

Doing History

with Megan van Frank, Utah Humanities

Megan van Frank is Director of the Center for Community Heritage at Utah Humanities in Salt Lake City, where she brings years of experience with cultural collections and project management into her field services work helping local organizations preserve and share their community heritage.

Tell us about your education and work background.

My background includes study in history, anthropology, politics, and museum studies. I have an International Relations degree from Mount Holyoke College and a long-term interest in understanding how local stories connect to larger narratives. I credit a strong humanities education for the skills needed to carry me through such a varied career. My first real job was at the MIT Center for International Studies running professional education programs for senior members of the U.S. national security community. As an introduction to in-service adult learning, that experience taught me about putting together relevant curricula and gave me invaluable project management skills.

When I moved to Australia, I wanted to learn more about the Aboriginal history of my new community, so got involved with archaeological site stewardship, produced local histories, and volunteered with Aboriginal groups. I also started volunteering at the Australian Museum's anthropology department, where they had a wonderful Native American collection they didn't know much about. Because I did, volunteering eventually turned into a full-time job in collections management, both there and later at Sydney University Museums. Both of those institutions taught me that at their best, museums can be more than venues for public education, but should be proactive partners with communities in the stewardship of material culture. Stumbling into museum work was happy serendipity.

How did you start working with a state humanities council?

When I moved back to Salt Lake City, I managed cultural collections at the Natural History Museum of Utah and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Then this job at Utah Humanities came up. They had an IMLS grant to provide exhibition training to small museums, so needed someone with a museum background, plus outreach and public history experience. Saying yes to this job opened up a whole world of field services work, that is, providing capacity-building opportunities to small cultural organizations. I help folks learn how to care for collections, curate exhibits, and reach their visitors with thoughtful community programming. The underlying work is helping people build stronger cultural institutions that are responsive to community needs. What this means day-to-day is a lot of content development, teaching, mentoring, event management, people hustling, and relationship brokering. My role is helping bridge resources in the state with organizations that need them.

What do state humanities councils do?

State councils are affiliates of the National Endowment for the Humanities. As specialists in public humanities, every council responds differently to the needs of their state, but all offer great connections to experts, partners, resources, and funding. Utah Humanities provides public programs



Megan van Frank (center in black shirt) works collaboratively with local, state, and national partners to help Utahns preserve and celebrate their community heritage. She led the team for *The Way We Worked* tour of Utah, which won a 2018 AASLH Leadership in History Award.

that focus on heritage, literature, education, as well as grants for local initiatives. Our small staff could not fulfill our state-wide mandate without working closely with local organizations that want to improve their communities through the humanities.

Tell us about some of your recent projects.

Utah Humanities has been shifting its program approach from the idea of a lectern—people being passively enriched by knowledgeable experts—to that of a campfire, where folks are actively engaged in the creation of projects that matter to them. This philosophy informs all my

work. For example, a workshop series about creating an interpretive exhibit doesn't stop at training, but incorporates step-by-step mentored support for participants developing an actual exhibit at their own institution. We also provide training in oral history, collections stewardship, and are in the midst of a two-year pilot working intensively with a group of small history museums to help them succeed in the six areas of StEPs [AASLH's Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations] practice. I'm partnering with our state Office of Museum Services to orchestrate the curriculum, participants, mentors, instructors—we're all learning what it takes for small museums to gain traction in this work. I also spearhead Utah's Museum on Main Street program, where we tour a Smithsonian exhibition to several communities around the state. Host sites augment the national exhibition with local programming and learn how to leverage the experience in ways that

strengthen their organizations. Next year we're touring the *Water! Ways* exhibition, so I'm currently solidifying our partners, confirming scholars and staff, and beginning to develop content. All of my work is collaborative—whether it's alongside local partners to turn our training into something tangible or with other state-level agencies to provide field services—and none of us can achieve our missions alone. I so appreciate my field services colleagues here in Utah, as well as those involved with the AASLH Field Services Alliance around the country; all are smart, diligent professionals dedicated to strengthening the fabric of state and local history. Really, this is the coolest job—my bird's eye view of the state shows me the passion people have for their local history and communities. I'm awed by the amazing things they can accomplish with a bit of support, and it's truly my privilege to provide that support and get out of the way.

What advice do you have for those starting out in public history?

For someone coming into the field, I'd emphasize that it's not all about knowing history. Museum work is more complex than it looks on the surface; it's not just about telling stories and playing with the stuff. Sustaining institutions capable of preserving and productively using collections involves paying attention to things like mission, governance, and operations. Do you know how to manage a budget? Write funding proposals? Find and keep volunteers? Build effective partnerships? I'd advise that person to look for ways to gain a variety of skills, volunteer a lot, and get on-the-job training. Also, get involved in the field to develop and nurture professional connections. And finally, be genuinely open to new opportunities—you never know when saying "yes" will change your world! ●