJ: I think Randy---well, this happened during the course of the pack-out and the recovery, but the animals were segregated, and his company took the responsibility of drying those. I don't remember whether they sent them to dry cleaners too, but all of those were donated to area shelters and hospitals. So I think because the quantity was so overwhelming only a small representative sampling of items that were in huge quantity were kept as part of the archive.

SP: Then when we went to do the pack-out we had everything else. That was cards and letters. People made these awesome things like quilts. A beautiful wall-hanging of a columbine I remember. Lots of candles---

KJ: ---Votive.

SP: ---Yes and crucifixes, and medallions, and huge posters. They were the kind of wall-hangings that--- well I was over by the tennis courts, and that's where a lot of the big posters were and there would be things that were signed. One of ones I saw was signed from students from Germany, and I don't know how they got it there, but they did. A lot of times people would leave thirteen of something, and a few cases there were fifteen of something. Pictures just---

KJ: ---Photographs. Yes, the vast majority of it was paper-based material. So some of it was destroyed by fire from the votives. A lot of it was in very fragile condition just because of the weather and that was really the main urgency. I think actually on the day of the pack-out it was stormy, and we had to start and then stop, and go back the next day, or the day after to finish, because the weather was so bad. Considering that---I had to remind myself by reading the article I wrote at the time, but it sounded like 95 percent of the material was saved, and considering the challenges, I was astounded myself that that much might have been able to have been saved.

SP: The thing that really surprised me was that the people who were really careful with what they did, like they'd wrap it in plastic and tape it up. Those were the ones that couldn't be saved, because the damp got in there and it mildewed. Where the people that just had them out, they got wet, they dried out, they got wet, they dried out, and those actually came through just great.

KJ: Yes, that's very true.

SP: Then when we had everything in the trucks, and it got to the Federal Center it was all packed in, and then we started going through it. We had a huge room in the basement where the de-humidifiers were. We laid pieces out, one, and then a few hours later we would pick them up and we'd lay more out. When we picked them up that's when we started going through them.

KJ: I have to say it was very interesting; in the head of an archivist, or a conservator where you're supposed to be objective, and think of the material. A lot of volunteers felt very personally involved in this process. There were a lot of cards that were in envelopes---you know volunteers---everyone was interested in opening the envelopes and reading what was there.

Some volunteers would say "This would be disturbing to the families of the victims, so we don't want to put this in the archive."

There were a lot of discussions explaining to people how---

SP: Oh no we threw them away.

KJ: Oh, we didn't.

SP: Oh, well we did.

KJ: I guess it depended on which team you were on.

SP: I was on your team, but we didn't put them in the rooms.

KJ: Well that was another thing. We actually had to segregate anything left to the murderers---

SP: ---Well each student had a room---

KJ: ----In a separate area, because people didn't want it to be part of the archive.

SP: The way it was set up there were fifteen rooms; there were two in the basement that were for the killers and then there were thirteen upstairs. When you went through the stuff, if it was addressed to a particular student it went to that student's room. There were a lot of get well cards, and those were all taken to the hospitals for the students still in there. A lot of things that were thirteen of, so we put one in each room, and then there were some that there were fifteen of. It was kind of surprising how much actually went into the killers' rooms. You looked at it enough to see if it was addressed to a particular person, and to make sure that it wasn't 'the wages of sin is death' kind of thing and there were very few of those.

KJ: Yes, considering. I do remember very particularly thinking, stay in objective mode, almost on automatic pilot, thinking as a conservator, looking at material based on condition, not content, and making decisions that would---

SP: ---I was doing content [Laughs]. It was stunning how many people wrote letters saying that they had lost a child, and how they could feel for the families. That was the thing that really surprised me was how many of them said that.

KJ: I think there was a huge outpouring of empathy.

SP: Then, like the kids who had cars in the parking lot there would be memorials by their cars, so all of that stuff went into that room.

KJ: I think what was astounding to me was this was this one intense effort I think within a week that we were finished, and the contents were stabilized. They stayed in those rooms at the Federal Center for several months, and I think there was some continuing consolidation happening, but our involvement with it was really limited to that week of initial stabilization.

SP: The parents came and took what they wanted. Which was a drop in the bucket. There were such touching things in there. I had been very good about not being emotionally involved until I was taking the things to the individual rooms, and I walked into the first room, and I thought, "This is what the parents get to come into." I totally lost it. Got over it and carried on. But it was so overwhelming to think that that's what they had left. Was this little tail end of their grief?

KJ: I do remember just trying to stay really detached, and after the pack-out was through it was almost like, did this really happen? You know, it was kind of very discreet portion of time not related to anything else that was going on in my life at that time.

SP: Where were you packing out from?

KJ: Which room?

SP: No, when we were packing out. I was by the tennis courts.

KJ: To tell you the truth, Sharon, I'm not sure I remember. I think my vision is of a big fence by the school, but I don't think I ever looked at a map of the area, or a lot of my time was spent directing things onto trucks, so I don't remember a particular spot.

SP: People wrote poetry. People did drawings. I mean really beautiful things.

KJ: It'd be interesting to kind of look at the media of the time and slightly after. I know there were many crucifixes dropped that were part of the spontaneous memorial, and I know somebody actually built some huge crucifixes. I know we had some that were large enough that they were taller than the ceiling of the room, but I'm not sure that those were the ones that actually were installed later as part of a semi-permanent memorial.

SP: The man who made those crosses brought fifteen and two of them were removed, which despite what happened, those families lost a child too, so---

KJ: There are some photographs here of some of the items lined up afterwards.

SP: Then what happened afterwards---the families came eventually. It took some of the families a long time to be able to face it. Then the national archives took some of it, the State Historical Society took some of it. We're talking maybe one or two percent.

KJ: Yes, there was thousands of linear feet, I guess if you---the Littleton Museum, the Littleton Historical Society, I think they and the Colorado Historical Society ended up with the bulk of what was saved. I don't think Jefferson County ended up acquiring any of the artifactual material, but Duncan will probably know that. A portion of that material did stay at the Federal

Center for at least a year while they were trying to disperse it, but we didn't have any direct involvement in that portion of it.

(So the only sort of permanent memorials that include some of this material then, are where?)

SP: The Colorado State Archives has some---

KJ: ---No, not the state archives, it's the Historical Society.

SP: Yes, I'm sorry.

KJ: And the Littleton Historical Society, their museum is---I've been there, but I can't remember the address exactly, but I think those two institutions were the most concerned with collecting those artifacts. I know the park and rec district of that area had a lot to do with building the permanent memorial. They may have some artifacts too, but I don't know if they have exhibit space.

(So really, a lot of what was in the fed center, the process after was really to kind of find homes for---.)

KJ: Yes, and I guess I can't really assume that I know what happened to every portion of it. But after that initial energy, I think finding a permanent home became the much harder long-term project of a few institutions that even had the capability of considering to take responsibility for that. I'm afraid that's probably the same story with any kind of huge spontaneous memorial. I mean, Princess Diana's---I mean, I don't know, but I'd be astounded if every single artifact was saved from that outpouring. We did learn that in Washington D.C. the curator that came to visit us says they still make a point of collecting whatever's left at the Vietnam memorial.

SP: Yes.

KJ: That's an ongoing function of their archive and I think at the time they mentioned the Oklahoma bombing, there were some spontaneous memorials left there, and as a federal site.

SP: And 9/11. All those pictures and posters, so unfortunately there's far too much of it.

(Well thank you both very much. Appreciate it.)

[End Part 1]

[Part 2]

SP: This one's a good feel for---look at all these people have things in their hands. Here. How about if I put it down so that you don't have to have my shaky hands. You can see how much of it was flowers. These people all have things that they're bringing by. This is just a little tiny one; the ones closest to the street were enormous.

KJ: [Referring to the subject of a photograph] Yes, here's one that's a little bit bigger. But it also shows the---many of these were variations on a theme. You know, the crosses, and the paper, and the flowers, and the stuffed animals, were ubiquitous.

SP: Yes. In this one [photograph] you can see some kind of drawings, and there's some stuffed animals there, ---and this one has several stuffed animals.

KJ: Oh, we didn't mention this, but I don't think we saved much of them, but there were a lot of balloons, [laughs] and most of them were pretty shriveled by the time we saw them. I really don't have a memory of those being archived.

(Are there any best practices for archiving balloons?)

KJ: You know, my expertise is paper. There were many objects-conservators that volunteered their time and I'm sure that they addressed that. From the pack-out to the stabilization, I was assigned paper, and because of the volume, there was very little cross-over. So I really didn't get a chance to converse with objects-conservators on some of the challenges they faced, though I'm sure there were many.

SP: Then this was the company---this huge hose was pumping dry, warm air into the building. The building was set quite far from the parking lot, so the hose was just enormous, and it went into the basement of the room.

KJ: Yes, and I think this was the large area. You can see the hose on this end. See it over here.

SP: Right there?

KJ: Yes. So that was one of the larger rooms that was the drying area before this material was separated into the discrete rooms.

(That's a room at the fed center?)

SP: Yes, that was the basement room. We went in and just covered it with paper and a few hours later we could pick it up, and then put more down.

KJ: And here's after---well, you can see [in the photograph], in order to pack-out and stabilize some of these items for transport, you can see on the floor some of the paper is like pulp. We did bring those rolls, so the banners that were there we could roll up for transport, so they wouldn't be damaged further. Just to get them to the Federal Center.

SP: The boxes had the get-well cards, I think, because a lot of the elementary schools in the area, the teachers had their students all write letters to the people who were wounded, so---

KJ: Here's just a couple of shots of some of the more elaborate memorials.

SP: This, I think, is one of the rooms. No it couldn't be---

KJ: ---Well I think there's a good chance that it is. There's another one, this one, I think is one of the rooms too, because there's a small portion of material there. It was just spread out for people to come and look at afterwards.

SP: But there's not nearly enough stuff. I mean, I remember bicycles and sweatshirts and---see, this one almost looks more like one of the rooms to me. Except, I don't remember that many crosses being in each room.

KJ: Well, I feel also, too that, because we were in the paper area, that other materials were being segregated.

SP: Right, so when we would take the paper in, there would be lots of artifacts and some quite large.

KJ: Sure and also because some of the physical characteristics of some of this stuff, you know, the paper dried really quickly; where[as] the stuffed animals were taken off site. I'm sure there were sweatshirts, or other objects. I don't think that they were stabilized on-site either. That would have required a lot of documentation, but our main concern was getting it out of the elements and getting it stabilized, so we never really got to see the big picture---

SP: I do remember walking into the rooms and just being overwhelmed.

(When did it first become a concern that something would have to be done with all these things? Was it early on?)

SP: I think the park was really the instigating force.

KJ: I think the pack-out began on May 10. We met a week before then to talk about organizing it. That was two weeks in. I'm sure it took the park and rec people, and whoever they talked to,

several days to kind of get it organized. They may have started within a week, but it would take that long.

SP: Doing the flowers. Because they had their machines already there, and they were putting flowers in it while we were working on the pack-out.

KJ: Yes, but I think it would have taken several days to call people and get a date fixed. So I'm sure they were working on it before we heard about it.

(Anything else?)

SP: Back at the other libraries, people were trying to figure out exactly what to do to help with Columbine. The county had gotten in touch with the library and said they wanted to turn Columbine library into the communications center for the sheriff's department and the county.

So Bill called his senior management team and said, "We need to get this set up tonight."

So the people from IT took every phone and every computer they had and set it up at Columbine. Paddy Correia was telling me a story: She said they got done about 6 a.m.; she was coming out and locking the door, she noticed the notes on the door of where students were, because the kids had gone to one of the elementary schools, and one of the churches, and to the library. That's where the vast majority of them were; one of those three places. The school and the church had faxed their lists over and then we'd faxed ours to the other two, so that if parents went to the wrong place they knew where to go.

Paddy looked at it and she said, "Here's this hand-written list of students at the elementary school and one at the church, and here's the library's list, which is typed in alphabetical order." [chuckles] She just said, "I just had to laugh; it was such a librarian thing to do."

Basically we gave up the building and the county had it for quite a long time. The Bookmobile went down there and we started calling people to ask them where they wanted to pick up their books. All their holds were brought to Lakewood and that was kind of a central location that had enough staff that people could be calling. Then somebody, and I'm sorry I don't remember who, was smart enough to go into the student's records and cancel their check-outs, so the parents weren't getting notes from the library saying, 'bring back your books.' A lot of students had their stuff in their lockers, so they couldn't get to it for months. So when the library found out about that they put them on kind of a hold, so that the students weren't getting fines. All that stuff was being done in the background, and I think, maybe people didn't even realize what was going on.

(Did the other buildings stay open during that time?)

SP: Yes, and people would tell us, "Well I'd like to pick it up at Villa", or whatever, and so they would get sent there.

The holds for Columbine people just kept coming in, because they were still on the lists, so it wasn't a one-time thing. The inter-library loan did a lot of that work.

(What was the atmosphere like working at Lakewood? Do you remember interactions with patrons?)

SP: Oh yes, patrons were in shock. When they'd hear about Columbine library being closed, for some reason they didn't---a lot of them, because they're not that close, didn't realize that it was not the library in the school. That was something that we had to explain to people. People just wanted someone to talk to. I remember that day; we had two people on staff who could have had students at that school, so I called both of them and said, "how's your kid?" They were just fine. One of them had not gone to school that day and the other went to the school where all the Columbine kids went. Chatfield?

KJ: Was it Cherry Creek?

SP: No. It started with a C too. I want to say Chatfield, but I'm not sure. There was another high school in the area and that's where the Columbine kids went for the next year. That's the only addition I have.

(Well thank you very much.)

[End of part 2. End of interview.]