

RECORDS MANAGEMENT,
ARCHIVES AND ORAL
HISTORIES

A PRESENTATION BY THE GAY
AND LESBIAN ARCHIVES,
SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

- Given that most governments in Africa are hostile towards LGBT organisations, there is a particular need for organisations that are strong, well-organised and can respond in fast, professional manner to the demands placed on them. Efficient records management techniques are key to this.
- It is essential that organisations retain an accurate, secure and comprehensive record of its activities. This ensures that organisations are accountable to funders and to the community.
- All of us manage records whether we are aware of it or not. We regularly create documents, distribute, file and destroy them; whether in paper or electronic format.
- In this introduction to some ideas around records management we will cover the following:

OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

- What is records management?
- What is a record?
- Why do we need a system for managing records?
- What records do we need to keep?
- What do I do with records that are no longer in current use?
- What about electronic records?
- A basic model.
- What is an archive?
- Why do we keep archives?
- Where do I store my archives?
- How do I submit my archives for storage at GALA?
- What is oral history?
- Why is oral history important?
- Some oral history techniques.
- Where can I obtain more information about records management, archiving and oral history? Who should I contact if I have any questions about records management, archiving and oral history?

RECORDS MANAGEMENT

- **What is Records Management?**
- Records should be kept for as long as they need to be (after which they should be archived), and kept so that they can be easily retrieved and don't get lost, and that access to them is controlled.
- **What is a record?**
- A record is recorded information, in any form e.g. it can be a paper document, a computer-based file or e-mail, or a sound or video recording, created or received by your organisation or staff member. For ease of use, records are often organised into files.
- What kind of records does your own organisation possess?
- Paper-based files?
- Computer-based records (e.g. e-mail, word processing, database)?
- Library/ resource centre?
- Other (including video and sound recordings, photographs, press clippings, microfilm)?

Why do we need a system for managing records?

- Ask yourselves the following questions:
- How many people in my organisation regularly make use of these records?
- Is our office clogged up with piles of paper?
- As a rule, can I find a document I generated two months ago in less than five minutes? What about a document generated by a colleague?
- How much does the time my colleagues and I spend looking for a document add to our overall costs?
- What would happen in the event of a fire or police raid on my organisation's premises? Does my organisation cater for the off-site storage of important records?
- Does my organisation have a back-up system for computer-based records?
- Does my organisation keep a permanent record (i.e. an archive) of its activities?

What records do I need to keep?

- Your organisation needs to keep any record that contains information of administrative, legal, financial, or historical value to your organisation, including correspondence, policy documents and directives, minutes, reports, submissions, rough notes and calculations used in the preparation of reports, unsuccessful applications and proposals, manuscript drafts, faxes, email, and sound and video recordings.

What do I do with records that are no longer in current use?

- Records that are no longer in current use, but have long-term value for your organisation or historical value can be stored in an archive.

What about electronic records?

- If your organisation creates electronic records (i.e. computer-based or machine-based records) this raises issues around storage. If you want to store electronic records on computer then a good back-up system is needed, so that in case of computer trouble documents are not lost. If it is not possible to back-up your computer regularly, then it is best not to treat computer records as masters- rather print and file.
- Remember, it is also important to store email, except for personal email and junk-mail.

Filing system

- A filing system is a method of organising records within your organisation.
- Get a filing cabinet to start you off or whatever system fits your needs e.g lever arch files on a book shelf.
- There are many different types of filing systems, e.g. using broad categories such as Finance, Staff, Correspondence, Projects, Fundraising etc. Another way of doing it is to create an alphabetical filing system.
- It's important to design a system that meets your needs. If your organisation already has a system that works in place, there is no need to change it.
- Whatever system you choose, remember to keep it simple. If you can find a records management short course in your area, it's a good idea to take it.

ARCHIVES

What is an archives?

- The word "archives" has three main meanings:
- "Archives" can be defined as the non-current permanent records of an organisation that are preserved for their long-term value: those records that document the history, development, and operations of the organisation (including administrative, legal and financial records). Unlike libraries or resource centres, archives contain original documents rather than published works.
- "Archives" also refers to professional organisations that collect, preserve and make accessible, papers, photographs, sound recordings and other kinds of records that contain information of permanent value. The Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) in South Africa, for example, collects material on LGBT people, communities and organisations, as well as government policies, legislation and societal attitudes; this material is then processed, stored in a secure facility and made accessible to researchers.
- "Archives" can also be used to describe the building in which archival collections are kept.

Why do we need LGBT Archives?

- "Without history there is no Pride!". We need archives in order to preserve the history of LGBT people, organisations and communities in Africa, and make certain that documents are preserved for the future and are not damaged or destroyed. Archives also represent an educational resource that can be used to promote greater understanding between different groups.

How do I store my archives?

- You can store your archives in a secure, accessible location on your organisations premises, one that is out of direct sunlight or wind and not near water-pipes. It is important to keep back-up copies of vital records, i.e. records without which your organisation cannot continue to operate effectively, at a secure, off-site location, so that they are not lost in the event of fire, flood or government raid.
- Some LGBT organisations may feel that they do not have the capacity to maintain their own archives, or that the political situation in their countries threatens the safety of their records. GALA is able to provide storage and cataloguing services for these LGBT organisations.

How do I submit our archives to GALA for storage?

- Contact the GALA archivist by telephone, email or post at: telephone, +27 11 717 1963; email, gala@library.wits.ac.za; or post, P.O. Box 31719, Braamfontein, 2017, South Africa. The archivist will help assess the situation and arrange for the transfer of the records.

WHY USE ORAL HISTORIES?

- The oral tradition is an important part of African ways of knowing and being. Elders and story tellers used stories and performance to document their history and pass this knowledge onto the next generation. Thus African cultures have historically been oral cultures.
- Story telling is also important in western LGBT communities where people often tell their “coming out” stories among friends.
- A lot of our LGBT history is not written down and exists in the stories that we tell each other. It is important to record these stories on audiotape so as to keep them for the next LGBT generation.

WHAT YOU NEED TO START AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

- You will need a good interviewer. Someone who listens well, has a wide network of contacts and is passionate about collecting stories.
- Equipment: a good quality and sturdy audio cassette recorder and good quality audio cassettes.
- Make sure the quality of the audio recording is good enough before you record. Test it first.
- Choose people who are naturally good story tellers and who like talking about themselves.

THE INTERVIEW

- Establish a connection and build trust with the person first – this may take up to four visits before you ask for an interview and bring your tape recorder along.
- Get their permission to do the interview on the tape at the beginning.
- Establish how the interview can be used – who can have access to it? Is it restricted?
- Have a conversation – use your questions as a guide – you can use the time line of their life: childhood, teenage years and then decades of their life: 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s.
- Ask general open ended questions to get the person talking. E.g “how” and “what” questions?
- Avoid questions where the person answers “yes” or “no” e.g did you go to bars?
- Encourage the person to talk spontaneously
- Steer the person back to points you want to explore in more details e.g. could you tell me more about
- Don't spend more than one to two hours of taped conversation

FOLLOW UP AND CATALOGUING

- The tape must be accurately labeled stating the date, time and location of the interview as well as the name of the interviewer and interviewee. The length of the interview should be noted.
- The interview report: A one page summary of the content of the interview with the topics covered on side A and side B.

TRANSCRIBING THE INTERVIEW

- Transcription is time consuming.
- Choose the best interviews for transcription.
- Write down or preferably type every word exactly as it is spoken on the tape.
- Do not summarise or paraphrase what is said.
- If the person wants to remain anonymous change all names and places or other identifying information in your transcript.
- If they want you to destroy the tape or return the tape do so.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

- We will have an ongoing dialogue using the “Get Organised” Page which will be built after the conference on the Behind the Mask Website www.mask.org.za
- Feel free to contact Ruth Morgan about oral histories or Anthony Manion about archiving and record keeping at GALA with any questions: gala@library.wits.ac.za.
- Or you can send your query to GALA by post: P.O. Box 31719, Braamfontein, 2017, South Africa..
- GALA is also happy to store any records, archives or material from oral history projects and to apply whatever restrictions you want us to use.