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### Interview Series

Kimberly McCray  
*Virginia Quilt Museum*

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## *Interview Series*

This year, our interview feature includes a discussion with a local museum executive director from Virginia. This spring we were looking to publish interviews with executive directors of local, smaller, and arguably more "niche" museums or public history sites from around the state of Virginia, than are normally addressed or have even been interviewed by our journal in the past. Managing or working in a museum that is off the beaten path, about something other than the American Civil War or presidents, and is trying to do so on limited budgets, makes public history jobs that much more difficult. Discussions of this type are lacking and it is our hope that this small contribution can help encourage more people to both visit and support all of our wonderful museums and public history sites, big and small. This one-on-one will provide readers with a variety of perspectives and ideas from these professionals in the history field.

Kimberly McCray is the executive director of the Virginia Quilt Museum which is in Harrisonburg, Virginia just down the street from James Madison University. She received her M.S. in Library Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, an M.A. in Public History from North Carolina State University, and a B.A. in History from James Madison University. Her work history contains time spent in a variety of library and museum settings, including positions at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, North Carolina State University Library's Special Collections, and Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

1) What types of duties does your job typically entail?

**Kimberly McCray:** As I am the only full-time staff at a small museum, my job entails a great deal of variability. In any given day, I pass my time responding to voicemails and emails, overseeing event planning, editing our website, sending out eblasts, managing the volunteer schedule, troubleshooting

technology hiccups, designing marketing materials, developing fundraising campaigns, communicating with Board members and volunteers on the status of various projects, training staff and volunteers, making bank deposits, typing up lots of meeting agendas, and even manning the front admission desk on days when we have no volunteers. No two days are the same.

2) What made you decide to pursue this career path?

**Kimberly McCray:** I was first introduced to the Public History field during my undergraduate studies at JMU through classes I took with Dr. Lanier, Professor Nash, Dr. Boyd-Bragg, and others. I was inspired by the many possibilities the Public History realm offered for making history relevant and accessible to the average citizen. I did not care to create “History for Historians”, but wanted to be “on the ground”, using the lessons of the past to aid people in making sense of our confusing world and find inspiration in our shared humanity.

3) What skills or attributes would you look for in someone applying for your position?

**Kimberly McCray:** Other than obviously needing some familiarity with museums and non-profits, in a small museum or site such as mine, flexibility would probably be the number one requirement. Anyone who needs a lot of routine in their working life would struggle greatly. The job also requires someone with good interpersonal skills – you must be able to be a skilled communicator when working with so many different people. After all, in a small site, you may be managing four-part time staff members instead of one full-time staffer at a larger museum, or six volunteers instead of one part-time staffer. There are more schedules to juggle and more personalities to consider. Lastly, the person must work well both with fine details and the bigger picture. No job is too big or too small.

- 4) What do you enjoy most about your job?

**Kimberly McCray:** The aspect of my job that I enjoy the most is project management. It is easy to get overwhelmed with the little pieces and steps of any project – an exhibit, a campaign, an event – but when you see the completed product and the positive responses of the visitors and attendees to that product, it is very powerful.

- 5) What is the most difficult aspect of your job?

**Kimberly McCray:** For me personally, the most difficult aspect, *at first*, of being the Director of a small museum was “not letting the perfect get in the way of the good”. Because small museums never seem to have enough of two big things - time and money – I sometimes must release products that are not quite up to the standard that I would like. Maybe that flyer had a logo that was a bit pixelated, or maybe the invitations to an event went out a few days late, or maybe I didn’t have time to personalize a donor letter the way I should. Depending on your personality and perfectionist nature, not being able to follow best practices can be frustrating. In the end, you must be able set those feelings aside, do your best, focus on the big picture, and not allow your standards to get in the way of moving forward.

- 6) How much does historical knowledge play into your daily work?

**Kimberly McCray:** Very little. It is common in any field for administrators to be somewhat removed from the content and product of the field, and Public History is no different. As a Museum Director, you spend much more time on fund development, volunteer training, and typing agendas and minutes than getting your hands dirty in the archives. If you want to do historical research or write exhibit copy, you probably should not become a Director.

- 7) In your opinion, how essential are internships for students hoping to pursue a career in public history?

**Kimberly McCray:** Internships, volunteer work, part-time assistantships and so on, are 100% beneficial. In undergrad, and even grad school to a certain degree, you are presented with a great deal of theoretical information, case studies, and best practices. This is all very important and lays the groundwork, but learning about something and doing it are two different things! I would recommend that every student complete at least two or three internships before they enter the field, and strive for different environments so you can test out which type of organization you prefer – small or large, public or private, narrow subject matter (take the Virginia Quilt Museum for instance!) or more flexible in focus (a local historical society), and in a small town or big city (do you want your museum to be the main draw for tourists or do you want to be part of a larger network of cultural sites)? View your internships (and even your first couple of full-time jobs after you graduate) as a buffet of possible career opportunities and take the time to taste-test what is the best fit for you. You may be surprised!

- 8) Have you encountered any on-the-job challenges that your training and/or education not prepare you for?

**Kimberly McCray:** My Public History training did not prepare me especially well for the financial end of non-profit management. I have had to learn these skills on the job. If a student wishes to become Museum Director or Assistant Director or any other upper-level position, I would strongly encourage them to take a non-profit management business course if possible. It will lay the groundwork for being able to “talk to the talk” of endowments, bequests, year-end campaigns, etc., and will also help you better understand and communicate with your organization’s bookkeeper, treasurer, etc.

- 9) What advice would you give to graduate students applying for jobs in your field?

**Kimberly McCray:** Prepare for each interview like it is the biggest exam of your life. Pour through the organization’s website and newsletters. Talk to members and volunteers. Heck, stalk the current Board members and staff online in search of personal connections and things you have in common. Drop your application off in person (if you’re local). If you have a somewhat non-traditional entry way for a position, or perhaps don’t *quite* meet the qualifications, fight for it – make a phone call to the hiring manager or better yet, meet up with a Board member or other influential player and explain your interest in the position. Having an insider who will speak out on your behalf can make a huge difference. It is a competitive field. Don’t hound anyone or look desperate, but do what it takes to make yourself stand out.

Test the waters. As I said before, complete as many internships and do as much volunteer work as you can. But even after you get your first job, don’t be afraid to move on. There is a prevailing employment “myth” that you need to stay at your first job for three years, your second for five years, and so on. If you are in a job you enjoy and that is serving your career path well, then by all means, follow that advice. But in my experience, personal and professional growth is something that is understood by most potential employers. Don’t be afraid to continue searching in a deliberate and intentional way until you find a job that fits your passion and your talents.

“There is always room for good people” – this was the advice given to my archival management class by one of my all-time favorite professors when one of my grad school classmates was lamenting about the difficulty of the job market (this was back in 2010 – it’s gotten better). I have always carried it with me. By “good people”, he did not mean the people with the fanciest degrees or the flashiest computer skills. He meant people who work hard, treat people with respect, and inspire those around

them. Be a good person and follow your gut and you will find your professional home!

- 10) In your opinion, what do employers in the museum/public history field look for in cover letters? What should absolutely be included? Conversely, what pitfalls should recent graduates avoid?

**Kimberly McCray:** Well, for one, it needs to be well-written. I shouldn't have to say that, but I have read some pretty awful cover letters in my day. Have every letter you write be proofed by 1) a skilled writer/editor/someone who will catch your awkward sentence structure and misspellings and 2) someone in the field in a position similar to the one you're applying for.

Second, do not even begin to write the letter until you've spent at least a couple of hours researching the job, the organization, the location, etc. Then spend some time reflecting on why you want that job and what skills and interests might best fit with the position and site. You need to have a feel for the job and the place beyond what you read in the job description to have any hope of writing a personal and well thought-out cover letter.

Then, make an outline and follow a basic cover letter format – first, introduce yourself and tell me what job you're applying for, then give a brief synopsis of your background (degrees and where you currently work --- save most of the details for your CV/resume) and then take a paragraph or two to tell me why you want and are a good fit for the job in question (reference several aspects of the job posting you are skilled in to show me you actually read the posting – you'd be surprised how many letters are obvious cut and paste template jobs). Lastly, sum it all up in a nice concluding paragraph. If there are personal reasons that are relevant and aren't a bunch of fluff (you are inspired by the site's mission, you are from the area and are wanting to return home, you attended an event at that museum and were impressed by \_\_\_\_), share that. No one wants to read a dry letter that sounds like it was

written by a robot.

11) What is your museum's mission and vision?

**Kimberly McCray:** The mission of the Virginia Quilt Museum is to celebrate and nurture Virginia's quilting heritage.

12) What are your museum's resources and restraints?

**Kimberly McCray:** The VQM's primary restraint is our short bench. We fortunately have the support of a great number of student workers and volunteers, but we still frequently struggle to find regular helpers with the energy and skills needed to take on some of our larger projects and tasks. This short bench is of course due to the even greater overarching restraint of operating within a small budget.

13) Who are your museum's constituents? What is being done to potentially expand that list?

**Kimberly McCray:** The Virginia Quilt Museum has a very interesting constituent base. One of course is the quilting community. We estimate that about half of our visitors are quilters or come into the museum as the guest of a quilter, and the clear majority of our members and donors are quilters or quilt enthusiasts. A second constituent group is comprised of fans of history who come to either enjoy our beautiful historic home or view our heirloom quilts. A third group is comprised of general tourism traffic – folks who perhaps are passing through the Valley and decide to spend a day in Harrisonburg, leaf-peepers jumping off the Skyline Drive for the afternoon, or Massanutten residents wanting to get away from the resort.