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University Archives & Community Organizations: Ensuring Access through Collaboration

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University Archives & Community Organizations

Establishing a Partnership

In 2005, as the CAF planned to relocate its offices, TIARA approached CAF to offer to preserve the more than 79,000 inactive archival records of the MCOF that were not slated to move to the new offices. After the CAF accepted and transferred custody of these records to TIARA, the genealogical organization began to process and index the records and to provide reference services for researchers around the world. A minor flood in TIARA's storage area in 2009, however, induced the organization to search for a more secure, permanent home for the records. After approaching several Boston-area archival repositories, TIARA transferred ownership of the MCOF records (spanning 1879 to 1986) to the UASC at UMass Boston in 2011.

Because TIARA members were heavily invested in the Foresters records, the collection was donated to UASC with the express agreement that the two bodies would work to establish a mutually beneficial partnership. UASC would provide resources, storage, and reference services for the records, and TIARA would continue to help process and index them. This would mean loosening some of our administrative control over the records and thinking beyond the "traditional" role of an archives, but we believed strongly that collaborating with TIARA would best serve the materials, TIARA's community, and potential researchers. First and foremost, TIARA members were able to commit a

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Ensuring Access through Collaboration

Jessica Holden, Andrew Elder, and Joanne Riley, University of Massachusetts Boston

Community engagement remains at the heart of University Archives and Special Collections (UASC) in the Joseph P. Healey Library at the University of Massachusetts Boston. UASC was established in 1981 as a repository to collect archival material in subject areas of interest to the university, as well as the records of the university itself. In addition, the university's urban mission and strong support of community service are reflected in records of and related to urban planning, social action, alternative movements, community organizations, war and social consequence, and local history related to neighboring communities, including collections associated with Dorchester and the Boston Harbor Islands. For more information, see <http://openarchives.umb.edu>.

Community Engagement

In 2011, to further our community-engaged mission, UASC began to focus on working with, promoting, and assisting community archives in the greater Boston area through facilitating cross-organization collaboration and access to informational, educational, and practical resources relevant to archival procedures and best practices.

The guiding tenets behind this continuing commitment emerged, in part, from UASC's multifaceted collaboration with The Irish Ancestral Research Association (TIARA), a local nonprofit organization established to develop and promote the growth, study, and exchange of ideas among people and organizations interested in Irish

genealogical and historical research and education. Our collaboration with TIARA formally began in 2011, driven by a unique collection, the records of the Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters (MCOF).

The Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters

MCOF was founded in 1879 by a group of Irish immigrants to provide life insurance benefits for its members. The organization grew from one small group in Boston to branches across the state. By 1893, there were ninety-five Forester Courts (local branches) throughout Massachusetts, including several German Courts, and beginning in 1894, women were admitted to the Foresters as well as men. By 1930, there were 60,000 members of the Foresters in Massachusetts and there was at least one court in Rhode Island. The MCOF was renamed the Catholic Association of Foresters (CAF) in 1960 and still exists today as a fraternal life insurance society.

Each prospective Forester applying for coverage completed an application that included personal data, family information, and a physical examination. Subsequent death benefit disbursements listed beneficiaries and correspondence regarding beneficiaries was included in the records. This material reveals a wealth of information about family structure, health, mortality, mobility, and occupations of predominantly Irish immigrants and descendants. For more information on the Foresters records, see <http://blogs.umb.edu/archives/foresters>.



TIARA's office and storage space. Courtesy of University Archives and Special Collections, Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts Boston.

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far more substantial number of hours to processing the records than UASC would have been able to provide. Thanks to this understanding and TIARA's continued efforts, the Foresters records became accessible more quickly.

UASC's partnership with TIARA has not been without its glitches and setbacks, however, so throughout the course of the partnership, we've kept the following questions and issues in mind: How can a university archives establish a successful ongoing relationship with a community organization? What are the benefits and challenges of such a collaboration? What are the lessons learned on both sides?

Takeaways

As part of our poster presentation at the 2014 CoSA/NAGARA/SAA Joint Annual Meeting, we explored four main takeaways from our collaboration with TIARA.

1) Community organizations are in love with their collections. Communities are often invested in their records in a more personal way than archival repositories. In recognition of TIARA's connection to and work with the Foresters records, UASC has provided TIARA members with special consideration throughout the course of our collaboration. TIARA volunteers are granted special access to certain UASC facilities and maintain a special relationship with the collection through indexing and processing activities. UASC created an exhibit and hosted a public event, "Calling the Heart Back Home: Irish-American Stories from the Archives," which celebrated TIARA's work with the Foresters records and drew more than 150 attendees. At the event, UASC presented TIARA with the 2012 Joseph P. Healey Community Archives Award to celebrate TIARA's role in preserving and processing the Foresters records. In November 2013, UASC and TIARA collaborated on an Irish immigrant-themed "Mass. Memories Road Show," an event-based public history project produced by UASC that digitizes family photos and memories shared by the people of Massachusetts.

The 2013 event brought together TIARA members, UMass Boston staff and students, and local community members to record and digitize more than three hundred photographs and stories related to the Irish immigrant experience. For more information about the Mass. Memories Road Show, see <http://openarchives.umb.edu>.

2) Community organizations often fear bureaucratic gatekeepers. UASC readily acknowledged and worked to mitigate TIARA's access concerns when we were first approached about serving as a permanent home for the Foresters records. When collections are accessioned into an archives like ours, the material can become less readily accessible (or even closed off) to the donating and/or creating bodies. We felt that this was a valid concern, and so we put into place several policies that would keep the records open to TIARA. First of all, UASC agreed to store the bulk of this collection onsite rather than in our offsite facility, recognizing that onsite storage would facilitate TIARA's continuing access to and work with the records. We also offered to waive reproduction fees for TIARA members and CAF members. Finally, we applied University resources to increase access to the collection, including improving and expanding searching and look-up tools. For example, before TIARA donated the Foresters records to UASC, they had processed and indexed about 29,000 of the collection's more than 79,000 records. Once the materials arrived at UMass Boston, we created a fully searchable, online database of the indexed records, which allows for expanded access and a more streamlined reference process.

3) A university archives' competing priorities can frustrate community organizations. Throughout our collaboration, UASC has consistently provided TIARA with clear, honest information about where the Foresters collection fits within our processing queue. And more specifically, UASC enthusiastically welcomed TIARA's donation without making unrealistic promises about immediate processing or access. Finally, we are careful to communicate any campus issues that affect TIARA's involvement—such as

parking, construction, staff changes, or special events—and we work with TIARA members to find mutually beneficial ways to address and relieve these challenges.

4) Working with a single community organization can involve many stakeholders. Rather than receiving the Foresters collection from a single donor, we found that there were many different players invested in the records who sometimes had competing interests. Dozens of TIARA members had worked hard to save the records from destruction, preserve the records, and provide researchers with access. In response to this potential issue of having many different contacts and to facilitate our collaboration and ensure effective communication, both organizations agreed that a long-time, well-respected TIARA board member and researcher would serve as the primary project liaison. In addition, UASC and TIARA have both engaged their institutional and organizational leadership during every stage of the project. UASC connects TIARA volunteers with other communities of interest on campus and beyond through academic programs, courses, departmental activities, and student engagement.

* * *

Since the beginning of our collaboration in 2011, UASC and TIARA have developed a mutually beneficial working relationship. Together we have made available nearly 30,000 Foresters records and have responded to hundreds of reference requests. The lessons we learned while working to develop a strong partnership with TIARA have helped UASC develop models for working with other community organizations and archives in the Boston area. In the coming year, UASC plans to outline and formalize the various ways we can collaborate with community organizations and record creators in Boston and across Massachusetts, from providing emergency services such as temporary storage, to collaborating on indexing and processing projects in further collaboration with graduate programs in public history and archives at UMass Boston. ■

This information was shared during the Professional Poster Presentations at the 2014 CoSA/NAGARA/SAA Joint Annual Meeting.