

The Only Degree Required Is a Degree of Caring

These words sum up the experience of participating in the Collections Care Training Program (CCTP), according to Ron R., the archivist for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Intergroup Association. This training program allowed participants to learn hands-on skills in the care and conservation of the kind of materials found in our A.A. Archives. The archives in Philadelphia contains historical material from one of the earliest A.A. groups where the first meeting, on February 28, 1940, was started by Jimmy B., the traveling salesman whose story, "The Vicious Cycle," is recorded in the Big Book.

The CCTP was begun in 1989 by Marilyn W., a professional art conservator, to offer intensive training to people working with historical collections in small museums and organizations in Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley. Her goal was to reach those groups and individuals who might otherwise not have access to the information and tools necessary for the protection and maintenance of their collections.

Even with 155 hours of class time and 40 different lecturers representing areas as diverse from one another as packing and shipping is from techniques in photograph restoration, only a beginner's introduction to this subject is possible. Perhaps the most important lesson taught by the CCTP is knowledge of one's own ignorance. This provides a healthy caution against doing anything radical in terms of preservation and focuses attention on the basics.

The most basic message of this training program comes down to two simple words, "Do Something." It is more important to just get started with the task of caring for your archive collection than it is to do everything perfectly and right away. This is a variation on the theme of "progress, not perfection." Simply rehousing the material in your archive in a protected environment could be the single most helpful action you can take to preserve and protect those documents. It is better to put an unconserved object into a good environment than it is to take a carefully preserved item and return it to a poor environment. This kind of action involves only a modest amount of cost, but does often require a dedicated group of volunteers willing to carefully place individual documents in acid-free folders or Mylar sleeves and then store them in archival quality boxes or metal filing cabinets. Interleaving old photographs with acid-free (but unbuffered) paper keeps one object from damaging another.

"Sticking the words to the object" is another catch phrase that makes good sense for archivists. Basically this means keep your records attached somehow to the items to which they apply -- e.g., by using an index number written in pencil on the object and cross referenced on the data record. Including a copy of the registration information inside the folder that contains the item is also a safe way of guaranteeing that the right information stays with the object it refers to.

Archivists are temporary custodians of the materials entrusted to our care. Our jobs are 90% care and maintenance and 10% preservation. Care of the collections is the primary conservation activity we can undertake.

It is difficult to resist the temptation to aggressively "attack" the deteriorating materials in our collections that are suffering from fifty years of natural aging and poor storage. This is a problem similar perhaps to that faced by the enthusiastic newcomer who wishes to tackle the tough "action" steps (4 and 5, 8 and 9), before laying the foundation of sobriety. In the case of A.A. archival materials, the Steps apply as well.

Twelve Steps for A.A. Archivists

Step One: Admitted that we, as archivists, are powerless over the natural cycle of deterioration that all documents will go through -- conservation scientists call this "inherent vice," but we know it simply as "all things will break and fall apart."

Step Two: Came to believe and trust that the higher power who brought these precious A.A. materials to our care will restore them to a condition of usefulness. Otherwise we will go crazy trying to do alone what no one archivist unaided can do.

Step Three: Having accepted our powerlessness and having come to believe that we cannot do all this work alone, we made a decision to turn our will and the life of our archives over to the care of g.o.d. (good orderly direction), as we understood it. This involved deciding what the primary purpose of your archives is and whether we are preserving the object or the information from that object -- or a combination of the two. For example, most of the newsprint in our collection dating from the early 1940's is severely deteriorated. Conserving it to archival standards would be an expensive and time-consuming process. The most important part of those documents is the information on how the Fellowship grew and how it was perceived in the public eye, and so a Xerox on acid-free paper of most of these materials will serve our archive's purposes well. However, there are a couple of articles that are of special significance since they represent the very first news coverage of A.A. in this area. Those items we have decided are worth the time and money to de-acidify and encapsulate in Mylar.

Step Four: Took an inventory of our collections, making it fearless and thorough. We didn't hide the problems under the rug and listed the archive's (and archivist's) assets as well as liabilities. Without this inventory, future plans for care and conservation will be based on half-measures.

Step Five: Admitted the exact nature of our archive's problems to a higher power, ourselves (very important) and to others on our Archive Committee or to someone involved in A.A. archive work elsewhere. This was the end of our isolation. A.A. historians and opened windows of fresh (filtered) air and light (low level and UV protected) onto our collections. We found that others have been faced with the same problems we are faced with and are willing to share their experience, strength and hope with us. Nothing is so bad in our archives that another person involved in this area of service can't identify with or offer some solution to help.

Step Six: Became entirely ready to have g.o.d. (as we understood it) remove all the defects of our collections. Remember, this does not mean everything all at once! It just means that we are willing to work on these problems, one item at a time.

Step Seven: Humbly asked for help to do the work that needs to be done. We could not do it alone and without a sense of humility in the face of this kind of work, we found that we might attempt "preservation" steps that we are not qualified to perform and thus irrevocably damage the material entrusted to our care.

Step Eight: Made a list of all the items that have been harmed by the passage of time and the handling of many people and became willing to mend the best we could.

Step Nine: Made these "mends" wherever possible, except when "mending" will injure the documents themselves or other materials in contact with the documents. This is a step that requires the utmost in patience and judgment. Too-hasty repairs can cause more damage than simply letting the documents alone. Often materials are attached to each other in such a way that removing one for treatment can harm the other materials to which it is connected.

Step Ten: Continued to take inventory of our archives' collections and our actions as archivists -- new materials will be added and new skills will need to be learned, some duplicates or inappropriate items will need to be discarded as well as sloppy or ineffective techniques in our management of the archives. When mistakes are made, we try to admit, accept and patiently correct them.

Step Eleven: Prayer and meditation are as necessary to our work in the archives as they are to our daily sobriety. Without a conscious contact with a power greater than ourselves, we can easily lose our way when faced with the overwhelming challenges of our archives. Only knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out can safely guide us to the care and protection of the precious materials entrusted to our keeping.

Step Twelve: Having had the spiritual awakening necessary to work these Steps, which means putting our service activity on a spiritual plane, we then try to enthusiastically carry the message of hope and recovery that is expressed in our archives to other alcoholics and to practice the principles expressed in these Steps in all our affairs, both professionally as archivists and personally as sober A.A.'s.

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