

Transcript for Ricardo Rodriguez Oral History, 2020/03/22

Interviewee: Ricardo Rodriguez

Interviewer: Tori Schendel Cox

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Abstract: Interview of a curator from the Baseball Heritage Museum in Cleveland, Ohio at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The curator provides insight into the museums activities, displays, and displays that are some of their personal favorites. They discuss the shift the museum is making to an online platform to continue to provide a connection to the history of baseball to their local audience and beyond.

Tori Schendel Cox 00:00

Hi, my name is Tori Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia G. Schroeder curator of art the Evansville Museum and today I have a good friend of mine named Ricardo, and we are at the baseball Heritage Museum in Cleveland, and he's going to show us some amazing content and what's going on in our sister state. So, by all means, Ricardo, let's have you take over.

Ricardo Rodriguez 00:26

Thanks, Tori. Hello, all, thanks for the opportunity to talk with everybody today, and just kind of share with you some of the experiences that the Baseball Heritage Museum has, is going through with the recent developments of COVID-19, and the Coronavirus. It's affected us, as well as other museums, all museums, for the most part pretty, pretty gravely. We have been, being a baseball museum, opening day was scheduled to be on this Thursday, the 26th, March 26th. And during the summer, during the winter months, we close down to one, maybe two days a week. So, March 26th was a big day for us because it broadened our operation window to five days a week and everybody was on board and prepped for this. We've been waiting for a long time. And that is now you know, there is no opening in the foreseeable future as far as we know. So, everything's kind of up in the air. But on that point, so it's forced us as well as other museums in the area, and around the country, and throughout the world to rethink how they interact, and how they approach their audiences. So, one of the main things that we've-we initiated is that we took to our existing social media platforms and asked our existing audience how they see the coming months, it as far as what they want to see from us. As far as content goes, we've gotten a pretty good response. They want to see YouTube content, they want to see interviews similar to this. We are actively staging- like story times- where we have interpreters read children-oriented books to different schools for like a virtual field trip type feel for those that are in homeschooled at this point. So, that's

pretty exciting and again, it gives our interpreters and our director of programming and outreach the opportunity to fill this much needed role at this time, virtually so nobody has to interact. Everyone can stay in their home offices or on their couch and still really fill a very valuable and needed role in today's socially distance climate. Yeah, so, let me see, on top of that, we've also the-the-the forced closures have given us the opportunity to address some of the larger projects that have been kind of shelved in our gallery. Like I saw you Tori, you are taking the time to get some cleaning done in your-your galleries and it's similar to what we've been doing. We've been rethinking some of our exhibits, restaging some moving cases around. We are, I have been installing a-an exhibit for the 1920's Cleveland Indians World Series victory and if you take a walk with me real quick, you can see over my over my corner. I don't know. Can you see me?

Tori Schendel Cox 04:27

I can see you and the display case. Oh, looks like—

Ricardo Rodriguez 04:33

Okay, sorry. I lost you there for a second. But over-over my shoulder right here, I had the stanchions built because we're an historic structure. So, we can't put anything on the walls. So, it's a-it's a very challenging difficulty because, you know, we need places to hang stuff. So, I had our carpenter build these-these stanchions to look like the grandstand-back-the backstop at the grandstand of Lee Park with the fencing and the-the-the wooden bottoms. That's what had been behind the home plate. So, it's-it's a not an exact replica by any means, but it's loosely inspired by that. So, I will be spending the rest of the days today, you know, arranging and hanging the-the photos that we have and hang label, and so on filling the-filling the case with artifacts from the 1920's World Series. And that is all, of course in hopes that somebody can come see it soon. But if not, you know, this is this goes on for you know, another month or so, we would definitely that-definitely consider putting that on YouTube as a virtual-virtual experience of some sort. I guess I'll have to, you know, re-address that or addressed that when-when that time comes, but it'll-it'll be constantly in the back of my mind right now going forward how I can address that. Now I can present that to, you know, our virtual audience, which I guess it could be, you know, noted that this all can, should be a lesson for us that we should constantly be thinking about how we can translate our physical-our physical exhibits into something that's more accessible to a wider region and even globally, you know, how can we get these artifacts out to a wider audience? And yeah, I think-I think that it's easy to say that we want to make our museums accessible. And sometimes it's easy to get caught up in the physicality of the artifacts and your gallery and the-the immediate space that you're dealing with and forget about the broader picture and the wider audiences that you shouldn't really be thinking about serving. And with that said, we have been thinking about different ways that we can produce richer, more contextual content, but still under the-the sense of immediacy, and that we needed in the now without losing quality and just putting up junk you know. So, that's also something that is a-is a-is-it a challenge for us... smaller staff, limited by, like most museums, our resources are

very limited. And yeah, I think-I think we will-we will come out on top of this and it's been-it's been a good sign that our audiences are understanding. They understand where we're coming from what we're trying to do. And, you know, we don't have the huge budgets of you know, some of these larger, more well-known institutions.

Tori Schendel Cox 08:44

Absolutely.

Ricardo Rodriguez 08:46

What else? We are trying to initiate an oral history initiative, where people via, people who have been quarantined, or stuck at home, shelter in place, whatever may be wherever we know what part of the country you're in, can upload oral histories regarding their experiences at Lee Park or with the Cleveland Indians and then we would, you know, produce them into a small, small clip and upload them to YouTube. I think it's important to say that we aren't a Cleveland Indians Museum. And while we do have some miners funding from the Indians, this is a separate entity and devoted to the-the varying cultures that are wrapped up in the-the history of baseball. So, a lot of people come in here understand that Lee Park is the home of the original home of the Cleveland Indians and immediately they-they think it's a Cleveland Indians Museum. And while we do have a lot of Cleveland Indian artifacts, you know, it goes beyond that. And we-we showcase Negro League Baseball. It's also 100th-100th anniversary of the founding of the Negro league that's also something important that we've been showcasing. We were playing at showcasing this-this summer, women's- we-we showcased the women's role in baseball, and you know, everyone immediately thinks of League of Their Own. And while we do have League of Their Own artifacts, we-we have some other interesting objects that have to do with women's baseball, Hispanicly, and also something pretty unique to Cleveland and the Midwest is Sandlot, or industrial league baseball. So, everyone knows the movie Sandlot. But there was actually sandlot leagues that played on dirt-dirt-dirt fields, and they were coined The Sandlot leagues because they were not always super well organized. But more like industrial leagues were a little-a little better-a little better organized and usually sponsored by-by a company similar to, I don't like to be the correlation, but I will like a softball league. You know, a company sponsors a company or a bar, or something sponsors a softball league that's similar to the industrial baseball but oftentimes, the difference, the main differences, oftentimes these players would actually go on to play in the major leagues because it was like almost a subset of the minor leagues. And we have quite-quite a nice collection of sandlot uniforms here. Let's walk over here. Let's see if we can see we got these are sand line, sandlot uniforms. We got one. This is a Ford-Ford sponsored, this team. And similarly, we got the Wenham Truckers and this is the oldest one that we have that's still under cover, but I will show you this is the, it's probably in reverse on your screen. But the Tellings-Tellings was an ice cream company that made ice cream in Cleveland, Ohio and I don't know if you can tell what this is, this wool, it's a wool Tellings jersey very sick. And it's-it's hard to even imagine playing baseball in mid-July in a-in a wool jersey like that. And lastly, I think one of the

things that we've decided to refocus our-our priorities to is addressing our digital collection. When I first started here as assistant curator, I took on the task of digitizing our collection, and I started with our 2-D artifacts. And through collaboration with the Cleveland Public Library, they let us use their digitizing facilities, and right now have about five or 600 objects digitized. But you know, it's more than just taking a picture, as you know, it's adding all that valuable metadata on the back end which makes that collection valuable and searchable. We want people to know what they're looking for and what they're looking at. So, that's one of the main projects that I can do when I'm sitting at home and working in my home office. And doesn't-doesn't require me to be in the museum. So, that I'm really looking forward to launching that within the next month or so and having the Baseball Heritage Museum digital collection accessible on the Cleveland Public Library's sports Research Center. So, look out for that. Do you have any questions for me Tori? I'd love to answer some or...

Tori Schendel Cox 14:39

Well, it's really good to see what you're doing. I love the fact that we can see some artifacts. Now as a curator we always have our one particular favorite piece that we like to brag about. Can you show our viewers something that you're working on right now that you'd like to brag about?

Ricardo Rodriguez 14:54

My favorite piece in the collection is actually right here right next to me. This is the, hope you can see it it's an original end seat for Leaf-for Leaf Park and there, this is the only one that we know of that is in this kind of a condition and you can see it's an end seat, because- sorry about that glare, but um, see if you can see the in the video, only the end seats had the finial here. And in the final, you can see a baseball bat, a baseball right there, and a glove. Try to get a little closer in there. But yeah, this this angle on here. And we also, we have-we have eight-eight original Leaf Park seats ranging from field box seats-box seats and then this end seat right here. And there's only about 17 known to exist. So, we're-we're proud to have almost half of them. So, we're still trying to get-get more every once in a while, they come in, somebody had one in their garage for a while. And you know, the grandfather was under the demolition crew and he had on the front porch. It's how we get a lot of our stuff is passed down through their family. And we got these oral histories attached to these objects. And, like, you know, as far as like cultural history goes, or cultural heritage history, there are objects, the oral histories often are what brings value to these pieces. Anything can have historical value, but it needs a story to go with it. And I often get, get asked, "Oh, you work in the baseball Museum?" "Hey, how much does baseball worth?" or, "How much is this baseball card worth?" And I have to say time and time again I go I'm not so much knowledge in monetary value. Well, I can, you know, give you a loose idea of its rarity and but I'm more interested in cultural value and historical value. And that often branches off into a whole set or a separate conversation. You know, somebody water bottle that they drank out of during, you know, the, you know, game five of a certain World Series would be much more valuable to me than a Babe Ruth-a Babe Ruth signed baseball, which there's, you know, quite a few out there in existence. So,

yeah, attaching those stories to the objects is really what I like to do and is a time-consuming task often researching, you know. This, researching these stories and making sure everything adds up and just, you know, putting out the best-the best quality, contextual content that we possibly can and having it be credible.

Tori Schendel Cox 18:30

Absolutely, that beautiful p-word for curators provenance.

Ricardo Rodriguez 18:33

Provenance, provenance. Absolutely. Yeah, that's a long, long way around saying that we got to prove that provenance. And sometimes, you know, memories are great, but they are not infallible. And oftentimes, we-we run into that, you know, "No, no, I insist. I insist it was this game. I know. It was for sure. And this person was playing and..." You know a little bit of research and, yeah, that's-that's just disproven. It's always not fun telling somebody that, "No, no, I'm sorry. That's not-that's not exactly quite how it happened. Great story, but it's not it's not true." Or actually, "It happened this way." You know, so...

Tori Schendel Cox 19:24

The fisherman's tale.

Ricardo Rodriguez 19:26

That's right. Yes. It was this me? No, I really. Yeah. So.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:38

Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Ricardo Rodriguez 19:42

No, I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today. If you or anybody else watching, this ever in Cleveland, Ohio, please stop in the Baseball Heritage Museum. Say hi. Look around. Ask for me, Ricardo. And yeah, I'd love to chat with you.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:59

Excellent. Well, again, Ricardo, thank you for your time. And for anyone watching, this is another video for our cultural insights, interviews in the creative sector and this is a recording by the Evansville Museum. So, we hope to see you and hope to have you guys follow us and continue on as we have this dialogue. So again, Ricardo, thank you and bye for now.

Ricardo Rodriguez 20:19

See ya.