

## **The Rainbow in Rose City: Documenting, Engaging, and Celebrating the Richmond, Indiana LGBTQ Community**

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The idea for this collaborative project, featuring a mix of student research and primary source gathering, grew from the Indiana University Primary Source Immersion Program that we both attended in the summer of 2018 in Bloomington, Indiana. This program connected faculty with special collection librarians and archivists in order to incorporate more primary source research into the classroom. Archivist Beth South was interested in adding more student research and diverse collections to the IU East Archives and Dr. Travis Rountree wanted his Eng-W270 argumentative writing course to address rhetorical constructions of LGBTQ identities in the Richmond, IN area and to have his students establish an LGBTQ archive collection. As Richmond or Wayne County didn't have any type of LGBTQ collection available anywhere and the LGBTQ community has been mostly closeted, the course was adapted to have the students build and contribute to the first LGBTQ archive collection for Richmond and the surrounding areas.

### **Class W270: Argumentative Writing**

The argumentative writing course provided an excellent place for this project because of its focus on research, both primary and secondary. Students gathered artifacts for the archive and worked with Beth to post them to our online archive. These included interviews, pictures, summaries, and audio clips for each artifact. After gathering these artifacts they wrote a rhetorical analysis on how these objects or interviews functioned within the community. The final draft of this

analysis was an audio piece that explained what the artifact was, how it circulated, and projected forward into their research. I had students produce these audio clips because 1) it was good practice in digital composition, 2) it provided audio for the archive for ADA compliance, and 3) it provided a wonderful opportunity for students to add their unique voices to the archive. After the rhetorical analysis, students then discovered the broader ideas of how these smaller, local artifacts operated on a larger scale; for example, one student studied an LGBTQ learning community at Earlham College so for her research she looked at LGBTQ learning communities at other colleges and universities in Indiana (and beyond). Another example was a student who wrote about the Gay Straight Alliance at the local high school. For her research paper, she looked at how those operated state-wide. They wrote an annotated bibliography and research proposal and then wrote a research paper about it. These papers were then posted to the archive site to give context to the local artifacts. Two students volunteered to present on the archive at its unveiling at the community panel.

During the spring 2019 semester, Beth visited the class to discuss various topics including the IU East Campus Archive collections, best practices in conducting interviews and oral histories, the importance of documenting and preserving materials from underrepresented groups, the need for deeds of gifts and copyright releases, and even some of the moral and ethical questions that archivists come across when dealing with controversial or sensitive material.

We originally thought that the students would be more focused on gathering physical objects rather than interviews. At the beginning of the semester, Beth did reach out via email to local

public library archivist to check and see if there were any LGBTQ related archives and to ask if she knew anyone who would be interested in being interviewed by the students. The archivist wrote back to report that aside from the newspapers, the library didn't hold any material on LGBTQ groups; she was also quite resistant to be on the panel, but eventually agreed. She also wrote that "until not too long ago, LGBTQ folds had to lay low for fear of losing their jobs" and that her "former partner was a podiatrist, and she was pretty sure that at least some of her patients would bolt if they knew." She also spoke to a couple of people, but she wrote back that one person didn't respond back to her and the other didn't feel comfortable participating in the current political climate, stating that he had received hate mail on two separate occasions since the 2016 election.

We were a little discouraged after these emails, but not surprised. We were worried that the students who were interested in conducting interviews would find it difficult to do so. However, we were surprised, and delighted even, when there were more students bringing in interviews, rather than articles or photographs, for the collection and that they had interviewed their peers. Beth admits that initially she was only thinking of collecting stories from older LGBTQ people, long standing citizens of Richmond, IN and the surrounding areas, but interviewing the younger generation of the LGBTQ community is also vital and an important perspective, one that didn't occur to her when she and Travis spoke initially about the project. As an archivist, you can get caught up in the past, thinking about what has already happened and the history of the community, but as an archivist it is also important to look around at what is happening currently and to collect for the future.

In addition to the class work, Travis incorporated co-curricular activities throughout the semester. Students were required to attend at least one film showing, the poetry reading, and the community panel. Because of our student population, however, Travis was cognizant and sympathetic to other obligations students may have had during these times. The films were *Southern Comfort* and *Love, Simon*. We, alongside members of the Safe Zone group, and LGBTQ Alliance student group chose these films because of their depictions of rural queer lives. The poetry reading was by Stephen Mills, a gay man who was born and raised in the area. It provided students another glimpse into the struggles of growing up in a small, rural community and what happens when these members leave the area. Mills noted that coming back to Richmond after several years to read was one of his most powerful experiences that he had as a poet. Lastly and perhaps most impactful, was a panel that consisted of local LGBTQ community members containing a nurse during the AIDS epidemic, an army veteran and law enforcement officer, business owner, student and co-founder of SAGA at the community college, a naval veteran and librarian, and administrator for the Earlham School of Religion. The panel presented many topics that are listed on the archive, but also helped to develop ties to a pride event that occurred later during the summer. All of these events provided students with views of LGBTQ life nation-wide, but also to include how queer life in Richmond and the surrounding areas was changing.

### **The Online Collection**

The majority of the content for this archives was created digitally. Students wrote about their artifacts on a computer, captured interviews and their own reflections with their phones or other digital recording devices, and pulled event fliers from social media accounts. Any paper artifacts, such as fliers or news articles, were scanned and uploaded to the online collection. All the paper artifacts, including deed of gifts and copyright release forms for posting interviews online are kept in the IU East Archives on campus.

While the students did the writing and collected materials for the archives collection, Beth used IU Pressbooks, a tool that enables faculty and students to create and publish text in multiple formats, available to Indiana University through the Unizin consortium, to pull everything together and create an online exhibit book. Using a public platform like IU Pressbooks to build this collection also generated interesting conversations about student scholarship, intellectual property, the importance of making collections accessible, and archival ethics.

The e-book format also allows the collection to be easily accessible to the public, with chapters denoting different themes, focusing on people, places, or events and it can be easily searched for those wanting to find content related to gay marriage, drag shows, HIV, and more.

This online collection features audio interviews, video, photographs, transcripts, news articles, and student analyses. There is even a video recording of writer and poet Stephen S. Mills, a Richmond native that now lives in New York, who came back to Richmond to give a poetry

reading at IU East and to visit the class to talk about his experience of growing up in Richmond, his coming out to his family, and his writing.

### **Continuing the Collection**

After the course ended in April of 2019, Beth continued to add content to book. The book was originally organized into three parts to reflect the type of materials the students collected and wrote about: places, people, and symbolism. Now the book has grown to include LGBTQ+ community programs and news and social media posts. Richmond, IN held its first Pride Festival in June, so Beth interviewed Ivy Tech student Ben Guard, who planned the Pride Festival and who has now revived the local LGBTQ group, Rainbow Richmond. Ben's interview is now featured in the collection, as well as, fliers, news clippings, and social media posts about the Richmond Pride Festival.

Beth also reached out to IU East faculty in the summer of 2019 to promote the collection and to gather more stories. In August, she interviewed Emeritus Faculty of Political Science Paul Kriese about discovering his asexual identity. She also reached out to Education Faculty Josh Tolbert who co-teaches Safe Zone, an LGBTQ awareness and ally workshop, on the IU East Campus and was the faculty advisor of the IU East Alliance for a couple of years.

Despite promoting the archives via local archival and library newsletters, handing out specially designed bookmarks at the local Rainbow Richmond meeting, and being written up in the most

recent addition of RadiUs, IU East's alumni magazine, the growth of the collection has been slow. Beth is finding that making personal connections and approaching specific individuals, much like the students did in contacting their peers, has been the most beneficial way in adding to the IU East LGBTQ+ Collection.

### **What We Learned and What to Improve**

If we knew how popular the interviews would be, we would have focused a bit more time on oral history etiquette and best practices. While the students were given a handout and a brief overview, only a handful of them really followed the format presented, so the interviews in the collection are not consistent.

Beth would also spend more time with showing the students how IU Pressbooks worked and encourage them to create their own pages, so they can learn more about using the platform and writing online, rather than have Beth upload their written papers into the book. Now that Beth is more familiar with IU Pressbooks and how easy it is to use, she'd insist on having one class period devoted to students adding their own content to the book.

### **Student Reactions**

Student reaction to the project was mostly positive as seen in their reflections in their portfolio letters. Comments from students include:

“I never even knew that IU East didn't have an LGBTQ+ archive. This class opened my eyes to lack of representation of the LGBTQ+ community here in Richmond and our schools, and eventually the entire state of Indiana and its schools,”

“This class really was an eye opener of sorts; and it was hosted in Richmond of all places. Like the least gay place in America. Which showed how progressive we have become as a society at large. I will be totally blunt with this next statement. But some people might look at this class and think; “well what’s the point. I am not apart of the LGBTQ community? Why should I care about any of this?” And the answer to that is because it’s about what is going on right now. LGBTQ is current, and relevant news. Why would you actively choose to be ignorant, and unaware of current events.”

“Because I personally know people today who disowned their son for being gay, all because the parents thought they were never going to have grandchildren. And I know people whose parents love them no matter what...this class is the first of its kind here in Richmond. So students in the future might look at my papers in the archive and use that as inspiration.”

They were excited about talking about the LGBTQ community in this area (and also other places where they grew up in the surrounding counties). Their engagement differed from years past because they learned not only about writing, but about these oppressed groups in the area.

## **Conclusion**

We learned that there is an absolute need for LGBTQ visibility here in Richmond. We also saw how students understand that need and can learn much by engaging with archives as a way to not only see, but advocate for visibility. Also, through the co-curricular activities, we noticed that there is a desire to link with other colleges and universities in the area such as Ivy Tech and Earlham. It was amazing to be a part of such a wonderful project and see the changes that it’s

starting to make. Through this collaboration, the course and archive created a system link to all IU campuses demonstrating the investment in sharing LGBTQ stories and identities. Specifically acknowledging this community in Richmond and the surrounding area helps students, faculty, staff, and community members to acknowledge and celebrate LGBTQ identities.