

Cunningham Children's Home: Preserving the Past Through University-Community Partnership

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Community Archives “are the grassroots activities of documenting, recording, and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control, and ownership of the project is essential” (Flinn, 2007). It is the aggregation of shared interests, identity, and memories by a group of individuals in the community. One such project is the Cunningham Children’s Home Archives in Urbana, Illinois. This project, initiated by CCH in collaboration with University of Illinois graduate students, preserves the memories of former residents through the archivalization of photographs, audio-visual materials, and papers. This project exemplifies the need of a local institution as well as the need of graduate students in engaging to the community. Thus, in this poster, we will describe the collaborative work between CCH and the university through its graduate students.

CCH is a former orphanage and is now a residential treatment center dedicated to helping children, youths, and their families. The history of CCH since its inception in the late 1800s includes memories of staff and former residents. These memories are represented in photographs, audio-video tapes, art works, and letters. These materials document part of many people’s lives and are, often, the only memories of their childhood. Additionally, CCH has been an institution in Champaign County for over 100 years and is a significant part of the community. Hence our efforts together with CCH staff are valuable to the preservation of history of the local community and to the memories of many people directly and indirectly part of the children’s home.

So, in this poster, we will describe the first stage of the project, which includes inventory of materials and recommendations for long-term preservation as well as discussion of the future of the project. The first stage of the project involves the assessment of the photograph collection in the archives. The photograph collection is the bulk of the materials at the CCH archives and is heavily accessed by staff and former residents. We also set a short-term goal for the first stage, which was to establish the recommendations for organizing and preserving the current photograph collection and future photograph collections of the archives. Ultimately, the long-term goal of the project is to have the materials, both non-digital and born-digital materials, properly archived for the future.

This project is a great resource for university students to learn and experience community archiving, collaborations with community organizations, and community engagement. At the same time, the community partner benefits in the work by students and the resources the university can offer. Thus, this project is truly a partnership between the community and the university.

Reference:

Flinn, Andrew. 2007. "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2: 151-176.