



Diggin' Up Archives with "Bro Joe"

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Tucked away in a tiny corner of La Salle University is a room few know about.

The La Salle Archives contains treasures amassed over a hundred years, some of the strangest sights to be seen for miles, and for quite a few hours a day, it contains one extremely interesting person. It also contains something else of incredible value and importance: It contains history itself.

And, indeed, Brother Joseph Grabenstein, 58, a self-described "archivist with attitude," can attest to the importance of some of the oddities of material history



that he has collected over his 14 years as archivist.

There are trophies, an ancient tabernacle built by some of the young delinquents at St. Gabriel's, two heads belonging to abandoned mascots, ancient soundboards once used by WEXP radio, 99 percent of the Collegians ever printed, full and empty wine bottles from the Christian Brothers' winery, and hundreds if not thousands of books and files on almost any topic concerning La Salle even slightly.

To some, this may appear to be a pile of abandoned junk, but to Grabenstein, it's all relevant, and it's all important.

In fact, he takes a very proactive stance toward collecting every bit of history he can get his hands on.

"I try to make history come alive," he said.

But the value of history wasn't something that struck Grabenstein upon taking up the position of archivist. For 18 years, he taught junior high school history at several schools in Maryland and Washing-

ton, D.C.

"I loved teaching," Grabenstein said. "I was a guy who would tell you, 'I'm going to die in a classroom.'"

After some time, however, the vocation began to wear on him.

"I burned out," he said. "The kids were learning their history, but I wasn't enjoying doing it."

With no desire to teach or write history, but still

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wanting to work in the field somehow, Grabenstein found himself stuck in a challenging situation.

Fortunately, he soon heard of the perfect opportunity: an opening at La Salle's archives under former longtime librarian Brother Thomas Warner.

After applying to a standing committee of Christian Brothers known as the Apostolate Committee, Grabenstein was granted permission to take a year off to pursue his third master's degree in library science and archives. He finished up his required studies in less than a year, which

was record time, and came to La Salle the following May.

"I finally got the green light to come here," he said. "I've been like a pig in mud ever since."

Though he started working at La Salle that May, Grabenstein worked for some time without even being on staff. It wasn't until August of that year that he was finally given the position of assistant to the archivist.

After another year of working under Warner, Grabenstein was promoted when the former retired as head archivist. At this point, he made some radical changes in the way the archives were run.

According to Grabenstein, his predecessor had no formal education in archival studies, and therefore applied his librarian skills to the job. Warner, he said, preferred to wait for things to come to him.

Grabenstein, however, was prone to actively pursuing what he needed.

"I won't wait for things to fall off the truck," he said."

Because of this attitude, the archives have expanded drastically since his inception as archivist.

Grabenstein views his job as composed of five main duties. The first of these duties is to appraise items. The question to ask is, "Does it fit?" Grabenstein said. According to Grabenstein, 99 percent of anything that mentions La Salle does fit.

When he has decided that an item does fit, Grabenstein must then set about acquiring it. This is the second step in the process, and includes anything from asking the staff and administration for various items, collecting things from the trash, and purchasing items on eBay, to taking pictures of various events, buildings and much more.

Others seemed to have noticed Grabenstein's active stance toward collecting

items.

"This summer I found out that other brothers refer to him as 'Brother Grab and Stash,'" said Dr. Alice Hoersch, executive assistant to the president at La Salle.

After acquiring items, Grabenstein said, he must set about to preserve them. Because many of the items

are older and prone to decay, special steps must be taken in order to prevent that.

These include acid-free paper and stainless-steel paper clips and staples, all of which are expensive and must be ordered from individual manufacturers.

The archives also are kept at a steady 68 degrees with 50 percent humidity, and are equipped with special lighting attachments to block out ultraviolet rays.

All of these expenses are covered by funds provided by the University and the Christian Brotherhood at about \$5,000 and \$6,000, respectively.

This, however, does not keep Grabenstein from dipping into his own pockets to buy things for the archives, he said.

Arranging the items is a duty of Grabenstein's that allows for more liberty. He is at will to arrange the archives as he sees fit.

Accessing is another task, but one that he usually gives to his student workers. This includes the systematic logging of much of the archives' information onto a computer. This makes it easier for Grabenstein to find information for people who come to him for help.

Despite the tedious sound of the

labor, the "work is actually pretty fun," said Lauren Balliet, a senior English major who has worked in the archives since 2006.

"[Brother Joe] is the best boss I've ever had," she added.

Grabenstein's duties as archivist stretch far beyond those just mentioned, however. He is a self-proclaimed "victim of [his] own success."

Because of the number of people in need of information, he is often bogged down with other types of work, such as providing writers with sources and lecturing freshman in First Year Odyssey classes.

He is also a member of the La Salle Singers in his free time.

Grabenstein estimates that he spends between 11 and 12 hours a weekday in the archives. He doesn't mind though, because he loves his job.

"The day I lose my enthusiasm is the day I want to quit," he said.

Others can attest to Grabenstein's enthusiasm for his job as well.

"Brother Joe is probably the most enthusiastic person I know," said Hoersch. "His love of history and the archives comes through in his dealings with all of us on campus."



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