



PICKING UP THE PIECES AFTER DISASTER STRIKES

Forest ranger Terra Kemper smelled the smoke and felt the heat as she drove from her home in southwestern Oregon to Collier Memorial State Park on the evening of September 7, 2020. A ranger as experienced as Kemper is able to “read” the smoke, the flames, the winds — and she knew right away it was time to evacuate the park’s Collier Logging Museum and also its campgrounds, where some 20 guests had pitched their tents for the night. Ultimately the 242 Fire, named for the nearest highway milepost, consumed 14,000 acres of forest, including roughly 486 of Collier’s 536 acres. It also consumed part of the museum’s collection of vintage vehicles, equipment, and artifacts, which were kept outdoors on its property.

Kemper’s priority was to save people first and then, ideally, the historic objects at the museum, for which she also serves as curator. But for now, Kemper knew the fire would have its way. Soon thereafter, she contacted Elaina Gregg, emergency programs coordinator at the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation (FAIC), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit funded by government agencies, individuals, foundations, and businesses that — among other things — aids cultural institutions with their collections and buildings. Gregg’s responsibilities include coordinating the National Heritage Responders (NHR) program, whose members are, as its mission statement reads, “trained professionals who provide assistance to institutions impacted by disasters.” What Kemper’s park had experienced surely qualified as a disaster.

By the time the smoke cleared, three weeks later, Kemper was able to assess the damage, not only to the landscape she helps oversee as a ranger, but also to the museum noted for its collection of large-scale vintage logging equipment, as well as a unique log cabin moved to the site 50 years ago. Among the near-casualties was a rare



Oregon park ranger Terra Kemper with the Collier Logging Museum’s rare 1906 steam-powered Stiff Boom McGiffert log loader



The tires and cab of the Collier Logging Museum's still-operating 1939 Caterpillar road grader were destroyed during the 242 Fire in September 2020.

Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. She was on that 1917 mansion's conservation and collections care staff when the winds and waters of Hurricane Irma hit hard in September 2017.

After Gregg sought NHR's help back then, she and other staffers began to work immediately with Viviana Dominguez, an independent conservator in Miami, one already well acquainted with the museum through previous contract projects in its rooms. Dominguez notes two main problems Vizcaya suffered once the Category 4 hurricane hit. "The winds and the storm surge were so great that they broke open the doors and the hardware holding the doors in place," she says. In addition to the salt spray and the water from Biscayne Bay

1906 steam-powered Stiff Boom McGiffert log loader, mounted on railway wheels, which had been licked and blackened by flames. The tires and the cab of a still-operating 1939 Caterpillar road grader had been burned away, but, alas, that old cabin had been reduced to charred timbers.

Kemper posted a request for help to Elaina Gregg, specifically about ways to stabilize the affected historic vehicles and equipment. On the other side of the country in Wiscasset, Maine, Molly O'Guinness Carlson, a conservator at the Head Tide Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, responded and volunteered to help. "After I sent the first e-mail to Elaina," Kemper recalls, "I got a response less than 12 hours later from Molly asking what artifacts I needed help with." Because of COVID-19 restrictions, Carlson and other volunteer conservators were not able to visit the Collier Logging Museum, but she could send along a steady stream of expert advice about how to stabilize the surviving artifacts. "Molly provided fabulous, helpful, comforting advice," Kemper says. "She gave me the resources I needed in a written report. She really set me up to be successful on the many subsequent steps I needed to take."

WEATHER REPORTS

NHR is accustomed to responding to big events — to damage inflicted by disasters such as wildfires, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes, events so big they appear on radar and are visible from outer space. But NHR's help is also about what happens after the storms pass and fires go out. Microscopic mold grows on documents and textiles. Metals corrode and rust. The structural integrity of historic objects becomes ever more compromised. Humidity warps works on paper. The security systems that protect institutions and collections fail as generators run out of fuel. Water works its way to short out wiring.

"We play a critical role in providing disaster-related resources to the cultural heritage sector," Gregg explains. "While FEMA [the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency] and other governmental organizations have started to include cultural heritage in their disaster planning efforts, FAIC's primary focus is the protection of cultural heritage." Gregg knows what it's like to be on the administrative side when disaster hits, and also in the eye of a storm, as she previously worked at Miami's

sloshing inside, numerous architectural features of the 32-room mansion were destroyed. "I arrived practically the next day," Dominguez recalls, "and my specific role, as a volunteer, was to photograph and document the damage from water. Vizcaya had a staff conservator, but a lot of staff members had evacuated the site and couldn't get back to it."

After providing this documentation and contacting numerous experts in conservation, Dominguez did what was most needed: She rolled up her shirt sleeves and trouser cuffs and waded into the water to start drying and cleaning surfaces and objects. "I helped sort wet textiles to send out for cleaning and repair. As the staff began to arrive back, they eventually took over." For instance, a Portuguese needlepoint rug in the dining room was submerged, so Dominguez and others pulled it up and sent it to an expert restorer.

Remko Jansonius, Vizcaya's deputy director for collections and curatorial affairs, has lived through so many hurricanes during his 15-plus years at the museum that he admits to getting their names confused sometimes. "Irma was bad, that I remember," he notes. Just prior to the storm's arrival, a security guard mounted a time-lapse camera to the building, the footage from which records the extent of the damage, a real-life horror film that dwarfs the powers of Godzilla. "One of the real benefits of having Viviana Dominguez on hand," Jansonius stresses, "was that she was able to sit down and really focus on some of the immediate concerns, while the



Conservator Viviana Dominguez processes a damaged textile from the music room in Miami's Vizcaya Museum and Gardens.



rest of the staff were running around in every direction attending to so many things. She was able to prioritize.”

MEETING THE STORMS

Even for museums in regions where hurricanes are customary, the storm names — Irma, Sandy, Maria, Florence, Katrina — become instant identifiers of periods in institutional history. Curators, directors, and other personnel invoke those names as if they are enemies who once literally stormed the gates to ruin buildings and artworks. While some damage lingers still, the real power of such storms and fires has since dissipated, in large part because of the work performed by NHR volunteers.

Karen Cana-Cruz, executive director of Puerto Rico’s La Casa del Libro, which is dedicated to the history of books and arts related to publishing, remembers the unwelcome visits her institution received from Irma and Maria, which occurred one after another in September 2017. Irma arrived only six weeks after La Casa had reoccupied its freshly renovated historic building in Old San Juan. The storm felled so many trees on the island that the natural wind barrier they once provided was lost. A brigade from NHR arrived in late November to evaluate the entire building for leaks and ancillary damage. Fortunately, Cana-Cruz says, many of the museum’s precious holdings were still safely packed awaiting reinstallation.

Two weeks after Irma, Maria arrived. “The main problem after Maria was that we didn’t have electricity,” Cana-Cruz explains. “That created a high humidity indoors that affected a lot of the collection.” In the many framed works on display, including some centuries-old incunabula (e.g., a page from the *Nuremberg Chronicles* of 1493), humidity became trapped between paper and frame, an ideal recipe for growing mold. So Cana-Cruz’s team asked Susan Duhl, a volunteer conservator with NHR, what to do. Should we open the building for air flow? She advised us not to do that. The salt air content was high outside, we had soot from cruise ships to contend with, and we also have a pigeon-filled park in front of the building. So she told us to keep the door closed. While she wasn’t there to solve our emotional problems after the hurricanes, just having her there to help did serve as comfort.”

Indeed, the bonds forged between museum personnel and NHR volunteers transcend the professional, whether they are collaborating on site or remotely (as is happening now due to the pandemic). “The visits from these conservators were vital,” Cana-Cruz emphasizes. “They were not only excellent, expert helpers, but they are also now friends. Personal friends and friends of the museum and of our community.” (As it happens, Maine’s Molly O’Guinness Carlson was involved at Casa del Libro as well as at Collier Memorial State Park.)

Anne Brennan, executive director of the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina, had a similar experience with the NHR conservators who helped her institution following Hurricane Florence in September 2018. She recalls being in New Jersey visiting relatives the week before the storm hit her hometown. “I remember seeing on the hotel TV the weather report showing a red dot on Wilmington as the landfall point.” Brennan headed home quickly, and, when it did hit, the storm was ostensibly a milder Category 1. Although she is a native of this region and has worked at the museum for 26 years, she confides, “Florence taught me that a storm’s category number does not matter at all. I thought I knew what a hurricane was, but Florence was unbelievable, something I’d never experienced.” The city of Wilmington was transformed into an island, with all roads cut off.

Although the Cameron Art Museum’s building remained largely intact, the more insidious threat was humidity, as at Casa del Libro. With electricity out, humidity levels rose inside. The institution, which is noted for its works on paper, had a generator, but it failed. Eventually Brennan found herself in the vault with a flashlight, having to decide which works she would carry first to a less humid part of the museum. “Do I take the [Richard] Diebenkorns, the [Mary] Cassatts, the many prints from the Louis Belden Collection?” she

(TOP) NHR volunteers Ann Frellsen, Bob Herskovitz, and Susan Duhl (kneeling) examine a damaged artwork at La Casa del Libro; photo: Karen Cana-Cruz ■ (MIDDLE) NHR volunteers Ann Frellsen and Molly O’Guinness Carlson (in white suit) prepare to enter La Casa del Libro in Old San Juan; photo: Karen Cana-Cruz ■ (ABOVE) Wrapped artworks that were saved from destruction at La Casa del Libro; photo: Ann Frellsen



Completed in 2002, the Cameron Art Museum was designed by architect Charles Gwathmey with a ventilation system inside the masonry that allows the building to “breathe” during hurricanes, which are a feature of life in Wilmington, North Carolina.

asked herself rhetorically. Brennan and the property plant manager brought as many pieces to the other side of the building as they could carry — as fast as possible. “Moving works of art puts them at greater vulnerability, even under good circumstances,” she emphasizes.

One of the Cameron’s consultant painting conservators, David Goist, rose to the level of hero when he contacted NHR and provided Brennan’s phone number. Because its building was unharmed and the humidity levels had been stabilized, Brennan and Goist decided the Cameron could play a different role in Wilmington’s recovery: it hosted a free workshop for local collecting institutions, individual collectors, and studio artists affected by the storm. NHR helped expedite the event, and, as the city continued to recover, Brennan invited members of the cultural community to camp out in the museum if they needed to. For days, some 200 people rolled out their sleeping bags and pitched tents in the galleries and offices. “We have an on-site restaurant,” says Brennan, “so our chef was cooking like mad to feed everyone, including the pets they brought.” In summing up the experience, Brennan observes, “We had lost so many trees in town, but trees grow back. Our cultural heritage can’t grow back if we lose it. NHR helped us preserve it.”

AFTER DISASTER PASSES

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, on-site visits by volunteer responders are no longer possible, at least for now. “One of our biggest goals is to facilitate virtual assessments of damage and provide support remotely,” Elaina Gregg says. “We’re trying to figure out how we can help despite not being

there physically.” She adds that there are some benefits to NHR’s increasingly virtual role: “We’re able to provide greater access to more information. It’s hard to say if we’ll return to entirely in-person training when the pandemic ends, or continue with a hybrid of in-person and virtual. Web-based instruction is proving very helpful at this time.”

Back in Oregon, Terra Kemper continues to survey the ravaged forest landscape and sniff for smoke, keeping in touch with NHR volunteer Molly O’Guinness Carlson 3,100 hundred miles away in Maine. Kemper also remains grateful to the many local volunteers who showed up to pressure-wash the museum’s road grader, and now a group dedicated to preserving historic steam-powered vehicles is keen to restore the log loader.

As an eighth-generation Oregonian, whose ancestors arrived via the Oregon Trail, Kemper knew already how committed the locals are to their forests. But she has also become acquainted with the dedication of kindred spirits who live far away. She reads aloud: “This is what Molly wrote in her latest follow-up: ‘Have I met your needs? What else can I do? This is what I’m here to do, to help you.’” ●

Information: *The Foundation for Advancement in Conservation offers a variety of emergency-related services; for details, visit culturalheritage.org/resources/emergencies. Donations to FAIC are fully tax-deductible and can be made at culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/donate. Collier Memorial State Park and Collier Logging Museum, stateparks.oregon.gov. To see videos of the damage caused by Hurricane Irma at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, visit virtualvizcaya.org/irma.html. Museo Biblioteca La Casa del Libro, lacasadelibro.org. Cameron Art Museum, cameronartmuseum.org.*

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