

Transcript of Interview with Catherine Allgor and Carol Knauff by Hailey Philbin

Interviewee: Catherine Allgor

Interviewee: Carol Knauff

Interviewer: Hailey Philbin

Date: 7/31/2020

Location (Interviewee): Boston, Massachusetts

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Abstract: Hailey Philbin interviews Catherine Allgor and Carol Knauff from the Massachusetts Historical Society on how the MHS has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and adapted to a virtual setting.

Hailey Philbin 0:00

So I'm recording. All right, so let's just jump right in. So if you could both just say your name and the position you hold at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Catherine Allgor 0:11

I'm Catherine Allgor, and I'm the President of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Carol Knauff 0:16

I'm Carol Knauff, and I'm the Vice President of Communications and Marketing at the Massachusetts Historical Society

Hailey Philbin 0:23

Wonderful. All right. So the first question I will start with is: what is the current status of your organization that you work for, so essentially, is it open, is it closed, are guests allowed in at any point, just explain exactly what's going at MHS at the moment.

Catherine Allgor 0:39

Sure. We closed completely on March 10th, and at that time there was sort of no idea that we would be out this long, so we were going to be experimenting with a phased reopening, but as it turns out, a couple days later, everything was closed. So we started working remotely, completely remotely, until early July, and what we did was after a lot of work for our reopening team, which represented people from all across the institution, we implemented a three week rotation. So we took the percentage of our staff that must work in the building for collections, so they're dealing with the stuff, so they have to be in the building- divided them up into three teams and started a three week rotation. And so the idea is they'd go in for one week and then be off for two. So if you were going to be sick or if you caught something, that would be your incubation period, and if someone were sick, we'd know exactly who you were working with and where you were in the building. Thankfully, no one is sick. We are on the second iteration of that. We are not open to the public at all, but we are serving our researchers and our, what we call, our fellows through a, I call it concierge service, but it's sort of like digital materials, reproductions, ask a librarian, live chat...so we're closed to the public, but connected to the outside world.

Hailey Philbin 2:11

That's wonderful. How many different researchers or fellows have you (MHS) been able to help during this situation? Do you know how many people you've been in contact with or have used these services?

Catherine Allgor 2:22

I would say in the tens of people at this point, probably maybe over one hundred. They're always a small group the fellows. But yeah a small group, but they're that produced the knowledge for the next generation so very important to keep them around.

Hailey Philbin 2:39

Wonderful. And have a majority of your co-workers been able to maintain their positions during this time?

Catherine Allgor 2:47

We have had no lay-offs. We do not intend on that. When we say we are in together, we are in it, and we are together.

Hailey Philbin 2:57

That's fantastic. Carol, do you have anything to add so far?

Carol Knauff 3:01

No, I was going to say that with our reference services that we are offering, we are really started to ramp them up more now, so I think the researcher number will increase as we go forward. And yeah, as Catherine said, we're really happy that everyone is able to work remotely and continue to fulfill the mission of MHS.

Hailey Philbin 3:25

Right. And I guess to add on to that question: with students coming back to school, even if it's remotely, soon and wanting to use MHS' resources for their own research, have you guys thought about a plan to service to students?

Catherine Allgor 3:41

I think that we treat students, well we treat them seriously, and we treat them every other researcher. Well, that's not exactly true because we do take a lot of trouble in the fall to bring student groups in and introduce them to the idea of an archive- what is an archive, what kind of library we are and introduce them around. So, that part is probably, sadly going to go away a little bit, but certainly we are there to serve their research needs.

Hailey Philbin 4:09

Great, yeah. I'd also like to ask, as someone that knows a lot about what you guys do at MHS, you usually have the Brown Bag Lunches and these events you can attend and listen to someone speak about a topic in history. And I've seen on your website and the calendar events that there have been some virtual programs. Can you guys tell me a little more about how those have been going, the planning process behind those, any information you want to share on those?

Catherine Allgor 4:34

Let me do the big picture and then I'm going to toss it to Carol. You know, we went remote very quickly, and we had a motto, and the motto was: 'not for the crisis only, but for a vast future also,' which is paraphrased of Abraham Lincoln because if you're going to paraphrase anyone, it might as well be Lincoln. And what it meant was that any innovation we were going to do was not going to be for the duration of the crisis, but it was going to be part of our mission delivery and part of our goal to become a modern historical society that serves multiple audiences. I'm gonna say that we have held to that. And maybe Carol would like to describe some of the great changes that have been happening over the last few months.

Carol Knauff 5:20

Yeah, I think this is one of those great things that we were able to just jump right into. As soon as we closed down, our programming team realized that we really needed to figure out what we needed to do, not only with the programs that were on the calendar but for the summer, what do we do. They jumped right into hosting virtual programs, and it's been great because we've seen a huge uptick in audience members, and we've also seen a big geographic expansion. So we've had people across the country, but even internationally at this point joining us for our programs. So, I think that's been really great, and we've continued to offer programs for one to two, sometimes even three, programs a week. We are also offering Brown Bag Lunches remotely which has been really interesting because [phone goes off, voice inaudible] attended them in person at the MHS. Typically, there are maybe 10 people, 20 people at a big Brown Bag, and it really is a more intimate discussion around a topic. And at the Brown Bag that we had, was it the one yesterday, Catherine? I think we had 130 people signed up for it. So, the Brown Bag Lunches have just grown and been able to bring in a much wider audience to really help researchers as they think through their topics. So, yeah I think the programming has worked really well, and I think even when we go back to having in person programs at the MHS, we will still offer virtual programs for people who can't attend in person.

Catherine Allgor 6:56

I think, the seminars, we're going to see, some seminars aren't going to start until fall, but I'm sure, Carol, we are going to see the same thing. And when we are talking about numbers, when we would do a public program in the evening with, you know, wine and cheese, we would get 15, 20, 40, 70 was a big number, and we are getting hundreds and hundreds every single time. And, of course, I would be remiss because this is my special baby, so we are the Massachusetts sponsor of National History Day, which is a year-long multi-disciplinary program that is a contest like science fair, and it culminates in a big national thing at the end of the year. In March, we were in the middle of regionals or locals or whatever it was the state, and after a lot of really hard talk and hard thought, Alyssa Tardiff, our Director of Education and Kate Melchior decided they were going to go 100% virtual. And I know that sounds like 'of course!' But at that moment no one was doing it, and through a lot of work they went 100% virtual and the upshot of that was that students who financially could, and their schools financially could not afford to send them to these big contests, could participate, so it actually increased our access. And then about a month later, the national office in Washington D.C. decided they were going to be 100% virtual and came to us to ask how we did it. So that's another, and I would say, echoing what Carol said, no matter what we do with History Day from now on, there will always be a virtual aspect of it to just to increase access.

Hailey Philbin 8:33

That's wonderful. To jump to another thing you guys do at MHS, there's usually an exhibit space, some exhibit going on. Correct me if I'm wrong, I believe there was a Women's Suffrage exhibit space that was going on or would be coming up soon, or something like that, in the spring of 2020. How have you guys handled the idea of future exhibit spaces during the pandemic or current exhibit spaces that you guys had?

Catherine Allgor 9:01

Carol, you're on that team.

Carol Knauff 9:02

Okay. So we, in the spring we were in the middle of an exhibition on the Boston Massacre. We didn't have a Women's Suffrage exhibit, but we moved to the 250th anniversary of the Boston Massacre. It was great. We were getting a lot of publicity for it and then we shut down. And so for a while we thought, that's okay, we'll be back, we'll be back we'll extend the exhibition, but in the end we decided to close the exhibition for the safety of the materials. And we decided that our exhibit that we're planning to do anyway in the fall is now going to be an online exhibition. So it will launch on September 8th, and it's about political cartoons and voting rights. So that will be up for the fall and beyond. It's been really interesting to take our exhibition team and move from thinking about something in a visual and tangible space and move it to online. It's been really exciting, and we're seeing what we can do on our website to make it really exciting and valuable for people to see. So that's what we're doing for our next exhibition.

Catherine Allgor 10:13

And you know, and I just want to say again back to our theme here, which is that when we did the physical exhibits it was always this thought about oh my god we should get this online as an exhibition because you do all this work, and it's gonna come down, but really by the time we were done we were exhausted and nobody had the bandwidth to do it. We would take a few pictures and that was it. Well now, free from having to haul out the cases and all that, we are now, yes, constructing these as real exhibitions that will live forever, so that's great too.

Hailey Philbin 10:48

That's wonderful. Yeah, and again students, researchers can access the resources online, so of course it lives on forever in more ways than one, but that's wonderful to hear. I'll jump to the next question just for time's sake. How has your organization worked with or benefitted from any local organizations or initiatives during the pandemic? There might be a yes or no to this kind of question, but if you guys have worked with anything local, other historical institutions or anything like that, I'd love to hear about it.

Catherine Allgor 11:16

So I now say that because I think I have in a sense, well first I have to say that everybody is scrambling. They're just scrambling, and they're attending to their own house. But there's been a lot of inter-institutional discussion within various groups. I would say at the higher level, the president level, about how we're doing and the decisions we're making. No one has ever done this before, so we're all kind of thinking. For instance we belong to IRLA, which is the Independent Research Library Association, and it's all across the country. And we've been

talking about when to open, how to open, what to do with fellows, what to with materials...And we've been talking with institutions in the Boston area because that's a very particular geographic institution. I would say there's been less collaboration than there would have been especially when you consider, right Carol, the Boston Massacre, we would've been collaborating a lot with Revolutionary Spaces for instance. So that level of programmatic collaboration right now I think we're still kind of recovering, but the collaboration is opening dialogue with leaders I think.

Hailey Philbin 12:26

Carol, do you have anything to add to that question?

Carol Knauff 12:29

I think just more of the same. It's just, you know, we as an institution are having conversations with sister organizations and neighbors of ours and just trying to figure things out

Hailey Philbin 12:42

Right. Do you guys find that everyone is sort of at this stage in the pandemic, at least in the historical community or historical/cultural community, are jumping to the same solutions or similar solutions.

Catherine Allgor 12:56

Probably I would say in the neighborhood solutions. We're all, you know, we're, I think we're so... let me just say this, we are so lucky to be in Massachusetts and in Boston because we have clear guidance from our leaders and so the idea of when we're going to start rotating people in, well we have guidance from not just the state, but the city. And so I think we are definitely moving in similar areas.

Hailey Philbin 13:23

And I wanted to sort of continue down this route, you both touched on a little bit how your specific roles have changed or adapted to the current situation. If you could each touch a little bit more about how your roles have adapted, that would be wonderful.

Catherine Allgor 13:40

You know, I'm one of the people who are at home, so one of the things we've had to wrap our minds around, and by we I mean me, but everybody really, is this startling idea that I may not be in the building for two years. Carol might not be in the building or if there's, you know, in the building once every six months or something like that, and that's crazy. But we do have a substantial number of people who are at risk, and also the other thing that we are wrapping our minds around, and it really dictates to us, and it's a wildcard. When you talk about other institutions, you know, the American Antiquarian Society, which is very much like us, but it's in Wooster like, does not have to worry about it, and that's public transportation. So we are in downtown Boston. No one can afford to live in downtown Boston. We all live everywhere and the T and the Commuter Rail are hot spots. So far it's been fine because not that many people have been on the Commuter Rail, and we don't have that many people coming in, but the things I worry about now are the things like that that I never really worried about. And I live in Marblehead, so it's really far away, so you know, a lot about my role is the same. What's different is this: I'm just gonna address because it wouldn't necessarily be top of your mind, but

the development world is undergoing a vast change. My job partly is to build a community of love and support for the MHS, and when I say love and support, I mean dollars as well because you support what you love. That is done face to face, but *face to face* like, you know, lunches and dinners and bringing people in, giving them something little to eat, and then showing them Paul Revere's letter, you know. And having the Gala, which we don't, you know, we didn't have our Gala this spring, and we're going to do it virtually this fall. That's where people are really experimenting, and it's like the Wild West.

Hailey Philbin 15:42

Yeah, to see the building, I mean, it's beautiful to visit MHS and that can inspire someone to support the society in ways that no phone call can, so I very much understand.

Catherine Allgor 15:54

(Motions to screen) This is no substitute.

Hailey Philbin 16:00

Carol, would you like to talk about how your position has adapted? Maybe she's frozen. We'll give her a second (Carol's screen connection was unstable).

Carol Knauff 16:17

Yeah, I think in some- [audio cuts out]

Hailey Philbin 16:23

This happens all the time. We can't control the buffer.

Carol Knauff 16:26

Can you hear me?

Hailey Philbin 16:27

There we go, yep.

Carol Knauff 16:28

Okay. Am I back?

Catherine Allgor 16:29

Yes, start all over.

Carol 16:31

Okay. I was going to say that, you know, I think in the communications and marketing world, I'm used to having a very flexible and adaptable job because you never quite know what's gonna be thrown at you on any given day. I think, like what Catherine was saying with development, so much of what I'm doing now is trying to figure out what works and what people want. I think in the very beginning of this it was 'we have to communicate with people! We have to communicate with people, but we don't want to do it too much.' So it was figuring out that balance of what is it that people want to hear from the MHS on a consistent basis. You know, we wanted to be something that could provide some entertainment perhaps or that could provide

some inspiration. So I think just trying to very quickly roll into that and thinking that way constantly has been one of the changes or one of the ways that I've adapted my job. And I think you know, now we're just looking into the future and what else can we do and how can we use the tools that we have more effectively.

Hailey Philbin 17:40

That's great, yeah. Again, for time's sake, I want to move on to another question. You both already sort of touched on this, but just to ask this exact question. What do you think your organization has learned during the pandemic? So whether that's, you know, how you guys work as co-workers or the best way to obviously figure this out during the pandemic, but even just the goals and the mission of your society, how has that changed during all of this for the long haul? Just maybe elaborating more on that specific question.

Catherine Allgor 18:15

Well I'll give Carol time to think of her answer. I have to say actually, I think we've rediscovered ourselves as colleagues. You know, you can say the communication is not so great when you're not in the building together, but the truth is when we're in the building, we are in our own little spot and between Zoom calls and the communications, and the fact that people have had to adapt, and it's been hard, I think it's brought out a lot out of our staff, empathy toward each other, and I think it's also underscored our mission. I mean, whatever you say about the pandemic, history is more important than ever, and as we approach an election and as the government continues on its path, we feel more and more relevant. And we're seeing how technology is really helping us to extend that to people who need the kind of work we do, which is to provide historical materials, historical facts, and scholarly interpretations of the past.

Hailey Philbin 19:16

Great.

Carol Knauff 19:18

I think what I've seen a lot of in our organization, and I think really everywhere, is learning to feel comfortable in a time where you really don't know what's coming next. I think, you know, the MHS as an organization has a lot of people that are very much planners and like to know what's going on. And so, I think it's that just needing to turn off that switch and say well I'm not exactly sure when we're going back or what's going to happen tomorrow or what the governor is going to say. You just don't know, or at least for the first few months, it felt like everyday things were changing. And so just being able to adapt to that to just know it's ok. We're still going to move on, and we're still going to get our work done.

Catherine Allgor 20:04

And you know, there are different leadership models. One of them is the empathic leader. Thank god that's what I strive for because in this, that's what you need is someone who can reach out. So for the, well, before we reopened, and so for about four months, I would write an email to the staff every night and, you know, it was always interesting to me to see what people respond to and sometimes it was me just telling them to take care of themselves and to be gentle with themselves. So it's also calling forth all kinds of leadership skills.

Hailey Philbin 20:40

And would you say that during this pandemic, the way that your community has worked together, the way your co-workers have worked together, that you do have a more tangible sense of community even though you are all further apart. Would you say that's the case?

Catherine Allgor 20:54

I do, I absolutely do. Yeah.

Hailey Philbin 20:58

Yeah. It's definitely tough to look for the positives in all of this, but there certainly are, and as a segue to my next question, which again, you've touched on, but just to add a little more oomph to this. What do you think your organization has done the best during this pandemic? What adaptations have you made that are the best, or what, obviously you've touched on how that sense of community is there, but any more explanation on what you guys have done the best so far in this situation?

Catherine Allgor 21:19

You know, I think, so we've talked about all the different things and projects we've done, and we could talk more about those things, but I think what they have in common is access. So every single thing we did was about getting people access. That included things like this: we had the time because people weren't in the library, including librarians, to redo the finding aids in a way that makes the collections more accessible to the others and then putting them up on the website, digitizing material and putting it up on the website. Everything we did whether it was virtual public programs or history day or the stuff with the collections, it's all about expanding that audience and pushing it toward accessibility. I think that, and Carol's communications, what she's doing, she's trying to make sure that many eyes are on our stuff as possible. So I think it's really been accessibility.

Hailey Philbin 22:25

Yeah, that's huge. I mean that is so crucial to the goals of MHS, but also the audience that you usually reach. Building on top of that, I was a processing intern at MHS several semesters ago and from a standpoint of collecting with the archives, have you guys been able to continue collecting during the pandemic or because you don't want to touch a lot of things, that kind of thing, has collection sort of stalled or what's the status with that?

Catherine Allgor 22:56

Oh no. Carol, would you like to answer that?

Carol Knauff 22: 58

Yeah. No, we definitely are still collecting. And, you know, our VP of collections is still getting collections in and working on how to get everything into the building and processed. But we've also set up a website to collect people's experiences during the pandemic. And so it's one of those things that we recognized that years from now or months from now perhaps, historians will be researching the impact of the pandemic on Massachusetts, on the nation and so we wanted to get those first-hand accounts, first-person accounts as they were happening. So that's another

way that we are collecting because anyone that contributes to the website or sends in a dairy or drawing or a picture they've done, it gets added to the collection.

Catherine Allgor 23:50

Yeah and I want to say that's a little be different from, there's a lot of these sites, historical societies, libraries have put up these sites, and they're collecting stories, but honestly I'm not sure what they can do with them because to actually be a part of a collection, you need to fill out paperwork and all this kind of stuff, and it took us a little while to get started because [ding] we wanted to make sure that these stories won't just be lost, but they actually will live in the archives which we thought was really important. And I do have to say I was laughing when you talked about collections slowing down. Think of it! People are now home. They are cleaning out their closets, finally! And they're finding stuff, you know, like you see all this stuff behind me there? I'm finally working on my family pictures, you know, that kind of thing. So we are getting collection inquiries right from the, all the way through.

Hailey Philbin 24:39

I mean, that's wonderful be then there's' work for archivists and whoever for a long time. They are still crucial during all of this which is fantastic.

Catherine Allgor 24:49

I'm so pleased to here that you worked with us.

Hailey Philbin 24:51

I did! It was, gosh, the fall of 2018. I was with Laura [Laura Lowell] in processing. I loved my time there, so when I got the opportunity to interview you guys, I jumped on it because I was like, Oh, I know so much about what you guys. So, with time in mind, I also wanted to give you guys a chance to talk about anything I haven't asked about yet. I know you brought up development, something like that that I haven't thought of to ask yet or just more about of what you guys have been up to, anything like that.

Catherine Allgor 25:26

Gosh, what have we covered Carol?

Carol Knauff 25:33

I guess one thing that we just sort of touched on, but I think it's been really important for us is just seeing how much our community has expanded. We have heard from people, very positive responses to what we're doing and that they're thankful we've been doing our programs online and communicating with them and we haven't gone silent and we haven't shut down completely. We are continuing to offer as much as we can. And so I think that's been really great to hear, and it's really great to know we have been able to do so.

Catherine Allgor 26:08

And I have to say something about our community, sort of our long term supporters. So this happens, a terrible pandemic happens and all these things are happening. People have food insecurity and there's so much need out there, and at the time I think things were bleak. We were heading into annual funds season. We were heading into the Gala, and the Gala had to close. We

were very despairing that we weren't going to raise any money at all. And I have to say our people stepped up. Even though they were taking care of other very worthy causes, more social justice service causes, social service cause, they didn't forget us. And when I talk about support and love, it's easy to feel the love when that annual gift comes in, you know, at the same time, or somebody says don't worry about the Gala, keep the gift and it's fine. So I think I've been very heartened that our supporters really, to the extent that we came very close to reaching our goal just because people didn't forget us. But as I said, it's really this all, I don't want to say of all the different things we do, but it really is so hard to see how this is going to work without being able to bring people together in rooms.

Hailey Philbin 27:26

Right. The longevity of all of this is very questionable, but with so many museums and historical institutions that will have to close because of the lack of fundraising and guests and stuff like that is really jarring to the whole field. But to be able to see an institution like yours, you know, find a way to get their niche kind of adapt to this situation and even perform maybe better or have a different way of looking at your same goal is really wonderful to hear about, so...

Catherine Allgor 28:00

And in a weird way, so our building, which you've been in of course, is very beautiful. But I always complain about it because it is a historical society from 1899, so it's like these rooms that are both too big and not big enough and soaring ceilings and all over the place and no really no flow. Turns out, that's great for a pandemic because at some point, we will, when people feel comfortable, we will have visitors. Not, I don't know how we're going to do it, but we can actually have small numbers of visitors and small numbers of meetings because the airflow is so and the spaciousness. And the fact that you can go and do your job and not see anybody else cause they are all over there. In a weird way, our building is tailor-made for a pandemic.

Hailey Philbin 28:50

You know, from my experience there, the elevator was always kind of wonky or something like that, so everybody took the stairs anyway.

Catherine Allgor 28:56

Right! Exactly! But talking about the silver-lining, yes.

Hailey Philbin 29:02

Oh, that's a great point. Yeah, yeah. Well, I did go to the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum a week or two ago, they had just opened. So yeah, everybody's opening and finding a new way. You follow arrows, you wear your mask. There's a way, so yeah, that's wonderful. All right. So we're at 10 minutes left. I don't want to make you guys talk for more than you have things to talk about, but wanted to give you a heads up on that and see if there's anything more you want to mention.

Catherine Allgor 29:30

Gosh, I don't know. But I just I want to say thank you for letting us be part of it. We're very conscious. We're always conscious that we live in a historical time that you know, that's what

historians do. We know that no matter how humdrum a time you're living through, you know, it's of historical interest. But there are moments where you know, you are living through history, and we are trying to do the best we can with that. Whether it's collecting archives from this time, whether it's using the great pandemic of 1918 as a historical contextualization, just giving people that historian's point of view, which is big and imparting that we're hoping, we're hoping that we're doing our part.

Hailey Philbin 30:14

Well, and I, you know, I obviously think that you guys are an important organization within Boston and throughout the country. And so that's why we wanted to include your oral history here. And for future generations, future historians to learn how such an important society and archival base foundation, you know, is, is adapting to the situation. So yeah, I thank you both so much for your time to be able to do this. This project is very important to the Northeastern community, the Boston community, and all the universities that are involved, and it's wonderful to speak directly with you guys and learn how everyone's dealing with all of this. So thank you,

Catherine Allgor 30:57

One more. We love our students, we love you. Come visit us on the web, when you can come visit us. And we love you all. We do have a little soft spot for Northeastern. I'll just say that.

Hailey Philbin 31:08

We love you guys too. So we will spread the word to all the students what you guys are up to how they can still interact with all of you and keep it going.

Catherine Allgor 31:17

Thanks so much.

Carol Knauff 31:18

Sounds good. Thank you.

Hailey Philbin 31:22

Bye