

PARBICA Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit Disaster Preparedness Guidelines – Author Profile – Brandon Oswald

With the assistance of the Programme Commission of the International Council on Archives, five new guidelines in PARBICA's Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit are being developed. The guidelines will cover topics of disaster management, identifying vital business records and assessing significant records in collections. These guidelines will be published in late 2018.

As part of the project to develop the guidelines, PARBICA has been privileged to have many specialists volunteer their time on this project. One of them is Brandon Oswald who has written three of the guidelines – Disaster Preparedness, Disaster Response and Disaster Recovery.

Brandon is the Founder/Executive Director of nonprofit organisation Island Culture Archival Support, that is dedicated to providing voluntary archival assistance to Pacific cultural heritage organisations. He has worked extensively in records preservation throughout the Pacific. Brandon began his archival career in the Digital Library Unit at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography Library before turning to freelance work. He earned his BA in Communications from California State University-Fullerton, and a Masters in Archives and Records Management from the University of Dundee. He is an active PARBICA member, and serves on the ICA Expert Group- Emergency Management and Disaster Preparedness.

In the interview below, we spoke to Brandon about his career in archives and love of the Pacific.

How did your interest in disaster management and archives start?

I got into archives later in life. Believe it or not I wanted to be the great American playwright. While I was writing plays, I needed money to pay the rent. So I worked in a variety of libraries during my twenties and early thirties. I worked in public, law and academic libraries.

My interest in archives began while working in the Scripps Institution of Oceanography Library. This venerable institution was the first of its kind in the USA and boasted a unique collection which I enjoyed working with. The archives were not my main duty in the library but I recall sneaking away to help with functions such as processing, preservation and digitising. The head archivist at the time was a woman named Deborah Day, who was very passionate about archives and I caught her enthusiasm. When she was young, she knew she wanted to be an archivist. This cracked me up. How many children have you ever heard say, "When I grow up I want to be an archivist"? Anyway, Deborah was a mentor to me. We both truly valued archives for research and writing, so access to collections was very important to us.

My interest in disaster management started shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck and flooded the city of New Orleans in Louisiana. I volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and our job was to gut people's homes where the waterline reached the ceiling. When the owner of the house came to visit us, they asked us to salvage anything we could – their personal collections - especially their photographs and letters. This reminded me that, although most things can be replaced, it was the homeowner's archives that were most important and irreplaceable. It also showed me how unprepared people were when it came to protecting their most valued documents and artifacts from unexpected disasters. Eventually I saw the same kind of issues in

disaster preparedness at cultural heritage organisations throughout the Pacific, and I made it a priority to assist while volunteering in the region.

What interests you most about the Pacific region?

The captivating and vibrant cultures on such tiny idyllic islands fascinate me. They all have similarities historically, but are quite disparate. I also believe that the region boasts some of the friendliest and most genuine people on earth. It is the kindhearted people that draw me back to volunteer again and again in these islands. Well, that and, of course, the feasts!

What do you think are the most important issues facing Pacific archives at the moment?

There are two important issues facing archives that I see at the moment. The first is convincing the right people that archives matter. In most cases this would be the Ministry in which the archives falls under. More recognition can lead to greater resources, funding, staff and training opportunities. I have seen some great strides in this at some Pacific archives such as the National Archives Solomon Islands. They have used International Archives Day to draw crowds and showcase their archives. Their Ministry will see the crowd and the interest in country's history and think, "well, maybe it does matter. How can we do more?"

I can recall during one of my first volunteer trips at the Vanuatu National Archives, a higher-up in the Ministry came by the library and saw us working on the archives' new policies and said, "Why would you want to protect those records. Those are just white man's records." Perhaps they are, but they still tell part of the story of Vanuatu and are of interest to researchers. But the time has come that we need to change the mindset of all Ministry higher-ups and leaders. Fortunately, I'm starting to see more and more involvement from the Ministry with their archives throughout the Pacific Islands.

Social media can also play a major role in convincing the right people that archives matter. I always highly recommend that all archives in the region should generate websites, Facebook pages, etc. With social media you can promote collections, create exhibitions and have easier access to records. It is a fairly easy and practical way of showcasing the archives that will attract people worldwide.

The second important issue that I see facing archives in the Pacific is the effect of climate change especially for low-lying islands. I have noticed weather patterns have become more intense in the region the past few years. The loss of an archives because of a severe natural disaster caused by climate change could conceivably happen within the near future and is a topic that should not be ignored. In fact, at the last ICA conference in Mexico there was a session that included a talk about developing "safe havens" where the copies of records from archives at risk be sent to a safer repository. Although this is in early stages, it is an interesting concept and I like that there is a group being proactive. I also believe that the time is right for PARBICA to start thinking similarly along these lines and to address this real issue at future conferences.

What have been some of your favourite moments working with archives in the Pacific?

There have been a lot of favourite moments working in the Pacific. Believe it or not, 2018 marks my 10th anniversary as a non-profit and couldn't imagine a better 10 years.

The projects I have done and the people I have met over this time have been wonderful. One of my fondest and proudest moments, however, was assisting to re-establish the Vanuatu National Archives. I worked with Anne Naupa which was a truly wonderful experience. And to this day I draw a lot from that experience while helping other archives in the region. Anne and I had great synergy, and her passion to start the archives was unbelievable and addictive. In the early days she was a librarian with not much archive experience. However, she understood the importance of archives and she really knew the history of Vanuatu which, of course, was crucial during our sorting and appraising stage.

I can recall the first time we saw the archives - I think it was around 2008 when we made that visit. The records were being kept in a decrepit building that looked like it was about to collapse. Nobody at the time was safekeeping the records. Anne instantly made the decision to remove the archives and bring the records to the National Library. As soon as she removed the last record, I believe a fire broke out in that dilapidated building. And that's how it all began. For the next five years or so we sorted, appraised, preserved, processed, and wrote policies. It was a lot of work- hot, sweaty and sometimes frustrating. But, I wouldn't have traded it for the world! Eventually, Anne brought in Augustine Tevimule who really showed an aptitude and passion for archival work and the preservation of Vanuatu's history. Anne was instrumental in getting a new archives and library building built which opened in 2013. It was a proud moment for all involved with the archives. It was more than a project, it was a journey!

What do you hope the new Toolkit modules will achieve?

First of all, it's an honour to be asked to write the modules. I hope that the disaster preparedness modules will inspire organisations in the Pacific to be more aware of the possible threats to their archives and proactive towards creating their own plan to combat these threats. The nice thing about these new modules is that you can easily use them to conduct in-country and/or regional workshops. Finally, I admit that I got so focused on the Pacific Islands that I forgot that the modules could be used throughout all of ICA's branches. I hope that organisations worldwide will embrace these modules and also be inspired to create their disaster plan.