

Transcript of Interview of Bree Boettner by Tory Schendel Cox

Interviewee: Bree Boettner

Interviewer: Tory Schendel Cox

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Location (Interviewer): Evansville, Indiana, United States of America

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Abstract: Bree Boettner is an employee at the Detroit Historical Society who dealt with touring and other affairs inside the museums that are a part of the Detroit Historical Society. In this interview by Tory Schendel Cox, they talk about the general feeling of what museums meant to them as curators and how it impacted kids and the culture of the Detroit area and stories about the interviewee's favorite object/exhibit in the museum and stories regarding them and how they decided to get into museums to begin with. Another major point is how COVID-19 has affected and will affect the future of Museums.

TC: Hi, my name is Tory Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia Schrader curator at the Evansville museum and today for our telecast, we have Bree and thank you so much for your time. I'm just going to hand it over to you.

BB: Awesome. Hi, everybody. My name is Bree Boettner. I work at the Detroit Historical Society in Detroit, Michigan. I like to tell people that I'm a transplant to Detroit. So, well I am an enthusiast of our history and everything that the city has to offer, I am actually not a Detroit native. But I did get my Detroit badge, so to speak, from a few of our locals, so they consider me a Detroit-er, which is very nice and very honorary. [Laughter]. I, I grew up with a military father, I kind of grew up everywhere. So, I'm, I'm just a kid of the world, so to speak. But thankfully, that's kind of how I fell into museums. Every new place that we moved to my mom and my dad, took me to the museum to kind of learn the area of the people, the neighborhoods, art, culture, you name it, I absorbed it, like the sponge that I am. And through that, I kind of just fell in love with museum education. Formally, I got my degree in archaeology, anthropology. It was really, really fulfilling to do archaeology for a few years. When you're up north, it's very seasonal, you can't really dig in the snow. So, I decided to go back to school for the significant for the suggestion of my field supervisor. And she's like, Bree you should really go back to school and do museum studies. And I was like, why? And she's like, you talk a lot. [Laughter] I was like, Yeah, I do. I do, like telling stories. I like finding, you know, things in the ground and explaining them to people so they can find personal connections with the objects and history around them. So, it's kind of how I fell to where I am today. And I wouldn't have it any other way. It's difficult. It's been a difficult road. Museums aren't the easiest thing to get into, all my young professionals out there, you understand. But I did fall into museum education, and in particular, working with our school groups. And so that's, that's a whole interesting beast in and of itself. And my job in particular, I work with a variety of different school districts in our area, we have 82 school districts in southeastern Michigan that we serve, which is a lot. [Laughter] I'm sure there's many more that will eventually come through our doors. Right now, that's how many we serve. And we

serve about 43,000 students a year. And the Detroit Historical Society actually has two museums. So, I was like to joke ahead, I got two for the price of one.

TC: Yay.

BB: Um, so the Detroit Historical Museum kind of covers like Detroit's history. And then we have the Dossin Great Lakes Museum, which is on Belle Isle. It's in the Detroit River. It's a really cool place because it's actually the largest island park in the United States. And so fun fact, right? It's bigger than, uh, Central Park in New York.

TC: Wow.

BB: [Unintelligible] right. All in our little neck of the woods in Detroit. So, we get to talk about our maritime history as well. Right. So, if you live in the Midwest, you know, the great lakes are like a maritime superhighway. We've got freight. And we've got cruise ships now going through the Great Lakes, which is awesome. We've got personal vessels that go through. So, it's just a really fun story to talk to you with kids. And still to this day, one of my favorite questions I get asked all the time by our students is, are there any sharks in the Great Lakes? [Laughter] Like, nope, they're unsalted and shark free, so you're good. But it's really, really fun to be out there. So as you guys can probably tell, I like to talk. Working with children is very fulfilling at the Detroit Historical Museum. Right now, we're working with Detroit Public Schools, which, as you probably imagine, is our largest school district that we serve being in the city, which is fantastic, because kind of the topics that we cover at our museums, um, really fits perfectly with our third and fourth grade curriculum. So, we serve a lot of third and fourth graders. If you've ever had a third or fourth grader, you live with one, you know, that's where the curiosity is peeking. And it's before they start talking back to you, which is always great. [Laughter] Cause kids are amazing. But my goodness, they can get a little snarky, but it's phenomenal working with, with that age group in particular. So, we talk about early Detroit history, kind of city growth, and the connections of what our city used to be and what it used to look like and the communities that built Detroit that we know of today. And kids get to align, kind of what history the city has, with what they know of our community today. So how their neighborhoods have changed, how neighbors interact with each other, how community growth develops. So, it's really interesting to kind of see them make those, those connections. And so yeah, I'm trying to think of what else you guys would want to know. Um. Do you have any questions?

TC: Sure! so out of curiosity, while you're working from home? What does that look like for you being a program coordinator?

BB: Yeah. Oh, yeah. So, I am the, the managers of education programs, I probably should have mentioned that. [Laughter] Yeah. So right now, we're not serving any schools. Obviously, I'm in the state of Michigan, our state governor has, or is expected to this week to end the school year, to cancel the school year. So, schools will not be back in session before June, which is a real bummer. Because this is kind of like for field trips, this is a peak time for teachers to take their students out of the classroom. So, a lot of the things that my team are working on right now is kind of activation. In terms of like lesson plans, curriculum that we can provide the teachers to share with students. I'm sure lots of people have heard about, like, e-learning. Parents, I'm there for you reach out and tell us what you need. Because we want to make sure that we're helping our parents kind of navigate this very odd time of like homeschooling slash guided schooling, slash e-learning. And so, it's kind of our big thing. We're also developing our first summer camp.

So, this summer, we are going to be having two weeks of summer camp, which I'm really excited about. And because our focus is Detroit of the world, talking about all the different ethnic groups that have moved to the city of Detroit and made it its at home. And so that goes from the [unintelligible] community to the Arab American community to Latinx community, and Polish, Greek, French, German, you name it, we're covering it. So, I'm really, really really excited to kind of highlight that with our students this summer. And maybe provide a little bit of relief [laughter] for our parent this summer as well, right. So. we are going to be doing that. We've also, our Dossin Great Lakes museum just underwent a \$3.2 million outdoor enhancement. If you've ever been to Belle Isle, our museum kind of looked like a water treatment plant from the outside for a while, nice 1960s building. [Laughter] Was very nondescript, unfortunately, so you've kind of updated the outside, it's all usable green space outside, I'm really geeked because we're going to be able to do educational offerings out there now. And kind of highlight the fact that we are literally on Detroit's waterfront. And so, we'll be doing some really fantastic programming out there as well to kind of highlight the natural beauty that is the great lakes and the maritime history that surrounds it. So, kind of what we're working on right now, among other things, when you work in a museum, you wear many hats, so there's, there's always plenty of work to be done. [Laughter] There's, there's not a day that goes by where I'm like, Oh, I'm taking off this hat and putting on another. But yeah, so lots of lots of good work, lots of busy work. Difficult to say the least. And unfortunately, our staff did lose a phenomenal coworker last week... to Coronavirus. So that was a really really heavy hit to our entire team. Because he was an instrumental member of kind of our leadership team but also just a morale and mentor to our member management team here at the museum. So, his name is Marlowe Stoudamire. So, if you've ever heard of him, keep his family and your thoughts and prayers, because he was a phenomenal guy, he did amazing work with our Detroit 67 project a few years ago, so his legacy will continue. But it's been a, it's been a tough couple of weeks, but we're getting there. [Laughter] We're picking ourselves back up.

TC: I can only imagine. Because it's been a while and same time you hop on social media, there's another death and other person who is positive.

BB: Yeah.

TC: It's just growing.

BB: It was crazy because, um, you know, he's, he's only like 43 years old. So, it's like not even in the age group that a lot of the news has been reporting that was affecting, in terms of like the death toll. So, it was just, it was a big surprise. And as far as, you know, myself and other staff, no, there was no underlying health issues which has also been like a very, like, touch, a particular touch point when people are talking about like how people are passing away from it so it was just it was a heavy hit we just did not expect it. But Detroit has definitely been affected by this. I was talking with a co-worker this morning, also on zoom, about you know how, how the nonprofit museum world is going to be able to kind of come back from this. You know we were kind of reaching a nice little peak where people in our community are seeing our nonprofits and museums as valuable resources and now that everything's, and actually visiting us yay! [Laughter] But now that we're going into you know social distancing and isolation you know how hesitant is our community, community going to be to go back out, right? Or is our expectations that everybody is going to be you know getting given the approval to go back out into society and engage with each other and they're just going to run to our museums or is there

going to be assessment sense of hesitancy for being in large groups or in public spaces because the Coronavirus is still catchable. I don't know. I'm interested to kind of see how it falls into place. But it is it's a concern because you know we want people to come visit us.

TC: Right.

BB: But it also gives us museum people the- all of our professionals kind of a better understanding of how we can be museums without walls which is what you're doing right? [Laughter] Right, we're outside of our physical spaces but we're still doing the good work!

TC: Because that's the thing, making your collections accessible and actually doing it, it's easy to talk about it, it's easy to drink the Kool-Aid if you will, that yeah I'm doing, but are you really?

BB: Exactly!

TC: That's where this opportunity because even though it is a tragic time, I think that it's a silver lining for one, you have to look for those in times like this, what can you do to better serve your public without the walls of your museum without the comfort of your galleries and without all the equipment and the luxuries you're used to. Basically here in my apartments very low tech. For a reference point i got my first tv last year and last time I had a TV was 2009.

BB: Nice [Laughter]. Yup! Yup.

TC: I do here with what I've got, that is interesting relevant, and you know it just being able to think of programming you can do but also, this is why I really appreciate our colleagues, your time, and people relative in our field because we understand it, and we're willing to give back and I'm just so grateful for that that I can just could call someone like hey my talk to me like sure.[Laughter]

BB: No, for sure for sure the door is always open. I definitely agree with that is and I think that definitely goes to like, that lends itself to the fact that we are public servants in a way, not in terms of government, God bless those in government, but the fact that we're- we are there to serve right? We are, we're doing at least at the Detroit Historical Society everything we do is in the public shots, the, the artifacts that we have on display and we care for and the archives that I talk about are all part of the city and they're the city's collection and you know we just curate it and offer it and do what we can to show all the amazing treasures that that we have to offer and that really that just represent the stories of Detroit and that's one of the more gratifying things. We actually have a replica of one of the first like, the first car was that was created in the city of Detroit. Sorry I got to talk about us being the motor city, but we have his car was built by Charles Brady King. So we have the replica and we had a student who was in a student group and I was like who made the first car? And usually when you ask a third grader who built the first car, they're gonna say Henry Ford because it's just right and can't throw a stone in the city without hitting something Henry Ford touched right?

TC: Yep.

BB: And I like absolutely love telling them that actually it wasn't and they're like what? I had this one student he's like it was probably LeBron James [Laughter] and I'm like you know what I'm sure LeBron James could build the car you probably would, but it wasn't LeBron James. [Laughter] But it was just fun to kind of see them make their connections right and you know they see value in something that LeBron James might have touched, or you know made or

participated in and it's like no this is the history that you get to participate in and this first car drove on the road that you guys took to get here today and it just it's really cool to see their wonderment of like what? We have? It's the small connections that brings them all together. Um but it's always fun with, with cars because they you know, I got, I got to stump them with the Henry Ford thing [Laughter]

TC: Yes, absolutely.

BB: But no it's uh it's, it's really cool the work that we're able to do and hopefully continue to do here in the future.

TC: Out of curiosity, is that your favorite object that you get to talk about?

BB: Oh man, a favorite object... I don't think it's my favorite actually. I got to think about what my favorite is.

TC: It's hard isn't it?

BB: It is it really, really, really is we get a lot of cool... got a lot of really cool objects we get to talk about. I mean one thing that was probably the only time in my career this would ever happen. You don't really get many of those is in the 1960s our museum put an artifacts on loan to another museum. Um, it was the Dearborn historical museum and it's a scrimshaw horn, outer horn. It's absolutely beautiful and it's dated all the way back to the revolutionary war so it's really a cool piece of history. Um and it got stolen from museum in 1968 right so you know as any good museum person would do, we put it on the registry of stolen goods to the FBI and you know we just kind of kept tabs on that. And then about a year and a half ago, two years ago now the FBI contacted us and the object had gotten, gotten put up for auction.

TC: Whoa.

BB: Right? Like this doesn't happen very often when you actually get to find the things that were stolen from you or from your organization not for me personally, I was not around. So it was just really, really cool so I got to attend the ceremony where the FBI like presented the artifact back to our staff and got to learn a little bit more about the, the history surrounding the artifacts and now it's, it's back on display at our museum so it's just a really cool and you know opportunity to experience that. Um it's a neat object I wouldn't say it's my favorite but it's definitely one of the cooler stories that I have to say um we've got I mean our largest artifact in our collection is a pilot house from a freighter. Like the whole pilot house [Laughter]. That's pretty cool and not a lot of people realize that we have a whole pilot house and it's attached to our museum and kids actually get to go, anybody who visits gets to go inside the pilot house and we have all the original machines and hardware that were inside the pilot house slash bridge depends on what part of it you're in that operated but the, the freighter which is really cool and it's, it's it looks out right over the water so when you're inside of it looking out for water it actually looks like you're on a boat [Laughter]

TC: That's so cool!

BB: It is very neat and that is at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum. It is just a really cool, sorry, it's just a really cool opportunity to learn a little bit more about the Great Lakes. But I really like that one it's a it's a really fun one to go in and, and to talk about with our visitors

TC: That's amazing. [Laughter] Bree is there anything else you'd like to share with our viewers?

BB: If you're ever in Detroit, which I hope is soon please come down and visit our museums. The Dossin Great Lakes Museum is free to all visitors and the Detroit Historical Museum in midtown Detroit which is located next to seven other museums, if you want to make a day of museums and is kind of its paid admission but if you become a member [Laughter] you visit whenever you want and but it's absolutely blast and I when you come asked for me I'd love to come by and say hi to any, any of our visitors for zoom today [Laughter]

TC: Well Bree, thank you so much for your time, it was a lot of fun!

BB: Oh yes, well, continue the good work I love to visit our museums and if you have questions or you're looking for resources don't hesitate to reach out we're here.

TC: I appreciate it.

BB: Yes!

TC: To our viewers this is Evansville museum recording and Bree thank you so much for your time.

BB: Of course!

TC: Thank you.

BB: Bye!