

2020 MARGARET JENNINGS AWARD PROFILE

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Tell us how you first got involved in the archival profession?



Many years ago, on a blustery and dismal morning, I happened to wander past the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne. I was 19, burnt out. My days were cramped – I was studying for my Commerce and psychology exams, working an early morning cleaning job, living with three other people in a two-bed apartment. An elderly gentleman with a charming smile welcomed me inside. “No, I really must be getting on,” I objected. “As you wish,” he shrugged. His accent was as captivating as his smile, and I wanted to know his story. He shared a little about his background. He showed me letters and photographs, artwork and maps, papers, books, testimonies and journals. Records of courage and bravery, extreme hate and prejudice, love and kindness. I listened to the

stories, wanted to honour the courageous acts of the Holocaust survivors, and remember the millions of Jews murdered. After this visit, I often thought about the elderly gentleman with the charming smile. One story that led to another. One story of many, living within this archive. An archive that was about the best and worst of human nature; a reminder of what had passed and what could happen again if we let it. A door to the archival profession had been opened.

What has surprised you most about the profession?

Digitisation is not as straightforward as it seems! Digitising records can help improve discoverability, access and preservation of archival records, reaching a more diverse user population across time and space. However, as I have learned more about digital continuity, I have realised there are more issues to consider. How do we adequately describe and contextualise digital records so that they are understandable in the future and can be used in new ways? How can we protect privacy rights, adhere to (the many) privacy regimes and protect the record from unauthorised access, alteration or removal? How do we ensure we can access and use records in the future when file formats and software become obsolete and technologies change? And how do we accurately appraise records like emails, online posts and instant messages and ensure that knowledge is not lost? The continuing intensive management of digital records, in order for archives to be accessible, usable and trusted, has definitely surprised me.

If you could change one thing about archival practice, what would it be?

Too many victims of human rights abuses, both past and present, are not seeing their identity, participatory, memory and accountability rights in records met. If the existing archival frameworks and their access policies do not support the needs and rights of community members, then they need to change. There has been some brilliant research on participatory archives, where archival systems and processes allow for multiple agency. Centred around active agents who co-create their records, they would have a say in what is recorded, how it is recorded and how records are used and accessed. I would love to see transformations in recordkeeping laws, policies and systems, so that these participatory archives could exist and prosper.

Tell me about someone who has influenced your decision to study and/or work in the archival profession?

Nearly twenty years had passed since I met the gentleman at the Jewish Holocaust Centre. I decided my career laid in the wonderful world of libraries: helping patrons access information, whether it was research data, journal articles, e-resources, textbooks, novels, poetry or picture books. As I listened to a lecture recording for a Library subject, *Information Organisation*, our lecturer, Tom, introduced a lecturer from the Archives and Recordkeeping specialisation: Dr Viviane Hessami. She spoke of records as fixed yet mutable, having multiple purposes – as instruments of power and oppression, governance and accountability, justice and restitution, identity and healing, remembering and forgetting. Whether Viviane was speaking about the Records Continuum Model, organisational accountability, or Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Archives, she painted the vast landscaped world of the enduring power of records. And just, wow! I was hooked and soon decided to explore the Archives and Recordkeeping specialisation myself.