

## GWS 467: Interview with Ms. Beth Watkins (Transcript)

- 00:00:00 Adam Brinati: OK.
- 00:00:06 Adam Brinati: This is GWS 467. I'm Adam Brinati. Why don't you give your name and the date.
- 00:00:14 Beth Watkins: Sure. I'm Beth Watkins, manager of exhibition, interpretation, and visitor experience at the Spurlock Museum. It is April 8th, 2024.
- 00:00:21 Adam Brinati: Awesome. And why don't you give a little background as to who you are, your connection to the school, and to the queer community?
- 00:00:28 Beth Watkins: Sure, I've been, I'm a twice alum of U of I. I have been in this role at the museum since 2003 as a full-time employee. Before that, I was a grad assistant working in exhibits and I have had many different titles at spurlock over the years, but I have always been working on exhibits and now that's the bulk of what I do in terms of projects with the queer community, the last, the major ones at Spurlock have been an exhibit on drag (*In Her Closet*) costuming in 2019-2020, and then, more recently, the...
- 00:00:48 Adam Brinati: Yeah.
- 00:01:00 Beth Watkins: *Sewn in Memory* AIDS quilt panels from Central Illinois, which was in 2021-2022. I was kind of the project coordinator for both of those, and those had slightly different capacities, but I worked extensively with community members in working on text and getting, you know, getting what's printed and installed in the exhibit, putting that together so that if someone's not on a tour or something like that, there's... there's still interpretation there for them to see so, that's the bulk of my role with that.

00:01:29 Beth Watkins: In terms of my relationship with the queer community, I consider myself an ally and have done since before I knew that term.

00:01:37 Beth Watkins: And that has meant different things over the years, I would say, and obviously means something different to every single person, but I'm so thrilled to have a way for that part of my life and my work to, you know, intersect and do something that really takes some of those values forward, for the museum and for the communities we serve. And I'm definitely not the only person at Spurlock who feels that way. But it's been a particular, kind of, honor, really, to get to do that in my work.

00:02:02 Adam Brinati: Awesome. Yeah. And I realized that I put you in kind of awkward position. You can just ignore the camera, OK.

00:02:09 Beth Watkins: Yeah, alright.

00:02:12 Adam Brinati: Yeah. So you briefly mentioned you were the de facto project manager for both of those. You, my understanding is, you... your current title was relatively recent.

00:02:27 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yeah. So my... my job duties and the title that goes with them have changed over the years. But for the last about 12 months, my title is the, the one I gave at the beginning, exhibition and interpretation. But I've worked in that...

00:02:35 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah.

00:02:37 Beth Watkins: Area my whole time here at Spurlock.

00:02:43 Adam Brinati: OK. Yeah. So that's great. We can just jump right into it then. I want to talk about the, the *Sewn in Memory* exhibit. I mean, I personally think it's a really interesting project. I guess you know this memorial.

00:03:01 Adam Brinati: So, you know, obviously there's the national movement and,

and how it got started in the 80s, but I'm interested in really specifically how Spurlock came into those quilts and, and how you all ended up choosing what to do with them, so I-I know a little about the GCAP and their ownership of the clothes but...

00:03:30 Beth Watkins: Yeah.

00:03:30 Adam Brinati: I mean, a lot of people won't. So if you could just go into that and say...

00:03:33 Beth Watkins: Absolutely. So as you know, before you were recording, you asked... We were talking about the drag exhibit and...

00:03:37 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:03:38 Beth Watkins: Th-this really does flow out of that because it was through doing the exhibit on drag costuming and the connections we made within a very small slice, but still a-a slice of the queer community in town that when, when we started working with GCAP, one of their members actually said, he named that specifically and said "because of that project we knew we could trust you to help tell our stories."

00:04:03 Beth Watkins: So it, you know, in the, in museums in general we're all, well, those of us who are wanting to move forward are trying to do more of these really community driven and community voiced exhibits and to see that that can actually happen. That's what's supposed to happen, right? is that you try something. You start with one thing and then it can grow. Because you have proven yourself a little bit, right? And, I don't mean to oversimplify who the queer community is and say, well, everybody trusts...

00:04:29 Beth Watkins: If one person trusts everybody does, you know it's not like that. But because those particular people happen to-to come to some of the museum things and the drive things and see what was going on and how it was working, they felt good about it.

00:04:30 Adam Brinati: Yeah, of course.

00:04:40 Beth Watkins: So it actually started with a history class. A former U of I history major, to a current history major. There is a class called History Harvest. It's a public history class.

00:04:49 Adam Brinati: Right, yeah.

00:04:49 Beth Watkins: And they, for a couple of years, were working with the queer community to archive and document various aspects of queer history in town. And they worked with GCAP in particular. And I have been invited to come to that class. This was during the pandemic. It was on zoom, so I showed up on the... on the zoom and they had asked me to come to it to talk about Spurlock's work with-with the drag exhibit, but also I'm a member of, you got the name right, Amasong, Champaign-Urbana's premier lesbian/feminist chorus, and they-the professor had wanted to ask about Amasong as well.

00:05:24 Adam Brinati: OK, this is a... Just be clear, this is a singing group, OK?

00:05:29 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yes, yes. Yeah, of course not related to the university. It's-it's-it's over 30 years old now. Yeah. Yeah, it's. Yeah. It's part of this, the women's, you know, women's music movement from the 70s and late 60s. Actually, the women's Music festival started in Champaign-Urbana.

00:05:33 Adam Brinati: No, I understand. I just I... Really awesome. Yeah.

00:05:52 Beth Watkins: Anywho, so as a long term member like that, she also wanted to me to speak to that just as a-as another organization that exists in town. And at that class meeting Jerry from GCAP, who's really the person without whom none of this would have happened. He's one of the Co-founders of GCAP. Jerry was talking about how they had their AIDS quilt panels, and they have been hoping that the students in history harvest...

00:06:03 Adam Brinati: Right. Yeah, yeah.

00:06:11 Beth Watkins: Class could have taken good pictures of the panels.

00:06:15 Beth Watkins: And I said, oh, Spurlock has special photography equipment to do photos of big flat things like panels. And I volunteered us if the students didn't have time in their class and turns out they didn't. So that was the spring semester class. And by the end of the semester, it became clear the students weren't going to be able to-to do that.

00:06:22 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:06:30 Beth Watkins: Yeah.

00:06:35 Beth Watkins: So then we, Jerry and I, started talking. And in the beginning of the summer. So I think it was actually June, Jerry, and the then head of GCAP, whose name was Mike Benner, brought the panels over to Spurlock, and we had some special equipment set up in our auditorium, and our photographer, our staff photographer, was taking pictures of them, and it was at that time...

00:06:59 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:07:02 Beth Watkins: Jerry says it was my idea, I say it was Jerry's idea, to do an exhibit because 2021 was the 40th anniversary of AIDS Being formally described in the medical paperwork, so '81 is kind of considered the-the beginning of the AIDS crisis in terms of anyone, many people actually knowing about it.

00:07:06 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:07:09 Beth Watkins: And at first the idea was to display prints of the photographs we were taking. But I was like, why don't we just display the actual panels? If you're OK with that? And thank goodness for the pandemic, in a way, for this, because we hadn't planned anything in our gallery because it was so hard to plan anything right at that time. So the gallery was actually empty. And so I quickly wrote up a proposal...

00:07:17 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah. Of course.

00:07:30 Beth Watkins: With another staff member, who also identifies as part of the queer community in town with Jerry's input. We put together this proposal, and our director, like, within half an hour of me emailing it to her, said yes, we should absolutely do this.

00:07:57 Adam Brinati: The space is empty. Yeah, yeah.

00:08:00 Beth Watkins: Yeah, exactly. So it was. It was convenient, but it was also, I think when that idea, the more we discussed it, the more important we realized it was. Partly for the stories that it was telling and partly to help people think about pandemics. Since we were all in another one at the time. And the... and how important it was to have a space to think about what we've what we're all going through and to grieve and to think about the failures and of systems to respond and also the... to think about the-the good things too, like the way communities came together, the way people tried to help each other, the advances in science, like what all all those things too, right. We wanted... we really wanted to do this.

00:08:19 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:08:23 Beth Watkins: And then after the, as the exhibit was going on, it was going to be up for about eight months GCAP approached the museum and said we would-we don't have a good place to keep our panels, and they were keeping them in an office somewhere. Could Spurlock take them and add them to the collection?

00:08:41 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:08:41 Beth Watkins: So that they would be cared for. You know, by museum and professional standards. Well, not sort of. By museum and professional standards. An-and we were again honored to be asked that because of the mark of trust that that is and then to hold these relics, these kind of sacred pieces, right? And we ended up coming up with a way for GCAP to still be the owners, and then we are the home.

00:09:05 Beth Watkins: Which is... hopefully you have not had to deal with university paperwork on the level that this would happen at, but it-it's complicated, right? So-for the-to use university resources to care for a thing that the university...

00:09:14 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:09:16 Beth Watkins: Does not own. That's... that's tricky, and the paperwork has taken some time. I jokingly call it a joint custody agreement. It has a more formal name and I forget what it is, but you know, so GCAP still owns them, but we take care of them. And GCAP has the first, the-they can, they can decide. They do decide who gets to see them, how they get used. If GCAP wants to like, check them out so to speak, and take them to march them in the 4th of July parade. Again they can. We don't let other museum objects go out to the 4th of July parade, right?

00:09:38 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:09:46 Beth Watkins: But, like these are, so they...

00:09:47 Adam Brinati: Nobody's walking around in a suit of armor.

00:09:51 Beth Watkins: Exactly. Or taking any other historic textiles or whatever, but these are GCAP's, so they can do with them what they want.

00:09:54 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:09:57 Beth Watkins: So for example, if a class requests to see them like the class you were in, those requests are approved by GCAP. Like if someone wanted someone came and said, I'd like to do another exhibit that uses some of these GCAP would have to approve that.

00:10:08 Beth Watkins: That so it's... a it's... a. And because they're local. And not a huge organization. Usually it's pretty easy to get that communication and keep it... keep it going even despite staff changes, so they're now on the third different director of that organization since I started working with them, so Mike retired, then they had another person for a year and... yet another person. So we have to keep re-instigating that communication, but especially th-the colleague who helped me write the exhibit proposal has been volunteering with GCAP. So that kind of...

00:10:27 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah.

00:10:37 Beth Watkins: Helps keep...

00:10:38 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:10:39 Beth Watkins: And we've done Programming with them too. So like their world AIDS event has been held here the last two years so that's really nice.

00:10:43 Adam Brinati: Here at Spurlock? Really. Yeah, it's very interesting.

00:10:48 Beth Watkins: Yeah. And it's not a... it's not a huge event these days, but I think it's pretty meaningful for the people who come. It's kind of a commemorative, it's pretty somber.

00:10:53 Adam Brinati: Of course, were-were these banners... they've been here for the last two years. So, these banners were involved in that last year?

00:11:00 Beth Watkins: Yeah, they were. So we would bring out, we brought out say like six or seven of them both years.



00:11:04 Adam Brinati: How many do you have in total?

00:11:05 Beth Watkins: They're 19 total. Yes, we bring a handful of them out. So the selection that you saw for your class...

00:11:11 Adam Brinati: There were four, I think.

00:11:18 Beth Watkins: Yeah. And we have pulled out the ones your professor chose since she ha-had you look at some of them ahead of time. We pulled out those specific ones. And usually it's different. We use a different set just to kind of rotate the-the use of them and stuff like that. But obviously if-if someone's gone through the bother to look at them ahead of time and it has particular ones in mind.

00:11:18 Adam Brinati: Yeah, right. Yeah.

00:11:28 Beth Watkins: We're happy to pull those out, so yeah.

00:11:30 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Yo-you touched on a billion very interesting things.

00:11:35 Beth Watkins: It's a, it's a interesting, like it's an increasingly complex relationship, but that's what's supposed to happen. Like that's what we want to happen. And... and we're, again, we're honored to get to do all these things with GCAP.

00:11:42 Adam Brinati: Yeah. I-I really want to quickly touch on, because I-I'm interested in this, as someone who is empowered to provide a platform for this marginalized group.

00:11:54 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yeah.

00:11:58 Adam Brinati: What's the process that you have to go through to set up an exhibit like that? Like, presumably, you know, just get... it's not like your space. You can't do anything you want with it. You mentioned you had to write a proposal. I-I know that the exhibit... the *Sewn in Memory* exhibit was funded by the Doctor Alan C. and Marlene S. Campbell Fund. And I'm

really interested in what that... what that is an-and where that money is coming from as well.

00:12:23 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah. Sure.

00:12:29 Beth Watkins: So unfortunately that answer is not probably terribly interesting. They are major donors to the museum, and they endow the gallery that those things were in. So if you, when you came in for your class to the main door, there was a gallery that's painted black right now. That, that's that gallery. They endowed that... Doctor Campbell is a-is a medical doctor. I actually don't know if he...

00:12:37 Adam Brinati: Oh. That's it.

00:12:49 Beth Watkins: They live in Peoria, so I they're not always over here super often, so I'm not sure if he got a chance to see that exhibit, but...

00:12:54 Adam Brinati: So it's-it's not directly related to-to this topic, it's related... I see.

00:12:57 Beth Watkins: No, no, it's related to the space. Yeah. Yeah. But it's interesting that you talk about that because since the drag exhibit went up, we have had donations of drag material to Spurlock because people were just Googling "drag museum" and found a place that would take their collection. So we have, we have.

00:13:08 Adam Brinati: Oh, really? Wow. Yeah.

00:13:15 Adam Brinati: We should probably explain... so can you...

00:13:16 Beth Watkins: [inaudible]

00:13:20 Adam Brinati: I've-I've-I've done this out of order and I'm sorry. Could you just really quickly explain the drag exhibit.

00:13:23 Beth Watkins: You're fine. Yeah.

- 00:13:27 Beth Watkins: Oh, sure. So that idea came to us from Professor Olga Maslova in theater costuming here on campus, and if-if I am, if my memory is correct, there were a couple of things happening, so she had this idea to do a drag exhibit and Sasha Velour, who won Drag Race season nine, I think it was. She grew up here, and Sasha's father was a history professor, I believe has retired. And so another professor in history had worked with a campus group. I believe this the Center for Advanced Study. To fund a performance by Sasha here on campus, which did happen in fall of 2019 over at Krannert. And as part of... So those things were kind of coming together. So we did have two of Sasha's outfits in the exhibit, and then we had all the others were local, except one who was a Russian performer in New York. But Olga knew that person because she's Russian, so there was a connection, a cultural connection there.
- 00:14:29 Adam Brinati: Yeah, I remember that. I remember seeing that specifically the Empress. Yeah, yeah, yeah. With the sickle and hammer. Very subtle.
- 00:14:32 Beth Watkins: Yeah. In this burgundy velvet with the, the big headpiece and all. So... but all the other people. So everyone had a local connection except for that, except for that person.
- 00:14:41 Beth Watkins: But that was through Olga. so everyone else was a local performer, and that too has led to some more relationships. So we've had several drag shows here at the museum featuring some of the people who were not exhibited, for example.
- 00:14:50 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:14:56 Beth Watkins: So that, that and that was really focused on costuming and we were super lucky that there were two PhD students on campus at that time. They've since finished and left, who are also drag artists. So they were the curators. Basically in terms of they came up with questions to ask all the performers, like those interviews that were kind of just transcribed and put...

00:15:11 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah.

00:15:14 Beth Watkins: On the wall.

00:15:14 Adam Brinati: Do I have any of those written down, I wish I did.

00:15:17 Beth Watkins: Sorry?

00:15:18 Adam Brinati: I thought I had their names, but I guess I don't.

00:15:19 Beth Watkins: Oh, it's John. John Musser, who goes by Veronica, Blaeux B L A E U X, and then Mike Atienza, who goes by Ma Arte. I can type those out for you too.

00:15:30 Beth Watkins: So it was really wonderful that there were, there were drag artists who were willing to be the curators because obviously they knew so much that no one on the museum staff ever would have known, and the-they had ways of talking about this material. That's their experience, right. And we even, and John Musser, Veronica did... did one of those get in drag makeup videos for us, and so did Sasha. So we had those playing on loop and the exhibit, for example, they were in the back, like, at a fake makeup table. It had, like, the-the light bulb around the frame.

00:15:46 Adam Brinati: All right. So yeah, so we can return to the the quilts in a... in a minute. But now, now I'm interested in that. Yeah, I-I.

00:16:06 Beth Watkins: Sure. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. No, the-they very much go together. Excuse me.

00:16:12 Adam Brinati: In my preliminary research for this, I guess I didn't realize,

or it wasn't apparent to me how connected those things were. So...

00:16:19 Beth Watkins: Well they were in in quite close time too, right? Which was, and again, was kind of a-a stroke of luck of their gallery being empty. Cause like right now that galleries booked through 2027 so we couldn't have said yes to putting the quilt panels out... all of them out for a long time right now, for example. So it was lucky.

00:16:35 Adam Brinati: So... so the... so for the... Chronologically, it was the drag thing first and then the...

00:16:39 Beth Watkins: Yeah, correct. Correct.

00:16:42 Adam Brinati: So, when you were writing the-the proposal for the, for the drag, I don't know if you were involved with...

00:16:48 Beth Watkins: I didn't actually do that. I know the professor, I believe went pretty directly to the director of the museum if I remember right.

00:16:53 Adam Brinati: So I-I I'm interested in how you are providing an opportunity for visibility for these people. And so like, is there a...

00:17:03 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah.

00:17:06 Adam Brinati: A process that you normally follow for that where...where you have to, is it like you know, you tell your boss or your boss's what's going to happen, or?

00:17:12 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yeah, we have an actual proposal form that we give to people from outside the museum who approach us with an idea, or if one of them comes to one of us, like for the-the quilt exhibit. Like I, you know, sometimes I'll write it up based on what people have told me or I get them to... I get them to add input and whatever and then move on. So, for example, there's another exhibit...

00:17:30 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:17:32 Beth Watkins: Coming in 2025. Stemming from a history harvest class, it's a different professor, but he had seen the AIDS quilt exhibit that his colleagues' class had led to, and he's like, I'm doing one on farm aid, the concert that happened in the 80s, Right? And he's like, I'd really love the opportunity for my students to get to be involved in something like that too, if it's available. And I was like, oh, that sounds fun.

00:17:47 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:17:54 Beth Watkins: We, despite being in the middle of Illinois, have barely ever done anything agricultural related at Spurlock. Like this is a whole other segment of the population that I think a lot of us on campus know extremely little about, right? And like I'm from this, I'm from central Illinois, but I don't come from a farm family. I don't know anything about farming, despite having lived here most of my life. So you know, so this is...

00:18:11 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah.

00:18:15 Beth Watkins: Another kind of diversity and representation that's going to happen. But so like for example, I worked with him to put together the proposal, but yeah, sometimes they come solely from the outside.

00:18:17 Adam Brinati: Right. Yeah, yeah.

00:18:23 Adam Brinati: So it's it's a...

00:18:26 Adam Brinati: just, by virtue of the fact that you... you people here at this museum were active in the community o-or... and they knew these drag artists already and and they could put it together that way.

00:18:39 Beth Watkins: And the... and the drag one was complicated because we had this idea. We had Sasha's outfit... cost- what's the word we were using? I'm forgetting what we call them. Attire is not right. Because people use different words, right? Costuming. I'll say clothing because that is, I think, accurate.

00:18:53 Adam Brinati: Yeah, I'm. I'm not.

00:19:00 Beth Watkins: And then th-the Russian one that Olga knew. And then we had the two curators. But after that we didn't know who else we were going to be able to get. And it's pretty down to the wire in terms of finding people who had material that they could lend for a long time that they didn't need in their actual performing, right? People who were willing to be part of a museum exhibit because not everybody wants to do that.

00:19:17 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:19:23 Beth Watkins: People who trusted the museum with their stuff, and again, getting those two curators who were active in the drag community to say I'm involved in this, I can kind of...

00:19:24 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Yeah.

00:19:33 Beth Watkins: Vouch for the museum in a way. Right. You need these bridge people to reach out to communities you've never been involved with. Most of the time that, I mean, that makes sense. Like, why would anyone who's never been involved with the museum trust us? The museum may be one thing, campus might be another. Right, so people might be like well I like museums and that sounds cool, but campus has not been good to me, or... or I've just heard things.

00:19:49 Adam Brinati: U of I... Yeah. Yeah, of course.

00:19:54 Beth Watkins: Or... Yeah, right. And so it-it, it really does take these incremental relationships and steps of action, and I think we're incredibly lucky that that drag exhibit happened at all because I can easily imagine no one else would have come forward and there would have been like five things and... and it wouldn't... and instead it was like 12 or 13 so it felt full.

00:20:10 Adam Brinati: Yeah, I-I right I, you know and I want to get into specifically how you choose to lay out these exhibits in-in a minute, but...

00:20:23 Adam Brinati: I-I was surprised at how many people... how many costumes there are. Maybe that's not the right word. How many... how many dresses there were. And also I want to touch on your involvement with the students because you mentioned there were PhD students here who were connected to the community. I read an article about...

00:20:27 Beth Watkins: Yeah, you can say it. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:20:44 Adam Brinati: Umm.

00:20:46 Adam Brinati: There, there were undergrads involved as well. I think... Maybe I missed that then.

00:20:49 Beth Watkins: We certainly had undergrads who were student staff at the museum who helped with the exhibit. So like I have a I supervised graphic design. So I had a graphic designer who was working on it. There are students who work in the collections unit, so they like, they build mounts and they help put the mannequins together and payments and all that kind of thing. I am not remembering undergrads...

00:20:53 Adam Brinati: Yeah. OK.

00:21:04 Adam Brinati: I see, yeah.



00:21:09 Beth Watkins: Being involved in like, the content as much but, but also that exhibit got cut short because of COVID. So, like, we were going to have a huge, like, closing drag show for it at the end of spring semester which we never got to do because we were all, you know, people were working from home, students were gone, you know. And so I think there would have been more opportunity for undergrads had that not happened.

00:21:26 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:21:32 Beth Watkins: Like everything else, right?

00:21:33 Adam Brinati: Well, of course.

00:21:35 Adam Brinati: That's very interesting. What was the... what was the reaction to that, whe-when it got canceled?

00:21:40 Adam Brinati: Specifically, the-these performers who...

00:21:40 Beth Watkins: I think we were... We were all really disappointed because this... that exhibit was really the first time that we've done something so community collaborative on that scale.

00:21:50 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:21:52 Beth Watkins: We had done smaller scale ones, but this one... and because it was a topic that made a lot of people go, like, kind of sit up and take notice.

00:22:00 Beth Watkins: Either because they love drag or because they didn't expect it, we had, you know, we were...

00:22:02 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:22:05 Beth Watkins: Whenever you try something new as a public institution, you always wonder a little bit like, oh, what are people going to say? Like, what are the nasty comments on social media going to be? whatever...

00:22:12 Adam Brinati: Yeah, that was something I wanted to ask you, but...

00:22:22 Beth Watkins: Minimal, minimal, and like, I monitor a lot of those accounts, and I did more so at that time than I do now. And like, there were a few people, like, I think we had one person say I don't want to subscribe to your newsletter anymore because you're doing drag.

00:22:25 Beth Watkins: One person out of the thousands of people who loved it, you know? So that's fine that they don't. You know, we're trying to move in a new direction. And if you don't want to come with us, that's absolutely OK. We wish you would. But if you don't want to, you're not ready. That's fine. We're moving on, right?

00:22:28 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:22:39 Adam Brinati: Does the... does campus...

00:22:46 Adam Brinati: I mean, it seems like you personally are interested in reactions to these exhibits, but-but does the school care so much? Or is it...

00:22:56 Beth Watkins: Not that I've noticed. To be honest with you, Spurlock's in kind of a funny position. So we're part of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences like history, but because we're not a teaching unit, we're the, I think we're the only unit in LAS that doesn't actually...

00:23:02 Adam Brinati: Yeah, right.

00:23:08 Beth Watkins: Have students, right? As a... as an instructional unit. So we kind of get forgotten about a lot. It's like, oh, history and bio and it's.

00:23:17 Beth Watkins: Right?

00:23:18 Beth Watkins: And the good part of that is you can do things and they're not too worried about what you're doing. Usually the bad thing is sometimes you get forgotten about and get neglected in a way or you have a hard time getting people to pay attention when they really should be paying attention. But I think that's true. All... I'm sure all campus units feel that some way or another, but the...

00:23:21 Adam Brinati: Yeah, right.

00:23:35 Beth Watkins: No, as far as I know, we've had nothing but praise and support from the university for some of these major projects.

00:23:39 Adam Brinati: Yeah, and you mentioned that for the... for the quilt exhibit as well, the feedback for that was generally positive.

00:23:48 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yeah. Super positive in a very different way, right? Because drag was mostly, kind of, celebratory wi-with touches of talking about some of the difficult things or the, you know, some of the performers are talking very frankly about their lives and in different ways. But overwhelmingly, the impression was like.

00:23:51 Adam Brinati: This is wonderful. Yes, of course.

00:24:09 Beth Watkins: You know. I'm going to say this a little bit tongue in cheek, but like Yas Queen, you know. Right. Like there's a lot of. That, and I feel like in that exhibit...

00:24:14 Adam Brinati: Yeah, right.

00:24:17 Beth Watkins: *Sewn in Memory* definitely did not have that. That's a very different topic, right?

00:24:20 Adam Brinati: No, I an-and it was not my intention to equate them.

00:24:24 Beth Watkins: But like, so the... the... no, no. And that was interesting to us too, because we knew how kind of somber and sobering and hard and traumatic the AIDS quilt might be, how talking about AIDS might be. But overwhelmingly, and I was on the public floor quite a bit for that exhibit, I gave a lot of tours, talked to a lot of classes, things like that. People are crying in the exhibit, but in a way that they would then come and say to me. I'm so glad you're doing this. I'm so glad I saw these things. I'm so moved to hear these stories.

00:24:57 Beth Watkins: I had a lot of undergrads say to me, I'm queer. I don't know this part of my history. And I got to see part of it today like that. If I never do anything else in my career, the fact that I got to...

00:25:04 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:25:08 Beth Watkins: Help make that happen. That's enough for me like that... that means the world to me, that the museum cou-could provide that.

00:25:12 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:25:15 Beth Watkins: That bridge between these stories and these experiences for visitors. So, so it was overwhelmingly positive, but not in a... not in a like [inaudible] kind of way.

00:25:25 Adam Brinati: Yeah, right. Not [inaudible].

00:25:25 Beth Watkins: You know, not that... not the drag was solely that, but it was mostly that, yeah. So it was, it was... it was... people we-were very glad that we did it and I don't think I ever heard a single negative comment about that exhibit.

00:25:40 Beth Watkins: Now, I should say, I think a lot of people who might have a problem with it, they just didn't come. So of course we didn't really hear from them. People... people select into going to the museums.

00:25:50 Adam Brinati: Yes, that's a filter there.

00:25:52 Beth Watkins: Right. And because it was still, you know, it was 21-22, the pandemic was still harder than it is now. The number of school field trips is not back up to pre-pandemic levels for example. So we, we did have questions about what would happen when school groups like 6th graders from the public schools came in.

00:26:09 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:26:09 Beth Watkins: Mostly it's fine, right? Their teachers are fine, but every now and again you'll get one where there's parents who might be mad that their kids walked past that room or something like that, but we didn't get that. Partly because it wasn't available to be gotten, right? Bu-but, and you know, I don't, I'm not aware of there being any AIDS deniers out there, right? It's not like we can even get those.

00:26:22 Adam Brinati: There weren't as many... No, that hadn't occurred to me actually.

00:26:33 Beth Watkins: Right. Like no one's pretending this didn't happen, or at least no one comes to our museum thinking that. But...

00:26:37 Adam Brinati: Well, that's the, that was the original intention of the quilts in the first place was to... was to...

00:26:41 Beth Watkins: Exactly. Exactly. Demonstrate this is. Yeah. Exactly. Exactly Right.

00:26:44 Adam Brinati: Stop people from being able to deny it or, or actively ignore it. So yeah, that being an extension of that is very interesting. I've got two things, one...

00:26:53 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah.

00:26:59 Adam Brinati: Is that you mentioned how students or individuals were going to this quilt exhibit which displayed, I forget the full name for the memorial project, like the original memorial project.

00:27:19 Beth Watkins: Oh yeah, it's called the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, or something...something I don't...

00:27:21 Adam Brinati: Yeah. I don't remember either I've, I've. I've seen it as the AIDS quilt.

00:27:24 Beth Watkins: Yeah.

00:27:27 Beth Watkins: Yeah, you can call it that. That's accurate.

00:27:29 Adam Brinati: Umm. To have these people come and see that and say this is a part of my history, I think that's really interesting that you mentioned that because it's... it touches on the fact that these exhibits are not only...

00:27:46 Adam Brinati: Like, I guess, like, contemporary. But they're also a way to document history and.

00:27:55 Beth Watkins: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

00:27:57 Adam Brinati: And so, yeah, was that something that you had in mind? Was like, not only are we showing, like, contemporary thing like these are... these are quilts that will go out into the 4th of July parade. But we're also maybe cluing people into, you know, something that started in the 80s and...

00:28:18 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah, definitely, definitely. And we don't... you know we-we skew. Not to say our collections skew older. I'm not sure if you took an average of everything in the museum that that would exactly be true, bu-but things made... things made by people right here are quite, you know, quite recent. Some of them are still here, some of them got to come and see things that they had made, you know, like Jerry, who I talked about, he made some of those panels and helped take some of them in.

00:28:46 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:28:46 Beth Watkins: He helped make some of them. In over 99% of the museum's collection, I would guess, we do not know who made a thing. Like, which individual made a thing.

00:28:55 Adam Brinati: OK, that is something I wanted to ask you about.

00:28:56 Beth Watkins: And that to get to... That's always extra special to us when we can do that regardless of what the... what the item is. So for example, in our powwow exhibit that we have up now, some of that regalia was made, you know. I think the people who loaned it to us know who made those things. We don't... That's not a privilege we have. It's for Spurlock often. So, you know, like paintings often have a signature. We don't... we don't collect paintings. You know, we don't do that. That's a Krannert Art Museum thing. More so we-we have so many kinds of unnamed...

00:29:26 Beth Watkins: You can make an intelligent guess about who made a thing, but like in terms of a specific named individuals, we almost never know. And so getting to kind of bring the-the specificity that's in those panels forward of the makers, but more importantly the people who are commemorated of course, but th-the makers of people in that community too and how they were impacted is...

00:29:40 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:29:46 Beth Watkins: Is really important and then you know these journalism students who came and did oral histories about the quilt panels and got to interview some of these people who made the panels or or were connected to the community in various ways. That was super important to us. And it's a thing we are just so seldom able to do.

00:30:00 Adam Brinati: Wait, i-in finding these... Cause I'm aware that they... some people came forward with the quilts an-and gave really accurate histories and some people were like don't talk to me about it. Did you... was that a responsibility to find these people and find the material for the exhibit, like, the history for the exhibit. Was that something that Spurlock handled or was that the journalism students?

00:30:13 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah. Right.

00:30:27 Beth Watkins: It was shared out, so the journalism students did some of it, although they were not initially part of what we were going to do, that kind of happened late. And, we were so excited to be able to say yes, to include them in all this. But when we started it was mostly Jerry from GCAP working his connections. He had a spreadsheet where he was trying to track everything. Jerry was calling and emailing people and saying do you know where so-and-so is now. They moved away 20 years ago, but are you still in touch with them because they made that panel or they were the partner of the person who made that panel or whatever, right? So I helped, and various staff members...

00:30:52 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:31:01 Beth Watkins: You know, we all did our share of Googling in a way, but we were mostly support for Jerry doing that and then every now and again, if I remember right, some of the journalism students would ask me questions, but I didn't usually know anything that they haven't already had access to.

00:31:14 Adam Brinati: I figured.

00:31:15 Beth Watkins: And again this... the material that history harvest students had collected some of. That was also helpful there. So for rubenexample, if you remember the panel that had the prison imagery on it, Ruben...

00:31:26 Adam Brinati: Yeah, the Reuben one, yeah.



00:31:34 Beth Watkins: So when we put the exhibit up, we didn't know anything about Reuben, but somehow somebody looking at the history harvest material found something as the project went on and the students were able to use that. I think Jerry is the one who found it among a bunch of papers or something, and we found this statement. So we were able to add that to the exhibit and we specifically designed the way we had the labels in the exhibit to be easily changeable so that if something did come forward, we... and once Jerry had sort of vetted it, we could swap it out. There was another example of... I don't think we had Paco's panel out for your class, but I think we maybe watched the video. Yeah. Yeah. The bartender, you know...

00:31:57 Adam Brinati: Was he the bar tender?

00:32:10 Beth Watkins: Yeah.

00:32:13 Beth Watkins: Paco is still known. There are a lot of people in town still who knew Paco. And there are circumstances around his death that we had differing opinions coming forward about whether those details should be shared or not, and since there wasn't consensus, we did... we left them out of the public labels.

00:32:32 Beth Watkins: Jerry knows and so that the information is documented, kind of in GCAP's archival material, but it's not part of the public exhibit which, which I kind of thought might happen more than it did for that exhibit. But as far as that's the one that stands out to me. But also to my knowledge, no family members came forward and said I really wish you wouldn't say such and such or anything like that.

00:32:58 Adam Brinati: Really? With the Ruben one, actually the description in the video mentioned a family member coming forward or something and saying we know Ruben's last name or-or like Spurlock does, but...

00:33:12 Beth Watkins: Right, right. Yeah, yeah, I don't, I don't know. But the person I have talked, the one person we know of who knew Ruben, they didn't. They didn't feel right. So it hasn't been shared, yeah.

00:33:21 Adam Brinati: I see. OK. Is that generally how it went like if you couldn't have come to an agreement on the information?

00:33:29 Beth Watkins: I think that's what we would have done. Yeah. Paco was the only one I remember. And I think one of the especially hard things about that, about that decision for AIDS quilts, is that part of the problem in researching AIDS is that so much information at the time was suppressed. These people's stories were silenced and ignored. So by not telling a fuller story, are we contributing to that? I don't know. I don't know the right answer to that. It kind of depends who you ask and what the setting is right?

00:33:53 Adam Brinati: I-I actually...

00:33:56 Adam Brinati: Yeah, I mean, my opinion on this doesn't matter, but...

00:34:00 Beth Watkins: And that's and that's how I ultimately felt too, right. Like, I'm, I consider myself an ally. I'm a child of, you know, I'm. I'm a Gen-Xer so this was... AIDS was very much a part of my, like, junior High, High School, and college.

00:34:10 Adam Brinati: Right, of course.

00:34:13 Beth Watkins: To my knowledge, I do not know anyone who has died of AIDS, but that cannot possibly be true, right? Like, and especially as someone who's been involved in music and theater, where there's a population that was harder hit, like that cannot be true. But to my knowledge that is true. So like I wanted to be extra...

00:34:19 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:34:30 Beth Watkins: Gentle and because we can't ask the people who died, what of their story did they want to be known? We kind of have to do whatever seems the next best thing to us.

00:34:38 Adam Brinati: Right. I-I think that there is a special impact there though, yo-you know, we're talking about these things as like living history, these exhibits as living history, particularly the quilt because of, maybe this is unfair to say, but they're... the national significance of the quilts compared to the drag race, which is really more of a-a local thing. It must have been powerful for those students, those journalism students, to find these dead ends.

00:35:18 Beth Watkins: I think so.

00:35:19 Adam Brinati: Whe-where people, where last names just don't exist. Yeah, and... and so we know there's someone out there who died because of this but we can't figure out who.

00:35:24 Beth Watkins: Absolutely.

00:35:28 Beth Watkins: Right, right. And so there's, speaking of Ruben, again, there's a former U of I history PhD student who helped with the history harvest class long ago, not long ago, a few years ago.

00:35:41 Beth Watkins: He's now a professor in Nebraska an-and he and I have been working on a separate project about Ruben and he, you know, is a very skilled researcher for 20th century American records, right? He cannot find Rubens death certificate or death, death announcement or anything like that. Right. An-and where is it?

00:35:55 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Coroner's report or anything.

00:35:59 Beth Watkins: Like there's some record in Champaign County that this person died, probably, but we don't know where it is, and one option, of course, is that Ruben, the name on the panel, is not Ruben's legal name. I do not know, but that's entirely possible. So even if we had Rubens last name, I still don't know if that's Rubens legal last name. And then also...

00:36:10 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Well, of course. Right.

00:36:20 Beth Watkins: We have, you know. So there's there's things like that that I think I talked with your class about how there's a panel with someone that has a photo on it, a first name, a last name, death date, birth date. Still... still don't know anything about that person. Someone out there...

00:36:32 Adam Brinati: Can't figure yeah.

00:36:34 Beth Watkins: Knows this person, but the name on the panel is Bob Smith. That sounds like a made-up alias name, right? Yeah. Maybe that's not that person's actual name, but maybe it is. I don't know. Googling Bob Smith is harder than...

00:36:44 Adam Brinati: Right. Yeah, right. It's hard, hard to track down all the Bob Smiths in Champaign county

00:36:46 Beth Watkins: So there's... yeah. And even if you say, OK, well, maybe it's Robert or maybe that's a middle name. And again, first name on paperwork is actually something else like, you know, we don't know. Bu-but also we're all doing this sort of as one of the many things we're working on the students as well so if we had a month to dig into this, maybe it would be a little different, but, and maybe someday that will happen. Maybe someone will...

00:37:03 Adam Brinati: Yeah. That's it. That's it.

00:37:07 Beth Watkins: Want to come in and research this collection and GCAP will say yes, you can do that and someone like or even like a grad assistant doing a thesis or something like that, like that could happen.

00:37:09 Adam Brinati: Yeah. So you, you...

00:37:18 Beth Watkins: Which would be amazing.

00:37:19 Adam Brinati: Absolutely.

00:37:19 Beth Watkins: But does it matter that we don't know for sure. Rubens's last name or Bob's name, or whatever? I think it... the not knowing matters in terms of what it means about researching these stories and what it says about the history of these... of these people in these communities and these experiences. But the actual specifics of this museum does not know Bob's name or doesn't know about Bob. That's actually OK, but what the larger kind of meaning is, what is? What matters more so?

00:37:46 Adam Brinati: I... yeah. I am trying to formulate this. You mentioned th-the ultimate... ultimately there are constraints for these things and it's like, you don't, you don't have infinite time and infinite funds to go out and, like, hire a private investigator to follow people around. So was that a consideration when handling sensitive subject matter like this. Like hey, we only have so many months to put this together.

00:37:51 Beth Watkins: Yeah.

00:38:19 Beth Watkins: And now that you've said that I-I'm realizing that's a thing we should say to people at the beginning of any exhibit project, right? Is like, here's what... But sometimes you don't know what you're going to need to do until you're part way through and then it's too late to say we don't have time. Or t-to have gotten that from the beginning. But I do think that's important, especially as museums do more of these community driven projects, to be as forthcoming as possible about what is possible.

00:38:49 Beth Watkins: And so no, I never. I'm sure. I never did say that to Jerry from the get go. But also he knew that, you know, he's been faced with this himself so that this one is maybe a little bit different in that regard. But yeah, being honest is the only way to make these collaborations really, really happen. You know.

00:38:56 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:39:09 Beth Watkins: And we've had... we've had curators and other community driven exhibits where they were the ones doing their research and we had to say you have to stop writing now because we have to produce this thing and get it on the walls and whatever. And like you know, since you do musical productions like you can only... you can't rehearse for forever, you have a date where it's gotta go. So that kind of thing is in fact really important. And we actually had a curator...

00:39:23 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Right.

00:39:31 Beth Watkins: Who just wanted to be in the archives. He just kept going down all these rabbit holes and my director actually had to say, 'if you don't finish by whatever date, we will push, we have to push the exhibit opening back.' and delay it, and he didn't want that. So that was what made him stop, because otherwise he would have kept going because you get interested in the thing and...

00:39:43 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Right. Yeah. You realize how much you don't know.

00:39:50 Beth Watkins: Whatever, and so you know how research goes, right? You don't know what it is that you want to find out until you realize that it exists, and then you can have a plan, but it may not go. Yeah. So... but that, but that kind of honesty is really important and I think.

00:39:56 Adam Brinati: Yeah. I'm actually... I don't know.

00:40:04 Beth Watkins: I'm trying to think of what our next example would be that that would really come to the fore, but that is... that is really important.

00:40:10 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:40:14 Adam Brinati: So I want to...

00:40:17 Adam Brinati: So these two exhibits, which are pretty related in that they are both... you're amplifying this community an-and its struggles and its successes and...

00:40:27 Beth Watkins: Hmm.

00:40:34 Adam Brinati: And you know, I'm sure that you were keeping in mind these, the time frames and the amount of, you know the money involved, I guess.

00:40:51 Adam Brinati: How did you choose to go about handling the layouts of the exhibits and the way they're set up to cater to these two, very different in a lot of ways, but similarly related exhibits.

00:40:58 Beth Watkins: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah. Related. Yeah.

00:41:09 Beth Watkins: Yeah. So my colleague Melissa Sotelo, who does a lot of th-the design of the physical spaces and also with, the drag, the drag exhibit I believe that was her idea. I could be wrong. It could be that one of the drag artists said this to her, but I think it's her idea. She really wanted to literally platform them and have them be elevated. So she and her students built a stage that was basically like a catwalk...

00:41:35 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:41:36 Beth Watkins: Th-that was up several feet from the floor so that the Queens were elevated, and you had to kind of look up to see them all. That was on purpose. Now, partly it helped keep them out of reach of little hands that may want to touch, and not just little... and I'm not just picking on children. Adults are actually the worst...

00:41:36 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Yeah, right.

00:41:54 Beth Watkins: At touching things in the museum. Like, I mean, if you like textiles, you always want to touch them. I totally... I'm like that too. I get it. So that kind of helped reinforce, like, these are special. But also, yeah, we really wanted to platform them.

00:41:58 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:42:09 Beth Watkins: So that was important. The idea of, you know, the curators were talking about how so much of when you are a kind of a small scale drag artist, like you are not Sasha Velour. You are, you know, you are performing in between your grad class assignments and you know you're changing in a broom closet. The stage is minuscule, the floor is sticky because it's a bar. It's loud. It's smoky. They wanted to see if we could get it that a little bit. And Spurlock does not have the facilities to be, like, theatrical in our exhibit set ups the way, like, big museums do.

00:42:25 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:42:42 Beth Watkins: But we painted the walls black. We kept... the-they've actually been black, but we kept them black. We actually had a little speaker under this platform that had, like, bar background noises in it. So it's kind of a distant like... and like chatter and like a drink spilling and, like, glasses clinking and stuff like that. And we didn't want it to be overt, but we wanted, as you walked by it...

00:42:51 Adam Brinati: Oh really? Yeah, yeah.

00:43:02 Beth Watkins: You could kind of get the sense of that. Whatever, right. So we wanted it to be, like, a little bit black and grungy and not glamorous because the setting for drag is not always glamorous.



00:43:09 Adam Brinati: But how was it... of course... how was it lit? Was it out of just normal lighting?

00:43:14 Beth Watkins: Yeah, nothing, nothing... again we don't have the facility to do anything too complicated. But we did... we did want to be sure to hit those costumes so that if they sparkle, they sparkle. That kind of thing.

00:43:23 Adam Brinati: Yeah. There are great photos of the exhibit, and there... and also there's a 70 page document where it's interviews with all the drag queens and it's...

00:43:36 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Those are what was up on the walls.

00:43:37 Adam Brinati: Yeah, there are a lot of them. Like one of the questions that they each got asked was, what was your worst, like...

00:43:43 Beth Watkins: Yeah.

00:43:44 Adam Brinati: Green room experience.

00:43:45 Beth Watkins: Yep, and wardrobe malfunctions and all that kind of stuff. Yeah. And they all have one. And I-I think they are like, it's not drag until you've had a... you've had a crazy change. Like, I think someone changed in the back of their car a few times. And when you think about...

00:43:47 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:43:57 Beth Watkins: The size of some of those outfits? I don't know how they did it, but...

00:43:58 Adam Brinati: Right.

00:44:01 Beth Watkins: Yeah. So that kind of like... th-the reality of what those performances were like and the actual work of making costuming, of creating costuming of... of getting changed like all that...

00:44:11 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:44:13 Beth Watkins: Stuff was important. This was...

00:44:14 Adam Brinati: This was a multi-layered exhibit. Was the catwalk? Was that... that wasn't... was that the only part of it? Or...

00:44:24 Beth Watkins: So, that was where most of them were. Then we had a... we had two Queens that we put one... So th-the place of the doors of the museum have changed. But at the time that one greeted you as you came in the door, we...

00:44:34 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:44:37 Beth Watkins: Wanted to have, kind of, an MC because drag shows are often MC'd. So we wanted to put someone there, and the first person we put there is named Mona Montclair and it was kind of th-the grand old Dom of Champaign-Urbana, right? Like, a long, long fixture in town.

00:44:40 Adam Brinati: Yeah. She's, yeah.

00:44:50 Beth Watkins: Right. And then halfway through the exhibit, we changed that out to be a different... a different artist named Peach of the Midwest, who's also one of the very established figures in town.

00:44:58 Beth Watkins: And then we had another... another single platform where an artist named Seduction Carrington was located, and then she was kind of gesturing towards the catwalk. And we had Sasha at the front of the catwalk, probably for the... for the impact because Sasha's costumes are, you know, like in some ways a different scale because of money. Like Sasha is a full time, you know...

00:45:18 Adam Brinati: Drag queen, yeah.

00:45:19 Beth Watkins: And Seduction is the person who got Sasha to first do drag in Champaign-Urbana. So like, Seduction is kind of gesturing to Sasha in that drag-mother relationship, right? So that, you know, that was important to have a connection to that.

00:45:31 Adam Brinati: That's... that's wonderful. And I think that if you just blew through there without reading anything, you would have, you'd never know.

00:45:36 Beth Watkins: Yeah, you wouldn't know that, right? I-I don't remember if we actually explicitly said that, or if it was just something that informed our setup.

00:45:40 Beth Watkins: For the quilts it was different. So we had 19... in a way like, oh, it's only 19 of them, but then the more you look at them, the more you realize that... how many different kinds of stories are going on so...

00:45:44 Adam Brinati: Yes. Yeah.

00:45:54 Beth Watkins: There were two that, sort of, greeted people as you came in. Right as you came in, there was a-a fairly plain one that's white, and it just has the red ribbon on it, and it's... it was made by one of the mothers of someone who died of AIDS and it says something about... we wanted that red ribbon to be because of, you know, my generation and older like, that's the that is the thing that represents AIDS. It's that red ribbon. Yeah, but that quilt had "mother" on it, and it was important to kind of think about family and parents, not just biological ones obviously. Like th-the wider meaning of mother and family, but that was important. And then that person's obituary from the local newspaper was pinned on that one. And we liked the, like the, visual simplicity but impact of that white with black text and the red ribbon and that was all...

00:46:38 Adam Brinati: It's... it's very easily identified. Like, this is what the exhibit is about.

00:46:40 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Exactly. And then if you turned in, actually went into the room, the first one was. And I-I can't remember if we had this panel on for your class. I don't think we did. It had the tractor on it, maybe we saw the video.

00:46:50 Adam Brinati: Ohh, we saw that one, yeah.

00:46:52 Beth Watkins: So you know, super, super agricultural, really cementing AIDS...

00:46:52 Adam Brinati: Somehow we saw that one.

00:46:56 Beth Watkins: Was not just an urban thing, that this disease was everywhere and that the people most impacted were also everywhere. And one of the things that came... that we knew going into the drug exhibit, but that exhibit really made clear queer stories are everywhere. People are everywhere. They have always been. They always will, you know. And I don't think we get a lot of visitors who don't know that, but it's important to reinforce.

00:47:23 Beth Watkins: That, you know, it's a small town and agriculture is also part of America that the-these are also stories that we associate with larger places and things like that, so that was important to us.

00:47:30 Adam Brinati: Yeah. I don't want to cut off your flow here, but I can...

00:47:35 Beth Watkins: No, no.

00:47:36 Adam Brinati: Definitely think of people who would see that and... and it would have an impact on them. You know, because yeah. And especially because it's so specific to like the experience of living here in Champaign-Urbana.

00:47:40 Beth Watkins: Yes, yes, yes. Mm-hmm.

00:47:55 Beth Watkins: I guess it's a lot harder to ignore agricultural things here than it is in Chicago and it's still pretty easy here, to be honest with you, like, as a person who lives in town and has no connection directly to agriculture that I'm aware of, like it... it's still pretty easy for me to be like I am out in the country, right? But like that... that's not fair. That's not real. Yeah.

00:48:09 Adam Brinati: And it's like right here. And it was the, you know, it was like a crisis was happening here.

00:48:15 Beth Watkins: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Exactly. And that one, we also really loved because it's the only... I believe it's the only one we have that commemorates a couple who died in close succession of AIDS. And it was made by another couple. One of them also died of AIDS not long after that. Like, it's just that panel shows the chain...

00:48:32 Beth Watkins: Just this horrific chain of spread, you know, and I-I don't know right. Like it's just... it's just awful. It's awful and that their farm was one of the places people gathered for parties and stuff too, so like...

00:48:35 Adam Brinati: Absolutely, yeah.

00:48:44 Beth Watkins: So yeah. That they were a very key part of the community here is my understanding. So that was important too. And like we wanted to... my colleague had initially wanted to put Ruben...

00:48:48 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:48:54 Beth Watkins: And the police officer whose panel has a ton of police imagery on it next to each other. And I said absolutely not. We do not know the circumstances of Rubio's incarceration. We do not know how Ruben was treated. I can guess. Ruben as a person of color who was experiencing homelessness, I bet they were treated extremely badly. We do not want the police next to Ruben.

00:49:06 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:49:14 Beth Watkins: I don't think that's fair to Ruben. Yeah. Yeah. I don't think that's the right way to do it. And instead they were back-to-back of the wall in between them. So you couldn't see them both at the same time, but they were still kind of connected. I thought that was...

00:49:15 Adam Brinati: Tasteful. Right.

00:49:32 Beth Watkins: And the more we learned about the the police employee, his name was Scott. Scott was also a house where people gathered after the bars. Scott had a pool in his yard, like his was also one of the gathering places. And Ruben, for my understanding, was extremely isolated. So that's also an interesting...

00:49:42 Adam Brinati: Yeah, the dichotomy there.

00:49:47 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yeah. So that in some ways these people are part of the same community, but in reality, not at all.

00:49:48 Adam Brinati: I think It's really interesting, that, because the walls were black for the quilt as well.

00:49:52 Beth Watkins: Mm-hmm.

00:49:53 Adam Brinati: But it's a different kind of black, you know, li-like whereas you mentioned with the drag...

00:49:58 Beth Watkins: Absolutely, yeah.

00:50:00 Adam Brinati: Like you're evoking this feeling of... like a bar, there's all this ambient noise. There's no ambient noise for the quilt exhibit.

00:50:07 Beth Watkins: Correct. Correct. Yeah.

00:50:09 Adam Brinati: It's very contemplative and so... so I... are these decisions that you make when you're...

00:50:10 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah.

00:50:17 Adam Brinati: When you get this kernel of an idea?

00:50:19 Beth Watkins: Right. Yeah, sometimes. And sometimes it's as we evolve or sometimes...

00:50:20 Adam Brinati: Or-or is it...

00:50:26 Beth Watkins: I mean, since you've worked in, you know productions, you know this. Like, some of us are better at visualizing how a thing will look when it's installed or produced than others. And we find a lot of people when they come to us with an exhibit idea. They don't tend to think that way. And why would they? They've never had to. Right. So like, we can envision a thing, but maybe our partners can't. And so when they come in and things are starting to get installed, they realize like...

00:50:29 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:50:48 Beth Watkins: Oh, what if we also had...

00:50:52 Beth Watkins: You know, a makeup table like that was in the drag exhibit. That's not a good example because we... that one was actually planned ahead. But like, what if we had a certain thing. Or, yeah. Could we change this in a certain way? And if we can, we will. You know, because ultimately it's not our... These are not our stories. These are not things like, things we've researched and therefore we're the experts. These are people's...

00:51:11 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:51:11 Beth Watkins: Lived stories and they're telling them themselves. Some things are just not possible. Like we've been working with some curators wh-who really wanted running water in the exhibit and we... we can't do that. It's not it. It creates an environment that bugs are attracted to and the bugs eat your collections. Right? So we cannot do that.

00:51:22 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Yeah.

00:51:28 Beth Watkins: But we've been trying to figure out a way to get a projector to have imagery like a video, looping of running water with sound. It's not the same thing, but at least it kind of gets at that a little bit. So like, there's some stuff like that.

00:51:38 Adam Brinati: Yeah, it's better than nothing. Was there anything like that for these two specific exhibits that you ran into?

00:51:44 Beth Watkins: Not that I remember. There may have been something for the drag that...

00:51:46 Adam Brinati: [inaudible].

00:51:51 Beth Watkins: Was wanted and we... I don't remember anything. There are things that, especially with *Sewn in Memory* in retrospect, I wish that we had done a little bit differently for some of the pragmatics like that. Like we didn't have a space... we didn't have enough space in that exhibit for people to just sit.

00:52:09 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:52:10 Beth Watkins: We had a couple of chairs that were at a table that had post-its on it where we had a few prompts for people to share feedback if they wanted to. Obviously totally optional. I think we could have done with a few more, especially comfier, chairs, so people could sit down with this stuff if they wanted. But there also wasn't much floor space because the panels were big enough that they took up a lot of it. So I'm not sure where we would have put that.

00:52:29 Beth Watkins: We didn't have... In retrospect, I wish we had had resources available, even if it was just pamphlets and some QR codes about grief. You know, that would have been, I think, helpful for some people. We did have...

00:52:37 Adam Brinati: Yeah.



00:52:40 Beth Watkins: A box of tissues out, but we didn't have any actual links to formal resources about grief counseling or even just things you could read. And I think we probably should have had that.

00:52:50 Beth Watkins: Because this exhibit really stirred things up for a lot of people. Even if you, you know, like me, like, you're not aware that you've lost anyone to AIDS. You've been through... you've been through the COVID pandemic or you're in the COVID pandemic and you maybe...

00:53:01 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:53:02 Beth Watkins: We haven't grieved for that.

00:53:07 Adam Brinati: Was that... Was there anything in the quilt exhibit that, like, directly referenced COVID. Yeah, there were blurbs, right? That spoke of it or...

00:53:16 Beth Watkins: Yeah. Yeah, you know what I said that confidently, now I have to backtrack. At one point the version of the introductory text that I wrote compared AIDS death numbers to COVID numbers. And then one of my colleagues who I think was quite right was like, you know, what does that really add? What does that comparison really add? And I think he was right. We certainly talked about it a lot.

00:53:34 Adam Brinati: Right, yes.

00:53:37 Beth Watkins: In person experiences, but I... do not... I feel like maybe we didn't actually have it in the exhibit text in the end because also COVID while we... while that exhibit was up, COVID, you know, surpassed the number of AIDS deaths.

00:53:47 Adam Brinati: Oh man.

00:53:55 Beth Watkins: And in a way that may have made AIDS seem like not as big a deal as COVID, right? So, to have the numbers. But maybe we did actually talk about it. I can look that up and tell you, but I... maybe we compared it or we just mentioned it as a pandemic.

00:54:12 Adam Brinati: But there was definitely...

00:54:14 Beth Watkins: Nothing super overt that was... that took up a lot of space...

00:54:16 Adam Brinati: There's definitely a blurb on the website that, that briefly...

00:54:19 Beth Watkins: That makes sense, yeah.

00:54:22 Adam Brinati: Discussed, not necessarily in a comparative way, but just like where everyone is going through a pandemic now, here's something that happened recently, you know, in recent history.

00:54:28 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I wish I remembered that better. Yeah.

00:54:37 Adam Brinati: Yeah, it's very interesting. Alright, we got about 5 minutes.

00:54:48 Adam Brinati: So I... yeah, I want to kind of ask you about your experience working with the community. I mean, you mentioned that... that once you've built that trust up they were very receptive to the, like, continued collaborations.

00:55:01 Beth Watkins: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

00:55:05 Adam Brinati: Is that something that you see Spurlock expanding on in the future, even more?

00:55:08 Beth Watkins: Definitely, definitely. And I have no specific idea in mind. Sometimes programming versus an exhibit is... is... That fills the need better, right? Like we can continue to host drag shows, we can host World AIDS Day if... if the GCAP wants to. We have been a site of Champaign-Urbana's PRIDE celebration, for the educational activities. We've done that the last couple years. That, again, feels huge to be asked to do that.

00:55:29 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:55:35 Beth Watkins: I think we would... I think we would be very open to almost anything. I mean nothing comes to mind that we would be like, no, absolutely not, you know, but...

00:55:45 Beth Watkins: And I think especially as, I feel like Gen. Z, not to make things too, like, based on generation. But like your contemporaries, I feel like the students who are currently in college, like, are so open and interested in talking about identities and experiences that derive from identities in ways that, like my peers and I, we didn't have that language. Most of us, I don't think and like that, that wasn't as...

00:56:02 Adam Brinati: Yes.

00:56:08 Beth Watkins: Much a thing.

00:56:10 Beth Watkins: And I feel like Gen. Z is really willing to step forward and say, like we want to be in an exhibit. Like we...

00:56:17 Adam Brinati: Yes.

00:56:17 Beth Watkins: We matter, you know, in ways that maybe others of us haven't done quite so much.

00:56:21 Beth Watkins: I don't... Again, I don't mean to oversimplify, but so, you know, if student group came to us, like, that would be amazing. Is the point of what I'm saying. It's not just people who live here all the time. It's also the people who at any college town like, they lose waves of always changing people. But like, how could we maybe build... build some more with those groups? Now, sometimes it takes so long to build a thing like that...

00:56:34 Adam Brinati: Right. Pass through and leave.

00:56:42 Beth Watkins: Students have come and gone, so that's harder. But like if we could connect to a class. A certain, like the LGBTQ office on campus, like, something like that, we've done some programming with them as well, but like, I think that could be really, really powerful, but yeah, if people want hold events here or hold exhibits, I hope they will continue to ask and the more good experiences everybody has, the more word of mouth spreads and that's really how most of this happens, right? It's... Sometimes it's the museum having an idea and reaching out, but more often it's word of mouth that we have no control over. Nor should we. Of people saying like, oh, I went and saw this exhibit. It was cool. I wish they had done it differently and then the person they say that to is like oh, well, I know about that. Maybe I could come up with a way to augment or do something different or whatever.

00:57:24 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah.

00:57:26 Beth Watkins: We hope... we just hope that those will continue to happen, that people will continue to come forward because it's so exciting, and watching how meaningful these things are to people is why we're here, right? This means the world.

00:57:37 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

00:57:40 Beth Watkins: And, you know, obviously we can't care for every artifact in Champaign-Urbana that may have to do with the queer community. But if we're able to do more of that, even just on a temporary basis and if we can be a platform that people feel good about using and coming to, then that's... That's what we're for. So hopefully that will happen.

00:57:54 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Fantastic.

00:57:58 Beth Watkins: Does that really answer your question? OK, OK.

00:57:59 Adam Brinati: I yeah, I think so. My point I was getting at was that this museum is, honestly, surprisingly involved with the queer community.

00:58:11 Beth Watkins: Yeah, yeah, we get that a lot. Yeah. And if you asked me 10 years ago, this would be totally different, right? We wouldn't have had all these overt ideas. Like one thing we have always, we have wanted to do for a long time is get more interpretation in the long term galleries like the one where your class was held. How can we inject...

00:58:16 Adam Brinati: Yeah. Right.

00:58:31 Beth Watkins: How can we find ways to get the queer experiences better represented in our more long term exhibits? And this is where, like, not knowing who made a thing and all can come in can really be hard because cultural identities we usually know to a certain extent. But then things like more individual experiences like that can be a lot harder. But I know lots of museums are doing like queer tours and things like that. So...

00:58:47 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:58:51 Beth Watkins: I'm hoping that we can, like, maybe partner with a grad student who's really interested in that and, like, find a couple things per room and really tell some of these... tell some of these stories. And, even if the connections are a little bit of a jump, that's fine. Like our collections are a starting place, they're jumping off point and you know, so there's got to be ways t-to do that and we just haven't...

00:59:04 Adam Brinati: Yeah.

00:59:08 Beth Watkins: We have not chosen to put the time into finding a way to make that happen. I'm sure it's out there to do it if we choose to do it. And some... I keep saying grad students because I am perpetually impressed by the amazing grad students at this campus and like, they're... they can often choose to focus on something like that in a way that sometimes undergrads can't, but also...

00:59:13 Adam Brinati: Yeah, yeah.

00:59:29 Beth Watkins: Maybe we could post an undergraduate job that, like, that's that student's project for the year, like that could be really cool. We just need to decide to do it.

00:59:33 Adam Brinati: Yeah. OK. Yeah, well, that's an hour. So I think that that's about all the time I have for this.

00:59:45 Beth Watkins: Sure.

00:59:46 Adam Brinati: So thank you so much for... for meeting with me and talking about this.

00:59:48 Beth Watkins: Of course, this is truly an honor to talk about this with people I really... I care very much about this, I'm so pleased that Spurlock...

00:59:53 Adam Brinati: Yeah, that's very clear.

00:59:56 Beth Watkins: Is, you know, doing some things in ways that are meaningful to people like that's... that feels great.

01:00:02 Adam Brinati: Right. Yeah, I'm sure to have people crying in your exhibit, you know, to be able to elicit that emotion.

01:00:06 Beth Watkins: Yeah. No, I'm like, I-I presented on the... AIDS quilt exhibit at a conference last summer of other academic museums, some museums on campuses, and I made some... some people in that audience cry. And I was like, yeah. If I don't make people cry. Then, like, I haven't done my job right.

01:00:23 Adam Brinati: Yeah, especially about that subject.

01:00:26 Beth Watkins: Yeah, exactly. Exactly right.

01:00:28 Adam Brinati: Awesome. Thank you.

01:00:30 Beth Watkins: Sure.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**