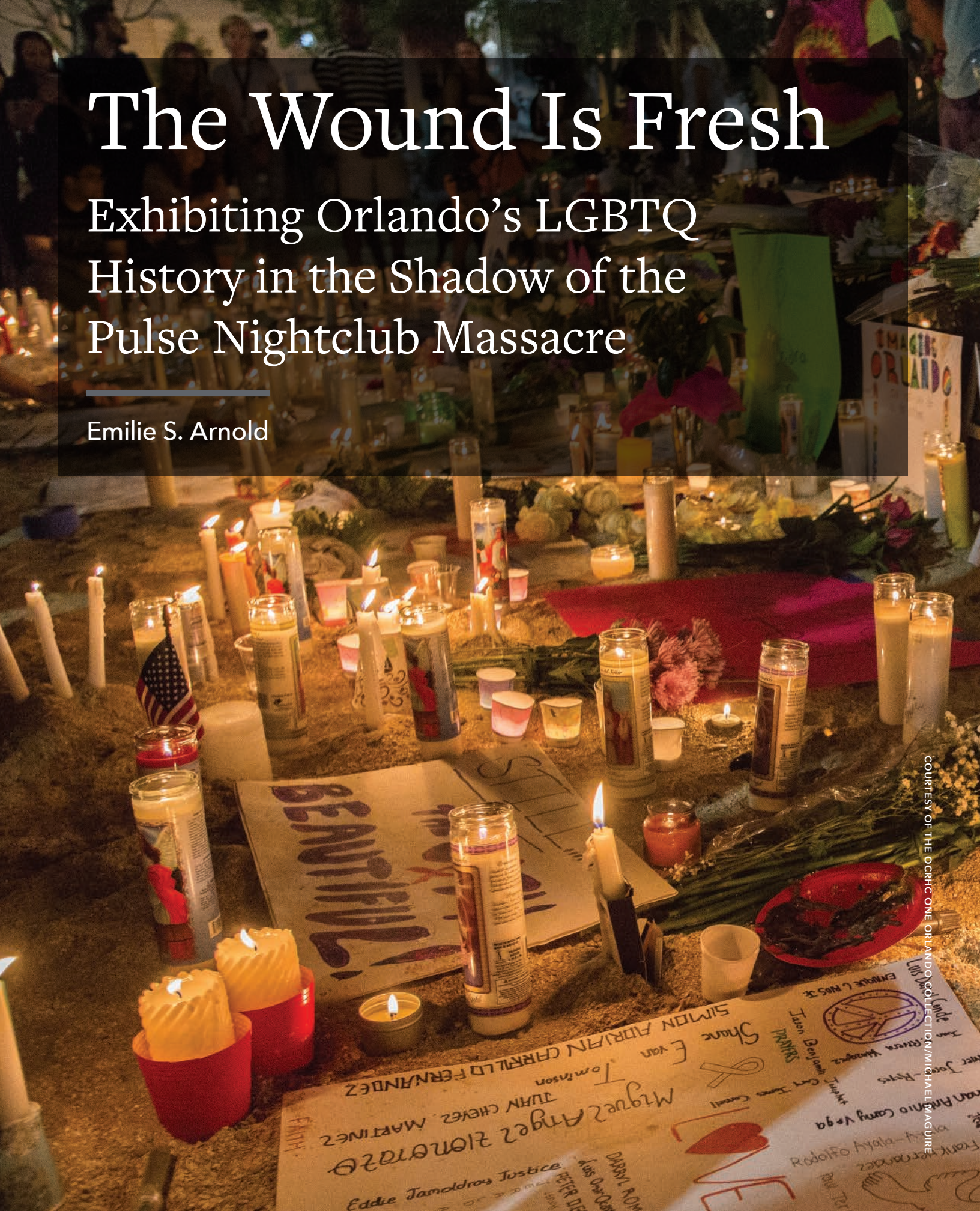


The Wound Is Fresh

Exhibiting Orlando's LGBTQ History in the Shadow of the Pulse Nightclub Massacre

Emilie S. Arnold



COURTESY OF THE ORCHIC ONE ORLANDO COLLECTION/MICHAEL MAGUIRE



fig. 1. This image from June 13, 2016 shows the memorial honoring Pulse Nightclub victims as it formed at Orlando's Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts during that night's vigil. History center staff began maintaining the site and collecting fragile items on June 25.

When a homegrown terrorist murders 49 and injures 68 at a popular gay nightclub a mile and a half away from the history museum where you work, what do you do?¹

Faced with an event of unfathomable violence and bigotry – and an outpouring of material tributes from around the world – the exhibitions and collections staff of the Orange County Regional History Center could not stand idle (fig. 1 – intro image). Pushing into the field to document and collect the event, and to assist our community in its grieving, carried deep importance to each of us personally and professionally. For years, our museum had struggled for greater visibility and intersectionality in collections and exhibitions; our response to this tragedy thrust us into the spotlight and showed our public what reactive and inclusive museum practice looks like.

As assistant curator of exhibitions, I was already deep in preparations to bring Orlando's queer history to life in a barely-publicized exhibition opening in just four months. The June 12, 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting changed the exhibition, the museum, and each of us. Our work in the aftermath of the shooting is the finest our museum has seen in years – and we accomplished it through a storm of high public emotion, local politics, media scrutiny,

¹ Disbursement records from the One Orlando Fund, which distributed memorial donations to those affected and their families, indicate 49 deceased, 37 hospitalized, and 31 who received outpatient treatment.

fig. 2. In our initial, pre-Pulse design, this rainbow treatment filled the walls of the entire *Pride, Prejudice & Protest* exhibition. Stories of pride (edged with red) made the guest lift his or her head; stories of prejudice (edged with blue) cast the eyes down to the bottom stripes. Stories of protest, coded green, rested between the two. After June 12, we designated two dark walls as interpretive spaces for themes of pain: the AIDS epidemic and the Pulse Nightclub shooting.

difficult timeframes, an already full exhibitions schedule, and the record heat of a merciless Orlando summer. We hope that our work as warriors for preservation and inclusion offers touchstones to benefit *your* museum should your community face the unimaginable.

Before the Storm

The Orange County Regional History Center is a medium-sized public/private nonprofit history museum. Located since 2000 in the heart of downtown Orlando and operating with a staff of 25 people, we interpret 10,000 years of Central Florida history. The museum hosts two or three temporary exhibitions per year, with lineups that incorporate both traveling exhibitions from other institutions and also exhibitions developed in-house through collaborations with community partners. In late 2015, our director agreed for us to team with the GLBT History Museum of Central Florida – a virtual museum – to create an exhibition about Orlando's queer history.

I thought this too good to be true. In the five years I had curated history center exhibitions, I approached every project – as I feel every curator of history should – with a mission to present social history beyond white, privileged narratives. For topics like air conditioning, *Gone With the Wind*, Florida baseball, and the citrus industry, history center exhibitions included and explored African American, Latin American, and working-class experiences, adding critical dimensions to their interpretation, although punishing schedules limited community input on these projects to a handful of oral histories rather than public collecting.



However, social issues had never headlined an exhibition at the history center the way a study of queer history would. Further, the bulk of our funding comes from county government; politicians allergic to even minor controversy can learn of sensitive projects and interfere with curation. This has engendered an institutional culture where flying under the radar by exhibiting “safe” and crowd-pleasing topics is preferable to considering difficult ones. Although I worried that permission to create this exhibition did not ensure free rein to present it, chief curator Pam Schwartz and I nevertheless jumped in with both feet. We met our collaborators David Bain and Joel Strack, president and vice president of the GLBT History Museum. They were as giddy as we were.

While we understood Orlando as a queer-friendly city where Disney World hosts “Gay Days,” the LGBTQ history timeline that David and Joel gave us showed that this hard-won acceptance was long in coming. For example: same-sex sexual activity continued to be illegal in Florida until 2003’s *Lawrence v. Texas* Supreme Court decision, and from 1961 to 1965, a state program legally removed suspected homosexual teachers, professors, and students from Florida’s public schools and universities.²

The timeline presented the community’s subsequent experience of transgressions, setbacks, and pride in and around Orlando, paralleling gay community histories throughout the United States in its chronicle of gay businesses, support organizations, activism, the AIDS epidemic, legal battles, protests, and episodes of anti-gay violence.³

For the exhibition, Pam planned to categorize each story under one of three titles – “pride,” “prejudice,” or “protest” – for mounting on a graphic, 83-foot-long rainbow banner (fig. 2). As this had been a blind spot in our own collection, the photographs and artifacts we used to support this story came from the collection of the GLBT History Museum, with some additional images from newspaper archives. We titled our exhibition *Pride, Prejudice & Protest: GLBT History of Greater*

2 You can read the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee’s infamous “Purple Pamphlet” on Archive.org (<https://archive.org/details/ReportJan1964>). This discriminatory document intended to teach Floridians ways to recognize and avoid homosexuals.

3 These organizations and experiences reflect those of queer communities throughout the nation. In 2016, the National Parks Service released a study entitled *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/lgbtqthemestudy.htm), a useful resource that defines the commonalities of the American LGBTQ experience and establishes a context for telling place-based LGBTQ histories.



fig. 3. Pulse Nightclub on July 21, 2016 (top), the first day the collection team visited, and August 10 (bottom), after almost three weeks of history center maintenance and thousands of visitors. Note the bilingual signs in the foreground; they informed visitors what would happen to the items they left.

Orlando and set an opening date of October 1, 2016 to coincide with “Come Out With Pride,” Orlando’s LGBTQ pride festival.⁴

However, we soon learned that the history center’s senior staff did not intend to publicize it. By hosting the exhibition, the history center “fulfilled” its obligation to the LGBTQ community. But by doing so silently, it ensured that few dissenters would know to be outraged. There would be no official opening gallery event, the museum would not advertise the

4 Within our exhibition, we used the acronym “GLBT” instead of the more modernly accepted “LGBTQ.” We posted a sign explaining, “GLBT” stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender. This exhibition uses the term ‘GLBT,’ which is interchangeable with ‘LGBT,’ because Orlando’s community established organizations using that acronym decades ago. There are other variations of this term that add the letter ‘Q’ for ‘queer’ or ‘questioning’ and the letter ‘I’ for ‘intersex.’ All of these acronyms intend to encompass a diversity of sexuality and gender-based cultures.”

exhibition in local media, and we would not hold our customary press day. I had been right to be worried: although Orange County’s voters traditionally support liberal causes in conservative Florida, the administration feared critical push-back from politicians or a vocal constituency. Of course, this also meant that hardly anyone would visit and learn from the important exhibition at all. As curators, Pam and I were bitterly disappointed.

Orlando Strong, Orlando United: A New Collection Initiative

The early hours of June 12, 2016 changed our world. After last call on Latin night at Pulse, a popular gay nightclub, a gunman opened fire, slaughtering and injuring dozens. The death toll quickly rose to 49 young club-goers killed and more than 50 wounded. This, said reporters, was the most lethal mass shooting in modern American history* and the country’s deadliest episode of violence against the LGBTQ community.

Orlando reeled physically and emotionally. Close to the club, police lights flashed and cars clogged the streets following lengthy closures of vital traffic arteries. Thousands more than could be accommodated overwhelmed the blood centers that called for donors for the wounded. Shocked and grieving, we Orlandoans attended vigils led by representatives of queer, Latinx, Muslim, Christian, and anti-gun violence organizations and recorded our solidarity under new hashtags: #OneOrlando;

* Editor’s note: Tragically, as we go to press this has been surpassed. A mass shooting in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017 has claimed at least 59 lives; 527 people are wounded.

[M]emorials popped up at the vigils held around downtown Orlando...

Pam responded by drafting an immediate plan for what became the history center's "One Orlando Collection Initiative."

#OnePulse; #OrlandoStrong; #LoveIsLove. Rainbow flags appeared throughout the city. Pulse Nightclub and I share a neighborhood, and back at work at the history center on June 13, I was so upset that I couldn't think; like many others, I couldn't believe the world kept turning.

Because law enforcement prohibited access to the site of the club for several days, memorials popped up at the vigils held around downtown Orlando. They quickly accumulated massive numbers of candles, flowers, and a raw outpouring of handmade, handwritten love and grief. Pam responded by drafting an immediate plan for what became the history center's "One Orlando Collection Initiative": a strategy to preserve these items, news articles, digital images, and oral histories in perpetuity, for the material memory, education, and research of generations to come.⁵ She compared her notes with fellow museum and archive professionals who had gathered memorial items following other episodes of mass violence: the 2015 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church shooting, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, and September 11, ensuring we were on the right track.

We worked with the city and the county to coordinate press releases and the posting of bilingual signs (Spanish and English) alerting visitors of our project. I then became part of our team of collections and exhibitions staff members who began public collecting efforts

less than two weeks after the massacre, setting up mobile preservation stations at Orlando's four impromptu memorials. Over more than 30 blisteringly hot and rainy days, our white tent and our team in black T-shirts became part of the memorial landscape. My colleagues and I were the only ones to read every message of loss and love and despair, until emotional and professional necessity forced us to look beyond the words and see only the physical condition of the object.

We assessed the tributes, balancing which fragile items were the most vulnerable to water and light damage with which could remain a few days longer (fig. 3). Handmade or personalized tributes that stood apart from the ubiquitous rainbow flag or store-bought pinwheel often took collection priority. And, although raw with their own emotions and often critical of city and county politicians, the Orlando community largely met us with curiosity, support, and gratitude.

During the summer, our outreach and collection process was almost continuous. By August, with the blessing of property owners, we had collected and cleared three memorial sites. With at least 7,000 items evaluated and safely stored at our 13,000-square-foot off-site collections facility, only the memorial at Pulse Nightclub remained. As of this writing, mourners continue to leave items there, and we still make occasional collection visits. But even if the club is someday torn down, the One Orlando Collection Initiative will be ongoing and perpetual. The Pulse experience is not fixed and frozen in time, and every week presents new items, information, and oral

⁵ The One Orlando Collection Initiative includes a digital memorial that displays documentary photographs from the memorials and community. This lets us share them with those touched by the event who have been unable or unready to visit (www.oneorlandocollection.com).



fig. 4. The exhibition's memorial wall took physical cues from Orlando's memorial sites. To visually reflect the innumerable candles left there, we used 49 votive holders with LED tea lights - one for each of the deceased - beneath small photographic portraits displaying their names and ages.

history appointments. Collecting this impact on our Central Florida community means continuing to reach out in the years to come, to follow the lives of every person this event touched.

Pride, Prejudice, Protest, and Pulse: Revising an Exhibition in Progress

Things had changed in Orlando. In a diverse city of more than 270,000, more than 10,000 people massed at the first public vigil, then 50,000 a week later, all rallying in solidarity and fierce support of our queer, Latinx, and Muslim communities. Regardless of their policies before June 12, local politicians hurried to support the queer community as well, to serve as visible champions of the murdered.

Returning to our work on the exhibition *Pride, Prejudice & Protest: GLBT History of Greater Orlando*, Pam and I found that internal resistance to “controversial” narrative themes was easier to refute. All the better: never had an exhibition about Orlando's queer history seemed timelier or the arguments against it more meaningless and cruel.

Now, in an institutional first, the history center had a prominent place on the schedule for October's “Come Out With Pride” celebration (rescheduled to November in the wake of Hurricane Matthew), with free admission to the museum and a special display of 49 memorial crosses the history center collected from the Orlando Regional Medical Center campus, the hospital where victims had recovered.

With the GLBT History Museum, we brainstormed how to pay respect to Pulse Nightclub. Lacking the perspective of time, we felt unprepared to fully unpack the story of the event. We also had no desire to speculate about the motives of the perpetrator while the investigation continues. Instead, we focused on the memorials and their messages of support. On a full wall of the exhibition (fig. 4), we featured photographs, names, and ages of the 49 murdered and displayed several especially moving objects from each of the four memorial sites (fig. 5). Unfortunately, scheduling did not allow us to provide Spanish translations befitting the Latinx community to which most of the victims and injured belonged.

fig. 5. This case exhibits a range of the kinds of objects we retrieved, from the sweetly mundane (a plush rainbow alpaca) to the distinctly Orlando (a drawing of a determined Mickey Mouse proclaiming "Orlando Strong") to the emotionally overpowering: 1,000 origami cranes made by Ryo Kikuchi to convey his wish was for healing and peace. Kikuchi took the cranes to the hospital where the most seriously injured recovered. Hospital staff took them from the room of one recovering victim to the next until they knew they would all be discharged.

A Thousand Cranes

Orlando Regional Medical Center staff donated this set of 1,000 origami cranes to the Orlando Collection. A Japanese legend holds that the gods grant the wish of someone who folds 1,000 cranes. As he folded each bird, the man who made these cranes said a prayer for a victim recovering in the hospital. It took him 40 hours to complete them all.

At ORMC, staff hung the *senbazuru* in the room of a recovering victim. After that person was ready to leave the hospital, the *senbazuru* moved to another room, bringing hope from patient to patient. Only when they were certain that the last patient affected by the shooting would leave the hospital did ORMC staff bring the mobile to the museum.

Orlando Strong Mickey Mouse

Recovered June 25, 2016 from the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts



Orlando Cruz Boxing Gloves

inscription: "To all victims & Families: Your Champion, Orlando Cruz"

Gay Puerto Rican boxer Orlando "El Fenomeno" Cruz left these gloves at the memorial at the Pulse Nightclub on July 17, 2016. He dedicated his July 15, 2016 championship match in Koyamabe to the victims. After the boxes entered the ring, there was a moment of silence and the bell rang 49 times in honor of each victim, 23 of whom were Puerto Rican. "El Fenomeno" Cruz, champion of them all, won.

Recovered July 21, 2016 from the Pulse nightclub memorial



Rainbow Llamo

Recovered July 26, 2016 from the Pulse nightclub memorial



"I Love You" Bear with Hat

Recovered June 24, 2016 from Pulse Nightclub



"I Love You" Bear with Hat

Recovered June 24, 2016 from Pulse Nightclub



49 Pennies

Recovered July 21, 2016 from the Pulse nightclub memorial

Although we hope never again to mobilize for the preservation of our community's response to a mass murder – nor do we wish it on any other place – we prove that it's possible for museums to serve a vital role in a community's healing.

I wrote main interpretive labels explaining that exposure to candles and the elements had changed many items, and many more couldn't be saved. Object labels explained to guests how each item came into our collection and, to foster understanding about good museum practice, what challenges we faced in preserving them. Each of these labels briefly outlined the context of its object within the memorial sites – which it came from, the day we recovered it, anything we knew about who left it there, and transcriptions of faded words so visitors could clearly read their messages. We urged anyone who left an item at a memorial to reach out to us and help us learn their story.

The visual centerpiece of the wall was a display of 72 messages written on strips of colorful paper (fig. 6). In the course of clearing the memorial at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, we found these pinned under layers of dead flowers and handmade posters. We knew they were remnants of an activity at the June 13 vigil: the creation of long paper chains made from heartfelt messages. Once completed, these chains encircled the growing memorial for the weeks to come. These strips, however, had never become links. Instead, they lay flat

in the memorial space, where their colors bled together in the summer rains.

We used these objects as the inspiration for an interactive prompt that asked guests to take their own blank slips of colorful paper and describe how they had reacted to the shooting or how it had changed them. During the exhibition's four-month run from October 1, 2016 to February 12, 2017, we received 9,519 visitors, almost double the museum attendance during this time frame in previous years. These guests wrote 736 responses in five languages, some remarkable. "Still remember driving over 115 mph to come help with the perimeter," one visitor wrote. "God knows we tried." Another said, "I know someone who lost 3 people that night.... As queer [people of color] the impact was twofold. But the community rallied. Blood was donated, fundraising, drag performances organized, attended, and donated. May we all heal and fight for equality."

Lessons Learned

By the time the exhibition closed, we had received positive feedback from LGBTQ community leaders, including Orlando's first out, gay city commissioner, Patty Sheehan. In a video interview with the *Orlando Sentinel*, collaborator Joel Strack highlighted why it was so important to host it in our museum, even had the shooting never occurred: "The pride in having it here on display at one of our public buildings – it's huge! It says that the gay community is part of the Central Florida community, and we haven't always felt that way."⁶ We also saw this sentiment reflected in those hundreds of colorful paper strips filled out by gay and straight, young and old museum guests to our exhibition;

⁶ Jason Ruiter, "GLBT Central Florida history exhibit chronicles victories and losses," *Orlando Sentinel* (Orlando, FL, October 9, 2016), www.orlandosentinel.com/news/pulse-orlando-nightclub-shooting/os-pulse-gay-history-20161009-story.html.

