Chapter 25
Response to the Unthinkable: Collecting and Archiving Condolence and Temporary Memorial Materials following Public Tragedies

Ashley Maynor
University of Tennessee – Knoxville, USA

ABSTRACT

From Oklahoma City to Columbine to the Boston Marathon finish line, individuals around the world have responded to violent mass deaths publicized in mainstream media by creating ever-larger temporary memorials and sending expressions of sympathy—such as letters, flowers, tokens, and mementos—by the tens and even hundreds of thousands. Increasingly, there is an expectation that some, if not all, of the condolence and temporary memorial items will be kept or saved. This unusual and unexpected task of archiving so-called “spontaneous shrines” often falls to libraries and archives and few protocols, if any, exist for librarians and archivists in this role. This chapter aims to provide insight and guidance to librarians or archivists who must develop their own unique response to unanticipated and unthinkable tragedies. Response strategies are covered in both a discussion of the history and literature surrounding temporary memorials and three disaster case studies: the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire Tragedy, the 2007 Virginia Tech Campus Shooting, and the 2012 Sandy Hook School Tragedy.

We’ve all become a nation of hoarders.
– Dr. Erika Doss, American University

INTRODUCTION

From Oklahoma City to Columbine, from Aurora to the Boston Marathon finish line, individuals around the world have responded to violent mass deaths publicized in mainstream media by creating ever-larger temporary memorials and sending expressions of sympathy—such as letters, flowers, tokens, and mementos—by the tens and even hundreds of thousands. Increasingly, there is an expectation that some, if not all, of the condolence and temporary memorial items will be kept or saved in some way for future generations to look back upon to help document the event and
the public outpouring of grief and sympathy that followed. This unusual and unexpected task of archiving so-called “spontaneous shrines” often falls to libraries and archives. Few protocols, if any, exist to guide librarians and archivists with this monumental undertaking, which is further complicated by each tragedy’s uniqueness as well as the singular character of the event’s surrounding community. Acknowledging that singularity and thus eschewing the notion of a standard protocol or tragedy response, this chapter instead aims to provide insight and guidance to librarians or archivists who might find themselves in the position of developing their own unique response to unanticipated and unthinkable tragedies.

Responses to these kinds of events are covered in both a discussion of the history and literature surrounding temporary memorials and three disaster case studies: the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire Tragedy, the 2007 Virginia Tech Campus Shooting, and the 2012 Sandy Hook School Tragedy. Drawing inspiration from these distinctive cases, this author proposes some general “best practices” and a list of essential questions for librarians and archivists to consider when responding to the unthinkable.

THE STORY OF THE STUFF: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Western world, spontaneous shrines are a “primary way to mourn those who have died a sudden or shocking death, and to acknowledge the circumstances of the deaths” (Santino, 2006, p. 5). Coined by folklorist Jack Santino (1992) in an article about death ritual in Northern Ireland, the term “spontaneous shrines” refers to such phenomena as the Mourning Wall at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, the panoply of messages on plywood barriers and missing persons posters at “Ground Zero” in New York City following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, and even the temporary roadside memorials and urban corner shrines of teddy bears, votive candles, and cards following automobile accidents or drive-by shootings.

This practice was first heavily theorized in Santino’s seminal book, Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death (2006) and “spontaneous shrine” has hence become both a widely used and contested term. Newer theorists, such as Doss (2008, 2010) and Sturken (2007), opt instead for the phrase “temporary memorial,” due to both the often secular dimensions of this kind of commemoration and to emphasize the ephemeral but not necessarily spontaneous nature of the practice. Other common terms include “performative memorials,” “makeshift memorials,” “ephemeral memorials,” and “spontaneous memorials.”

While memorial practice itself is millennia old, the contemporary practice of creating large-scale temporary memorials in the Western world exploded in the 1990s, growing and evolving alongside the 24-hour news cycle and birth of the Internet, and is largely characterized by leaving teddy bears, cards, candles, and other items at sites of violent death (Milne, 2009). Much of the theoretical attention, at least in the United States, has focused on national tragedies, such as the Oklahoma City bombing (Brown, 1999; Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998; Sturken, 2007) and 9/11 attacks (Gardner, 2002; Haskins, 2007; K. Jones, Zagacki, & Lewis, 2007; Otto, 2014), and to a lesser extent roadside memorials (Clark, 2006; Santino, 2006), the bonfire collapse at Texas A&M (Grider, 2002), and the shooting at Columbine High School (Grider, 2007; Spencer & Muschert, 2009). This existing body of literature focuses heavily on anthropological and ethnographic practices. More recent publications additionally explore the implications for cultural studies and material culture, including the dimension of public affect versus private mourning—how these memorials serve as repositories for...