Transcript of Interview with Lucinda Hemmick by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Lucinda Hemmick Interviewer: Kit Heintzman Date: 02/08/2022 Location (Interviewee): Long Island, New York Location (Interviewer): Transcribed By: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed include:

First learning about the Southold Indian Museum through teaching students science, becoming interested in its research, and becoming the museum's president. New York State requirements around Native American content in curriculum. Museum losing foot traffic during the pandemic; ongoing research at the museum throughout COVID. Public science, science education. Working as a high school chemistry teacher. Early preparation in 2020 to bring teachers online while watching other schools in different parts of the USA shut down; comparisons between online and in person teaching. Feeling safe, wanting an end to restrictions, and a return to normalcy. Social media messaging. Comparing shutdowns in the school and shutdowns at museums. Digitizing archival materials. Preparing the museum for reopening, new exhibits. How liability impacts the museum's decision to reopen. Mental illness in teenagers, observing depression in students online and offline. Having a high risk aversion threshold. Gain of function research in virology. Comparing New York's policy to the policies of neighboring states. Choice and masking.

Kit Heintzman 00:02 Hello.

Lucinda Hemmick 00:04 Hello

Kit Heintzman 00:05 Would you please start by stating your full name, the date, the time and your location?

Lucinda Hemmick 00:10

This is Lucinda Hemmick. I'm an Eastern Standard Time. 6:16pm. I'm in long in Long Island. My Museum is located in Salford Long Island. And I live in Cutchogue on Long Island.

Kit Heintzman 00:29

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under Creative Commons License attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Lucinda Hemmick 00:40 Yes.

Kit Heintzman 00:41

All right, I'd like to just start by asking you to introduce yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening to this, what would you want them to know about you and the place that you're speaking from?

Lucinda Hemmick 00:51

Well, my name is Lucinda Hemmick and I'm the president of the Salford Indian Museum, which is a chapter of the New York State archaeological Association. The museum is owned by the chapter, and it's located in South old New York. I am the museum president, but I'm also a high school science research teacher. So I do always have an agenda. And that's going to come out in this interview.

Kit Heintzman 01:19

Can I invite you to just like, start giving me that agenda? I'd love it.

Lucinda Hemmick 01:24

Well, a number of years ago, I got associated with a partnership for collaborating on large scientific experiments at Brookhaven National Lab. My school joined what's called the spark program, which is Students Partnering for Advanced Research and Knowledge. What it allows you to do is the students can propose an experiment to use a beam lines at the NSLS two, which is a national synchrotron light source at Brookhaven. And if their experiments are approved, they get to use the beam lines of free of charge and get assistance from the scientists. So I've always had an interest in archaeology, I'm pretty I'm pretty much interested in everything. So the original experiment that we did with the museum was they had a clovis point and a full some point. Clovis points are typical of the what's the first culture to be identified as coming into North America maybe 10-12,000 years ago. And the students wanted to know where these points came from. And so I contacted the museum, and they loaned us the points to do the experiment. And that was that that was actually the first time I knew about them, because I had just researched who's got some of these points. And so after the experiment, and visiting the museum, I realized how many artifacts and how, what amazing collection they had, and the kind of questions that the students could ask. And we got deeper and deeper into projects using the archaeological collection of the museum. And then I just sort of evolved into the President because I was already spending so much time there preparing for these projects. So it's been really fun.

Kit Heintzman 03:08

Would you tell me a bit about what your day to day was looking like in the pre pandemic world.

Lucinda Hemmick 03:14

In the pre pandemic world at the museum, we have no paid staff, we're all volunteers. And fact everyone has a day job. And so we're actually only open on Sundays. So that's a limited hours already. But we had a pretty good visitation. Because being that you're only open once a week, people who really want to come need to come on that Sunday. And we also would have field trips from the local school districts, high schools and universities. And that was sort of our moneymakers during the week, private tours, appointments, etc. So things were kind of rolling along for us. In New York State, there's a required component of the fourth grade curriculum on Native Americans. And the Native Americans in our region would have been the Algonquin. So there, there is that required unit, there's a state standardized test on it. So it really is to the advantage of the students to come to the museum to see what we have and get some experience. So that was sort of our normal operating, and then maybe one or two big fundraising festivals per year just to, you know, pay the bills, et cetera. So that's pre pandemic. Post pandemic, was just everything just dropped off the face of the earth. And for a long time, it took a while for

us to qualify in New York State to even reopen in our category of indoor entertainment. So there were many months where we could not open could not let anybody in. And then we were able to open in a limited way with all of the rules that New York State asked for for that, so we went back to our Sunday hours. But the of course, visitorship was very much down, because it came down to people's risk tolerance, you know, our usual regulars who would run in and try to have us identify artifacts, they were always there. But the people who would just happen to stop by because they drove by, and they're like, Oh, I've never been there, let me pull in no, you know, that wasn't happening anymore, because people just didn't want to go into any kind of a public space.

Kit Heintzman 05:33

I'd love to hear more about the museum being classified as a entertainment space.

Lucinda Hemmick 05:40

So an indoor entertainment that would maybe be like, an arcade, or a small theater or something like that. And so that's how we were classified in the the New York state regulations. So you know, when we reopen, we had a long list of paperwork that we filed, saying the kinds of things that we were going to do in our cleaning routine, and how we were going to record and our contact tracing and all of this. And as soon as that was submitted, then we reopened with all of the signage that we needed, you know, for masking and things like that. Because some visitors are still better than no visitors.

Kit Heintzman 06:32

And since, since the reopening, what are the what are the researchers who are coming in, what are they looking at your consistent?

Lucinda Hemmick 06:44

Well, the collaborations that we do are some, some of them are just what any museum with 100 years of archaeological records would always do would be say, there's a development in the region, and we happen to have records about a site. And so we would release those records to that archaeologist who would use the written records, but then also want to come into the museum to maybe photograph some artifacts from the site. So these are just services that we provide for free because we provide information. So there's that. And then there are other collaborations, like we're looking into interacting with the it's a, New York archaeological Council, where they have cultural resource site collections that need a home. And we're a museum, we have a home if we can make the space for it. And we were looking into, you know, making the space and using those site collections as new exhibits. And that helps us because we can rotate our exhibits. And it also gives us more archaeologists to collaborate, you get a wider network, you know, for so for me coming back to my agenda, you know, since I have the projects going on with the students all the time, this puts me in contact with experts that I wouldn't have met otherwise. So for example, one of the archaeologists that we're working with, gave me the name of a person who's a ceramics expert in the Northeast. And I was really, really lucky to get her to help advise my students on one of our research projects where we're trying to identify the different types of clay used all along Long Island to make ceramics. So that's strictly a scientific study. But you, you totally need the context, you need an expert. You know, there's no replacement for somebody who's thought about this for decades and published in it. So every project that we run, I try to find an expert who's got a big background and would be also willing to deal with my high school students and answer their very, very basic questions. Patiently.

Kit Heintzman 08:53

Do you remember when you first heard about the pandemic?

Lucinda Hemmick 08:57

Um, let me think, well, we heard whispers about, you know, something coming from China, et cetera, and then travel restrictions. And then it started to be a concern in the back of our minds as teachers what might happen. So we started hearing rumors about, you know, the Washington State epi, epidemic sort of set it off for everyone. Because if you think to the end of that, you're already thinking schools might close. And so for instance, at my school, we all thought the worst and so we ran around gathering materials in case we were forced to go home, which happened. So that was in March of the pandemic. So those of us that were thinking the worst were prepared because we had already taken everything home or dumped everything in our drives. So that if we went online, we will be fine. So we spent weeks just preparing for that. So when it came, we were ready for it. And then we we did online instruction from March to the end, to June of that first year, but then in the fall, we opened back up. But with masking. So fortunately, we really only missed three or four months of instruction in the schools. I mean, we were online, but it's never the same.

Kit Heintzman 10:17

Would you say a bit about the difference between teaching in person and what happened when it was online?

Lucinda Hemmick 10:23

Well, online instruction might be okay, for that mature adult who's very motivated and is able to focus. That's a small community of people. That's not your typical teenager, teenagers need social interaction, they need face to face experiences, it doesn't work for them, particularly because of their makeup. You know, it's sort of a perfect storm to have any unmotivated teenager, learn something in front of a computer. You know, sure. For the most motivated students, they actually did fine. Everything was fine. But for anybody who was on the edge, and it didn't work for them. It it was very, very hard. And then at the, at the museum, we saw other museums, starting online virtual programs, and things like that. But my experience with the school sort of colored my response to that, because after a while, everyone got zoomed out. And you could only take so many zoom talks and talking by chat, etc. So we decided against launching virtual programs and talks, we just said, You know what, we're gonna wait this one out, and we're not doing anything until people are back physically. And that was partly because of my experience with the schools.

Kit Heintzman 11:50

How would you compare with the with the return to in person in schools and in the museum? How are you feeling about safety in those two spaces for yourself, personally?

Lucinda Hemmick 12:01

I feel fine. I went out and got vaccinated as did most of my teacher friends, because I'm in a building with 3000 students, and I haven't caught it yet. So that's just dumb luck, because I'm exposed all the time. So we got vaccinated, we got boosted. And, you know, we wear the masks, and we go about our business. Now, the museum is a different place, because the school you have to go, you have to give instruction students have to go, a museum is optional. So if you're feeling kind of queasy about going in public spaces, you're not going to a museum, you're not going to the movie theater, you're just going to wait it out, you're going to be cautious. And I get that

Kit Heintzman 12:45

you had mentioned that in our sort of standard year pre pandemic, that one of the things you would be doing are regular fundraising events. What's that look like mid pandemic?

Lucinda Hemmick 12:57

Oh, please, you know, we can't even think about having a festival, or any kind of crowded public event, you know that it's just a nightmare. It cannot work at all, you know, there needs to be an end to all the restrictions, or return to normalcy. And then we would plan, there's no way that we can even envision it right now. In New York State. So we're waiting for everything to calm down. And then everyone will sort of have an appetite to get back to normal. And then we'll start thinking about dates. You know, because everyone's mind is just blown right now. Because they can't conceive of going to a large event.

Kit Heintzman 13:43

What's the word pandemic come to mean to you?

Lucinda Hemmick 13:46

Well, to me, you know, since I have a science background, I think about it as a worldwide event, which is what this one was just like the Spanish flu. So you know, as we looked around the museum sort of thinking about, you know, what's the history of this, I realized that in our collection, we have a very beautiful, it's an Ojibwa jingle dress. So this is something that would have been worn by the Ojibwa women who would dance in the jingle dresses when someone needed healing. So they had this belief that the sound of the jingling bells, they were actually made of tobacco can lids in unison would drive off whatever the sickness was. And I read that during the Spanish flu that some of the tribes would have a jingle dress ceremony to try to keep the Spanish Flu away, which is almost exactly 100 years ago. And so that was a kind of an opportunity to do some research into that and kind of highlight that are part of our collection and put that on the Facebook's and so it was kind of like a silver lining because I had never really thought about the significance of this artifact.

Kit Heintzman 15:02

Tell me about the Facebook post. How did you how did you show that off?

Lucinda Hemmick 15:07

Well, of course, you can add everything you want to your Facebook posts, you can add photos, you can add links, things like that. And so because we were in the same situation as other historical societies, things like that, I tried to create a network where if I was showing a photo of something, or telling a story, I would put a link into maybe a library that it had a showing about this in the past so that we could share the publicity and interested people could go from link to link. So that's something that I probably wouldn't have done. If I hadn't been forced into the virtual world so much. I was trying to just take advantage of it. And it's kind of a win win, win to institutions, you know, can get viewership on one thread.

Kit Heintzman 16:02

How quickly did the museum respond to the pandemic, in contrast to the schools?

Lucinda Hemmick 16:11

Well, shutting down and shutting down, everybody shut down immediately, the schools had to get back to work. So in fact, I believe we were forced to leave the building on a Friday, and we had class on Monday virtually. And that's because at my school, all teachers are already required to have a Google Classroom. And I also had a website for my course, because it's, I teach AP chemistry. So we have we things have to move on. So we had the infrastructure digitally, to go right back at my school, but only because of circumstances we had already been doing that. But a lot of other schools in the area really struggled. And they closed down for several weeks, while they got up to speed with getting Google Classroom and things like that. We'd already been using it for years. So we were very lucky. In that sense, the museum, we're really not set up to digitally interact with guests at all, unless we want to set up a zoom or something like that. So there was a sense of just retreating and saying, Okay, we know what we can't do, what can we do. So we've been working for years with our standard past perfect digital catalog. And we were very lucky several years ago that the Shippo, which is a state historical preservation office, offered to scan all of our 100 years of field notes and records for free for their information. So they would store that site information, and then just return it to us digitally. So we have a person that works with a museum who just loves to do that. And so she would work from home, and then just start stitching together all the digital records with a photo catalog that I had done, courtesy of a grant from the gardener's foundation here on Long Island. So took advantage of that sort of vacuum, to get things organize, so that when we do interact with archaeologists or other researchers, then at the click of a button, we can pull up a site and photos and records and everything's digitized. Instead of saying, well, I think that's in the storage room, you know. So, you know, it was an opportunity to just kind of get our act together, to so that we could kind of pounce on any opportunity, and develop new exhibits, so that when guests come back, it looks fresh, there are some new things. We got some donations in the meantime, we're designing new exhibits around them. And we look forward to kind of like coming back into the public, with some fresh exhibits with some new things. That all were able to be accomplished just because, you know, we've had plenty of time with no people around to get stuff done.

Kit Heintzman 19:16

How are decisions about what the next exhibit will be made within your museum?

Lucinda Hemmick 19:22

So we have an archaeology advisor on the board. And what she usually does is she proposes a new idea for say, a big summer exhibit. So that's generally her turf. But if something comes up where we're involved in something else anyway, it can turn into our summer exhibit. And then new exhibits pop up when we receive new donations. For example, we're receiving a mammoth tusk. So I'm coordinating with a lot of people who know about it laterals and then in the northeastern Clovis culture to make an entire new exhibit that features the mammoth tusk, but also brings in our Clovis points at laterals, lateral weights. So there's sort of a ripple effect when you receive a new donation because you tend to center a new exhibit around it, and reinterpret some of the artifacts that you already have.

Kit Heintzman 20:24

What's working from home been like?

Lucinda Hemmick 20:26

Well, I was only teaching from home for four months, did not like it, because I was frustrated that it wasn't efficient with the students. You know, not some of them fine. Some of them not. So it's out of your control, because you don't see them personally. So you have that feeling of loss of control, which teachers love control, or the illusion of it.

Kit Heintzman 20:55

What does the word health mean to you?

Lucinda Hemmick 20:58

Well health means to me, you know, the pillars you have physical, mental, spiritual, and you had to pay attention to all of them. And let's add in social for teenagers, that's so high on their list. So, you know, I've, I, I feel horribly about some of the mental illness effects this has had on the teenagers around the country. Because if you can imagine it, it's like their world ended. Because they couldn't see their friends. They couldn't go to their house. You know, they couldn't go to school to socialize. They missed all of those hallmark events, the prom the this, you know, and as adults, we're like, oh, big deal, the prom. No, it's It's their whole world.

Kit Heintzman 21:52

Were you able to see that manifest in particular ways with your students?

Lucinda Hemmick 21:57

They were just, what's the word? They really in general seem depressed. They, they were less verbal. Even when we came back to school, with masks on, instead of being bubbly, and asking questions all the time and raising their hands, withdrawn. I would describe it as an entire withdrawn class, almost like they went through some trauma, and they couldn't get out of it.

Kit Heintzman 22:33

How did that change how you were managing the class with a less engaged purpose?

Lucinda Hemmick 22:40

So that's a problem. Because if students don't come forward and ask questions and volunteer, now you have to draw them out, you know, you're supposed to kind of walk around and make eye contact and thing, but you can't get within six feet of them. So it's a challenge, because you're trying to sort of like get them to wake up. But your usual mechanisms for getting them to wake up, some of them aren't even allowed. So difficult.

Kit Heintzman 23:09

What are some of the things that you want for your own health and the health of people around you?

Lucinda Hemmick 23:13

Well, if I had to say one thing, I would, I would love it, if people would rethink their idea of risk aversion. We're never getting to 0% cases, we're going to have to accept this. And if we treat every new disease that comes along COVID are not as something to run away from and lock yourself in your house. That's no way to live life. And so I think that we have to get over this risk aversion that we have. And let's not forget that there's a liability here to, you know, like this decision to reopen the museum. That's controversial, right? Because what if someone complains that, you know, they got COVID by coming to your museum, and if you wanted to avoid that you'd never open I know, lots of places around here that never reopened. Probably because they were worried about liability. See, that's not an option in the school. You had opened the school. That's it. But a business, a museum, a theater, that's optional. You might go broke, but you don't have to open if you don't want to.

Kit Heintzman 24:29

How's your own journey about risk aversion changed over time?

Lucinda Hemmick 24:35

Well, I don't really have much risk aversion so I really can't speak to it. It's horrible to say that, but everybody's got their own sort of thing. And I accept a lot more risks than other people would. And it's probably my science background. I just take everything as I questioned everything. So I don't agree that will never be a 0% risk for anything, you walk out the door, you get hit by a car, everything is random. So COVID is just another thing that you have to kind of manage at your own comfort level.

Kit Heintzman 25:21

What are some of the things that you think we've learned accurate or not from COVID?

Lucinda Hemmick 25:27

Wow, there's so much inaccurate, I don't even know where to start. Alright, so one thing that is accurate, is that coming from a science background. That just because you can do a thing doesn't mean that you should, you know, I have a background in molecular biology. And there's always that time as a scientist, that you say, Oh, this would be really cool to do this. Wait, should I do this? You have to ask yourself that question, because society's not asking that question. So with the gain of function research, I hope that there's a lesson learned there. Because, sure, that's good information. But now let's balance that against what could what could go wrong? I think that is a fair question to ask whether what went on with that is worth the potential for knowledge gained from that kind of research.

Kit Heintzman 26:30

Okay, curious, could you just explain what gain gain, gain of function research is, to someone who's listening and might not know?

Lucinda Hemmick 26:38

Well, if you have a virus and is currently only infecting, say, monkey, to monkey, and you're curious what you could do to that virus to make it infect a human. That would be a gain of function across species. All right. So if you're dealing with somebody doing bio weapons research in a country that we will not name, then you need to know as much as they know. And how do you do that you do the same experiments, you do the same work. So I see that argument. I totally see that argument. I get it. But accidents happen. So you carry out dangerous research. And even as careful as you might be, you're not immune to accidents nobody is.

Kit Heintzman 27:30

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Lucinda Hemmick 27:34

I feel pretty good, at least in my area. We have Connecticut and New Jersey just lifted mass mandates on schools. And I think that by peer pressure, New York will have to follow because the public will say but but but look at the but look at these. So I'd love to see the mask kind of get off the kids because that is what's making them withdrawn. It's making them feel like they're muzzled. It's making them feel like they're doing something that is not necessary. I'm not in control of their feelings. I'm with the school, I gotta support the school, the school says, do this, I'm going to do that. I'm going to have them do that. So I would like there to be sort of a sea change so that everyone gets mandates lifted, do you want to continue to wear a mask? knock yourself out. You know, but give people the choice.

Kit Heintzman 28:30

I'd love to hear you say a bit more about what you've been observing with peer pressure between states and policy.

Lucinda Hemmick 28:40

Well, people just go with the flow, you know, if they see their neighbors doing something, and then the public notices that, it doesn't escape the public's notice. And you have to kind of look at your policies and see how they fit with what the public is expecting you to do. And it gets all the way back to that risk aversion. You know, how do you balance the risk that you perceive against the wishes of the parents and the compute communities that's going on all over the country. So that's a hard hard job for a school board. School boards have to make these decisions, and they have to weigh everything. They have to think about, are we doing something that's going to make be a health risk? Are we feeling pressure to do something that we don't think is right? So I have no envy for school boards in these days.

Kit Heintzman 29:33

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Lucinda Hemmick 29:38

Well, in general, longer term. My hopes are always the same, that everybody gets to do what they're interested in doing. And no one has limitations. And everybody lives their best life.

Kit Heintzman 29:58

What are some of the ways that you been taking care of yourself, or you've been witnessing students take care of themselves?

Lucinda Hemmick 30:06

Well, I think they still have close relationships. And they've tried to keep those going in the school. I mean, that is A number one with teenagers, they have to have their social, they have to be with their peers who have to talk with him every day. And they're all connected by phones. So that was already an advantage. Because when things go dark at the school, you get right on the phone, or you can, you know, have FaceTime or whatever. So, it's lucky that we had the ability to go to that right away. So, you know, I think most of them I managed it really well, I have to say, because everything has been a shock, shock to the system.

Kit Heintzman 30:56

This is, this is my second last question. And it's a little odd.

Lucinda Hemmick 31:01 Okay.

Kit Heintzman 31:01

Um, so we know, as you've pointed to, that we're in this moment where there's all of this biomedical research happening. I'm wondering what you think people in the humanities and the social sciences can be doing right now, to help us understand the social experience of COVID?

Lucinda Hemmick 31:21

Well, that's an excellent question. Because, you know, my science buddies and I were talking at the very beginning of this, that, Oh, we really hope somebody starts a study of cortisol levels in in schoolchildren and teachers, because that would be such an enormously, you know, a wealth of information. But with everything blowing up around you, you don't start a new study. But, you know, if you want to look at the effects of stress on people, and what it makes them do, that's the domain of the social, right? Look at what's happened with people retiring early. Finding out that working at home is great and never want to go back, the beginning of the digital nomad up, I can live in Africa and do this job, you know, so if you want to look at it as silver lining, we got more options out of this, do I really need to commute for an hour and a half to go to that building? No, because I've been doing this without, so I'm kind of a silver lining person. You know, the biomedical research is what it is, it's going to keep on being accidents, et cetera. That's kind of a separate issue to me. I'm always interested in people having more options. And I think that this pandemic gave people options they didn't know they had.

Kit Heintzman 32:48

What are some of those options?

Lucinda Hemmick 32:51

Well, that would be do you need to put in FaceTime to do your job? Do you need to sit there and be in a meeting for two hours on a day when it could be a Zoom meeting, you could be doing something else? I'm a big believer and not wasting time. So you know, latin, less FaceTime, less commuting, less waste of time, all for it.

Kit Heintzman 33:21

And this is my last question, but I'm gonna sneak another one. And that's very close. But technically, the sort of last solely contained question, which is, I'd like you to imagine a historian in the future someone far enough in the future that they have no lived experience of this moment. What stories would you tell them you want preserved? What do you want to make sure history doesn't forget about this moment?

Lucinda Hemmick 33:52

That's a tough one, because I've got my opinions, but I'm trying to curb them. Um,

Kit Heintzman 34:00

You are for the sake of the interview as like invited to be as free as you would like. So like that's entirely at your own comfort.

Lucinda Hemmick 34:09

Well, in my opinion, this is going to be seen as an overreaction by some to a virus that really didn't have the lethality of some others like smallpox, Ebola, et cetera. But, um, it exposes, as I was talking about before, the whole risk aversion part of society. How much liberty are you willing to part with to have zero risk? This is what

strikes me about the whole experience. And I think that's going to just emerge as something that we learned from this

Kit Heintzman 35:00

My secret tag on question to that is, because of the work that you do with the museum, I want to ask with a deeper timescale, if it were an archaeologist, what would you tell someone, so far in the future to be looking at right now?

Lucinda Hemmick 35:16

Well, assuming that many of these masks are plastic and plastic is forever, if you were going to do a dig, and locate this time period, you would see this huge, spreading out of the mask artifacts everywhere. And that's got to draw the attention of someone who knows nothing of this period. And then they would try to start explaining and well, what's up with all these masks, I must have been something bad going on, they would piece it together. You know, if you go back to this Spanish flu, that wasn't a thing, then you wanted to get away from it, you just went indoors. But now we have all of this evidence, you know, so I think it would be interesting to be an archaeologist several 100 years from now, or 1000 years, when that's really far enough to just not know what was going on and understand it. And look back at these huge changes and wonder what kind of an illness brought on this reaction? You know, you might be curious about it.

Kit Heintzman 36:22

Those are all of my questions. And at this point, I just want to open some space, if there's anything you want to share about your experience of COVID or the last two years to please do so.

Lucinda Hemmick 36:34

Nope, I think that I've answered all your questions, and that's about all I had to say. So I wish you luck with your project. It's very interesting. And that's about it.

Kit Heintzman 36:47

Perfect. Thank you so much.

Lucinda Hemmick 36:49 All right. Have a good evening.

Kit Heintzman 36:51 You too.