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Profile: Erin Johnson Archivist, My Sisters' Place Library Assistant, Western University

Erin Johnson is a library assistant at the D.B. Weldon Library at Western University in London, Ontario. In this issue of *Partnership*, we profile her volunteer work with an organization called My Sisters' Place (MSP), under the umbrella of the Canadian Mental Health Association Middlesex. Erin is creating an archive to preserve the history of

My Sisters' Place and the women who are members of its community.

[My Sisters' Place](#) describes its mission as:

We seek to reduce homelessness for women and to support women to find and keep safe, affordable housing. At the same time, we connect women with CMHA Middlesex mental health services such as Case Management, Clinical Services, and Community Programs.

Describing the project, Erin wrote:

The documents scattered among the offices of the busy workers of MSP have many stories to tell. Some tell stories of mental illness and of homelessness. Others tell stories of violence against women or what it means to be hungry.

Some of these stories reflect a population of women strengthened through their ties to the community at MSP. Others still show the power of community partnerships in initiating change.

These stories found within the documents of MSP have archival value. That is, they provide evidence of the lived experiences of women within the community and are of value for academics and activists alike who seek to develop our

collective knowledge of women's history. Preserving these documents and the history they represent would also reflect the significance of the lives touched by My Sisters' Place.

I sat down with Erin to discuss her experiences with the archive, why she was drawn to this project, and what she's gained and learned from her work.

Tell us a little about your work at My Sisters' Place. How did you begin the project?

I was in library school. I was looking at volunteer opportunities that were available, and none of them were really speaking to me; they weren't touching more interests than just library science.

I had connections at My Sisters' Place. My Sisters' Place is a place that sees anywhere between 110 and 140 women each day. They provide hot meals, social services, help with addiction, help with housing. It's a phenomenal organization.

I set up a meeting to propose starting an inventory of their records. I had to write a proposal, an anticipated budget, and a spiel of why she thought it was necessary. They loved it. I created my own volunteer position.

What drew you to volunteering? Have you done other library-related volunteer work?

Yes, I had done volunteer work at the London Public Library with the Children's Rocks program (summer programming for kids) and ESL Conversational English. For this project, I wanted something different.

I like to be busy, I am a member of the community, and I like to give back. It feels like that's what I'm supposed to do. I'm a member of the community so I contribute to it, and in this case, it's how I can use my expertise as a trained professional, as an archivist. It's probably the Girl Guide in me a little bit. I was a hardcore Girl Guide.

Are you local to London?

Originally, I am from the small town of Eugenia, Ontario, but I have lived in London since 2002, so I consider myself a local at this point.

Tell me a bit about your background in libraries. Where did you wind up after library school?

I have worked at Western Libraries since September of 2009. I started as a casual assistant in Interlibrary loans during my undergrad degree. I became a full-time library assistant in Serial Acquisitions in April 2013.

What made you think about starting an archive?

Susan Macphail, the director of My Sisters' Place, and I talked about the interesting documents they have, scattered and in boxes stored in the basement. The people there are busy working with the women and don't have time to organize their files. The workers pulled them all into one spot, and then I started to go through them.

In a blog post I wrote, "The documents have many stories to tell, but they also tell the story of successful non-profit organizations and how to create community partnerships to initiate change." They're important documents for people researching women's studies, justice, sociology, and to researchers and activists. They provide evidence of the lived experiences of women in the community and develop the collective history of women in the community.

Women's voices are often not heard, and these are marginalized women so it's even more the case. This repository will include their voices, testimony, artwork, records of fundraising efforts, and celebrations of lives for women who have passed on.

That must be heartbreaking.

Some of it was sad to look at, but some of it was the opposite—letters from women expressing their gratitude, or stories that show the impact that My Sisters' Place had on their lives, helping them to regain control of their lives and realize their potential. There's this great quote by Kären Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher (1999): "These tangible commitments to documenting the lives of women make it clear that women's lives and experiences are valued by society." It shows that we value the lives of women.

How did you get started? Was it overwhelming?

The workers put all the documents they thought belonged in the collection into a room and gave me an empty file cabinet, and I slowly, one document by one, made an inventory that listed key information. Then I marked where that was within the drawer filing cabinet. From there we arranged them into series and wrote the description. We used the principles of archival description and Rules for Archival Description (RAD). I don't know if you know this—I had two MLIS student volunteers that resulted from a guest lecture I did with you at FIMS (Western's Faculty of Information and Media Studies).

That's fantastic! I remember a few students coming forward. What did they work on?

When they first volunteered, I sat with them and asked what contributions they thought they would make based on what skills and interests they had.

Kelly Thoreson focused on finding grants that we could apply for. She emailed me and said, "It is a great project! I was really happy to be a part of documenting a small piece of these women's histories . . . it's a project worth spotlighting."

Carly Diab focused on organizing the newspaper clippings collection and some inventory work. She said, "I found volunteering on the project was really rewarding and meaningful. I feel grateful to have had the opportunity to gain practical experience with concepts I was learning in my archival studies class in such an important and inspiring organization. The documents that outline the history of My Sisters' Place show the care and perseverance that went into establishing and continuing to provide the necessary services and space to support their community. The documents also demonstrate the beneficial impact the organization has had on the women who visit MSP. "

I love that you used RAD and archival principles. Did that come out of your school work?

Yes, and I used a book called *The Lone Arranger* (Zamon, 2012). It was recommended to me in archival classes so I bought it.

I should note ours is not actually an archive because we don't have the proper storage conditions. We did try to use acid-free paper, but it's more a collection.

However, once it's organized, it's accessible, and then we have a product to present for grant funding, to try to get archival boxes. We have some donated boxes—about nine banker boxes in total. Half are acid-free boxes that were donated by the Sisters of St. Joseph Archives. In the history of My Sisters' Place, they had a huge role in the origin of this organization and the funding. In the future perhaps we could transfer this collection, since they have the facilities there.

We have yet to receive funding, but My Sisters' Place does take donations. We are always looking for donated archival supplies, things like acid-free boxes and file folders or polypropylene sleeves. If anyone reading the interview wants to donate, they can email donate@cmhamiddlesex.ca and CMHA can then put them in touch with me. The official donation page is here: <https://cmhamiddlesex.ca/about-cmha/msp/supporting-my-sisters-place/>

What are the different documents you've worked with?

They range from textual records to DVDs of interviews that aired on CBC, VHS interviews, event posters, videos of events in the community (for example, they do a fashion show every year to raise money). We've archived posters and photographs that are restricted.

Then there's the testimony. The two elements I think are important are the testimony and the records of celebrations of life. They hold a memorial for the women who frequented My Sisters' Place when they pass on. This is an opportunity for other women

they've connected with in the community to have closure and celebrate that person's life.

I also really like the scrapbook collection with all of the different articles that have been written about My Sisters' Place over the last ten years, it's really cool to see their impact on the community.

Tell me about your “day job” with Western University.

I work in Research and Instructional Services for the Weldon Library in a library assistant role. I work the service desk, answer reference questions, and do some instruction in class.

How has this work influenced your career choices at all or do you see it as separate?

I've never actually worked as an archivist, I've only ever volunteered as an archivist, so I see it as outside my work, but definitely increasing my skills in the archival area. And really in my previous job in metadata, there are correlating elements between archival description and metadata work.

What would you tell a library or archives worker interested in getting involved in volunteer work?

From my experience, if you can't find the volunteer opportunity that you're looking for, just create it. If you have a truly great idea, then somebody else will see its greatness too. Find that partnership. Talk about your ideas, get them out there.

I've also learned that it's not always as easy to do what you want to do in an organization. You might have the support of many, but you need to gain the support of all.

To do that, I've been trying to talk about the importance, talk up the idea of it. I wrote a blog post. I'd hold little meetings to show the staff where I was at. The other thing I've learned is that maybe good things come to those who persist. This project started in 2012. I was only dedicating an hour a week to it consistently for years before I came up with a final product, which still isn't final. It's never final. There's always more to do.

References

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