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Material Culture of a Community Trauma: Building a Memorial Collection Out of the Isla Vista Tragedy

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Material Culture of a Community Trauma: Building a Memorial Collection Out of the Isla Vista Tragedy

This paper was prepared for and presented to the Western Association of Women Historians in May 2015. A presentation based upon the paper was later given at the Society American Archivists meeting in July 2017. Minor updates were made before posting the paper to eScholarship in December 2020.

Abstract

When tragedy strikes your community, few people think about preserving the objects associated with the social mourning process. This paper discusses a project to document our community's response to a mass murder. It describes how we collected and organized materials from spontaneous memorials to make them accessible to scholars in the future. Material culture is not just the realm of archaeologists; it is also the domain of librarians, archivists, curators and historians. Our project demonstrates how a campus community can work together to preserve materials that tell the story of such an event and those who were affected by it.

Introduction

Friday night on May 23, 2014 started out like any other Friday night of a 3-day holiday weekend. I recall seeing a text on my cell phone from our campus alert system just before I went to bed. The text said something like "Report of shots fired in Isla Vista." Isla Vista (IV), a community adjacent to our campus, has a high concentration of rental properties and is home to a large percentage of our student body. For decades this area has been known for the parties and "goings on" that occur there. There was a part of me that night that thought it was just another alert that would later prove to be nothing significant. Sadly, I was mistaken. The next morning when I turned on CNN, I learned that our community, like many others before us, had been the site of a mass murder.

As a historian, my general practice is to avoid using the first person in my writing. For this paper, however, I think that is impossible. Like many others in our community I have been

deeply affected by this event. It is difficult to approach it from a position of scholarly neutrality. While I did not know any of the victims personally, I know witnesses and close friends of the victims, and I have met members of the victims' families. I have also seen the impact of this tragedy on everyone in our community. Therefore, I have decided to present a first-hand account of our efforts to build a memorial collection related to the event. While I hope that there will never be another community that experiences this type of tragedy, I know that it will happen again and offer this account as a guide for future collection builders.

Campus and Community

The University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) is one of 10 campuses of the University of California system, located about 100 miles northwest of Los Angeles. Situated on 1,055 acres of ocean-front property in Santa Barbara (the "American Riviera"), the university emphasizes its status as a major research university and the fact that the faculty includes 6 Nobel laureates. For the 2014-2015 academic year the student population was around 19,300 including about 2,800 graduate students. At the time of the tragedy, approximately 38% of the student body lived in university-owned housing. Some of this housing, as well as the bulk of non-university rental properties occupied by UCSB students, are concentrated in Isla Vista. During the 2014-2015 school year, 40% of the student population lived in fraternities, sororities, and non-university rental properties in the community.¹

IV, as we call it, is an unincorporated community that lies on the western edge of campus. As a "census-designated place," the 2010 census measured the population as 23,096. According to that same census, 19,574 (84.8%) of Isla Vista residents are in the 18-24 age group. Renters occupy about 97.4% of the housing units in the community. In addition to UCSB students, a significant number of Santa Barbara City College students and other residents live in IV.²

As the population demographics suggest, Isla Vista has a completely different "vibe" than the rest of Santa Barbara and its surrounding communities. The young population of mostly college students is concentrated in an area of just 1.86 square miles, with a population density of 12,000 per square mile. During the late 1960s and early 1970s IV was a center of American

counterculture as the site of student activism and the anti-war movement. The best-known event from this era occurred on February 25, 1970 when student protestors burned down the Bank of America building.³

More recently, Isla Vista has been the scene of notorious large-scale street parties on Halloween weekends, as well as those associated with social media-promoted events such as Floatopia and Deltopia. On April 5, 2014, Deltopia made the national news when a riot broke out and police arrested about 100 people.⁴ Unfortunately, since the year 2000 Isla Vista has also been the scene of two nationally known acts of violence. The first occurred on February 23, 2001 when a UCSB freshman smashed his car into parked cars and pedestrians, killing 4 people and injuring 1 other. The second mass-killing in Isla Vista was on May 23, 2014.⁵

The May 23, 2014 Mass Killings in Isla Vista

Memorial Day weekend of 2014 offered UCSB students a nice break before the pressures of “Dead Week” and final exams. Many students left town for the holiday while others were enjoying the promise of a bit of Friday-night fun. The 9-11 system logged the first call about the crime spree at 9:27 pm reporting “shots fired” in Isla Vista. Eight minutes later, the perpetrator⁶ committed suicide. As the investigation proceeded, we learned more about the sequence of events. Earlier in the day the perpetrator had ambushed and murdered his two roommates and one of their friends in his apartment with a knife. He then uploaded a “retribution” video to *YouTube* and emailed a 137-page manifesto to his friends and family. During his rampage he attempted to gain entry to a sorority, shot 3 women outside that sorority (killing 2 and injuring the other), and then committed multiple drive-by shootings, killing a young man at a deli. He also injured other victims by intentionally hitting them with his car. In the end, 6 victims died, and 14 other persons were injured – 7 from gunshot wounds and the remainder from being struck by the car.⁷

All 6 of the fatalities, as well as many of the injured, were UCSB students. George Chen (1994-2014) was 19 years old. He grew up in Ottawa, Canada and San Jose, California. George was studying computer science in the College of Engineering. Katherine “Katie” Breann Cooper

(1991-2014) was 22 years old. She was from Chino Hills, California. Katie was a double-major in art history and classics. Cheng Yuan “James” Hong (1994-2014) was 20 years old. He grew up in Taipei, Taiwan and graduated from high school in San Jose, California. James was a 4th-year student in computer engineering. Christopher Ross Michaels-Martinez (1993-2014) was 20 years old. He grew up on the Central Coast and graduated from high school in San Luis Obispo, California. Chris had not yet declared his major but was planning to complete a degree in English. Weihan “David” Wang (1993-2014), was 20 years old. He was from Fremont, California. David was studying computer engineering at UCSB. Veronika Elizabeth Weiss (1995-2014) was 19 years old. She was from Westlake Village, California. Veronika was studying financial mathematics and statistics. All six, of course, were more than just UCSB students. They were sons and daughters, friends, classmates, sorority sisters, roommates, and more. Their loss shocked not just those who knew them personally, but also the entire campus and the neighboring community.⁸

Organized Memorialization

The first organized memorial event was a candlelight vigil on Saturday night, May 24, 2014. Organized by students, the event began at 7:30 pm in the plaza at the base of UCSB’s iconic Storke Tower. 4,000 participants carried white candles as they walked from campus through the Pardall pedestrian tunnel to Isla Vista. They retraced part of the path of the previous night’s rampage until they reached Anisq’Oyo’ Park. At the park the participants paid tribute to those lost in the tragedy. Friends of several victims addressed the crowd. At this time, authorities had only released the identities of 3 of the murdered students.⁹

The following day, the university cancelled classes for the following Tuesday so that students would have more time to recover from the tragedy. Counselors from other UC campuses arrived to assist UCSB counselors with the difficult task of providing psychological assistance to students affected by the tragedy. The university also scheduled training sessions throughout the week to guide faculty and teaching assistants in how to work with students as they processed their grief.¹⁰

The official campus memorial service occurred on Tuesday afternoon, May 27. Faculty, staff, students, and families of the victims all gathered in Harder Stadium for the service. Student groups provided music and prayers were offered by Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist religious leaders. UCSB Chancellor Henry Yang paid tribute to the six students, saying, “As we grieve, we also remember the joy and the light they brought into this world. We are privileged to count them part of a UC Santa Barbara family.” He also reminded those in attendance, “It is true that many dark and difficult days lie ahead, but we will continue to draw strength and comforts from each other, and we will become an even stronger university and community.” Richard Martinez, father of victim Christopher Michaels-Martinez, read statements on behalf of several of the families. He then told a story about when his 8-year-old son took an especially hard hit during football practice. “But he was on the ground no more than two seconds. He hopped back up, stomped one foot on the ground and walked determinedly back into the line. That’s the kind of kid Chris was.” Martinez later asked the crowd just how many more people needed to die from gun violence before we take action. Wanting to give those assembled a concrete way to contribute to a solution, he challenged them to send postcards to politicians with the hashtag #NotOneMore. “We know what’s happening here and it’s unbelievable that we’re at this point. Too many people have died, and it shouldn’t be. It should be not one more.”¹¹

Perhaps the most beautiful commemoration was a memorial Paddle Out on Wednesday, May 28 – an event organized by the UCSB Surf Club. During the event hundreds of students paddled out into the Pacific Ocean on surfboards, paddle boards, and other floatation devices. They formed a large circle in the water, chanted, sang, and tossed bouquets of flowers into the water. Hundreds of other students watched the event from the beach. Surf club member Bradley Martin reflected on the event: “It is just a testament to the strength and resilience of the community. It is great to see everyone coming together to create a calm environment where we can all celebrate one another and honor those we lost this past week.”¹²



Figure 1. Memorial “paddle out” on May 28, 2014. Photograph © Claire Bredenoord.

On Saturday, May 31 there was a more political response to tragedy. Nearly 100 students and community members staged a rally for gun control. They began at the IV Deli Mart, where Chris Michaels-Martinez was shot; walked to the apartment complex where George Chen, James Hong, and David Wang were killed, and then visited the lawn outside the Alpha Phi sorority house where Katie Cooper and Veronika Weiss died. This event was part of the #NotOneMore campaign that began when Richard Martinez challenged those at the campus memorial service to work to end gun violence in America. At each location during the march, the participants remembered those killed at the sites and shouted, “Not One More.”¹³

These are just a few examples of the organized response to this campus tragedy. In addition, area churches and campus organizations sponsored their own memorial events. Students and families attended funerals for those who died. As the campus community attempted to return to normal life, students spent the final two weeks of the quarter writing research papers and taking final exams. By Graduation Day on June 14, all the injured had been released from the hospital

and several of them were among the graduates receiving degrees. Before the ceremonies commenced, graduates and families paused for a moment of silence in memory of those lost in the May 23 tragedy. In addition, the university granted posthumous degrees to each of the six murdered students.¹⁴

Spontaneous Memorials

The phenomenon of spontaneous memorials has become quite familiar in the United States and beyond. While it is difficult to determine exactly when and where they first appeared, they date back to at least the mid-1980s. As the name implies, these are not planned or organized memorials, but rather impromptu shrines that tend to evolve over time. In modern America spontaneous memorials have become the standard community response to notable tragedies such as horrific accidents, mass murders, and terrorist attacks. Spontaneous memorials are typically located where the death occurred or at other locations associated with the victims. As people visit the sites, they feel compelled to leave behind “offerings” such as candles, flowers, religious objects, hand-written notes, stuffed animals, and personal objects that remind them of those who perished. Participation in the ritualistic construction of a spontaneous memorial is open to everyone in the community and allows individuals who may not be close enough to attend a victim’s funeral a way to exercise their grief and show solidarity with others affected by a traumatic event. These memorials are not only expressions of grief, but also reaffirmations of the strength of the community.¹⁵

Some of the best-known examples of spontaneous memorialization in the United States have been responses to large-scale acts of mass murder or terrorism. These have included the memorial sites associated with the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on April 19, 1995; the mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999; the three sites associated with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks; the mass shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007; and the mass murder at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012. While our spontaneous memorials were of a smaller scale, they shared many characteristics with these sites.¹⁶

Spontaneous memorials began to appear in Isla Vista almost immediately after the tragedy. In all, the police report identified 17 separate locations where the perpetrator killed his victims, fired shots, or assaulted others using his vehicle (see figure 2 below). The three primary sites for memorials were those where deaths occurred: on the lawn outside the Alpha Phi sorority house located at 840 Embarcadero del Norte (crime scene #2), on the sidewalk outside of the IV Deli Mart at 6549 Pardall Road (crime scene #4), and on the lawn outside of the Capri Apartments located at 6598 Seville Road (crime scene #1). In addition, there was a site outside the 7-11 convenience store on Trigo Road near where several victims were injured (crime scene #6). Numerous posters and banners appeared in Isla Vista, including a banner thanking law enforcement officers that students placed outside of the Isla Vista Foot Patrol (a station manned by deputies of the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office and officers from the UCSB Police).

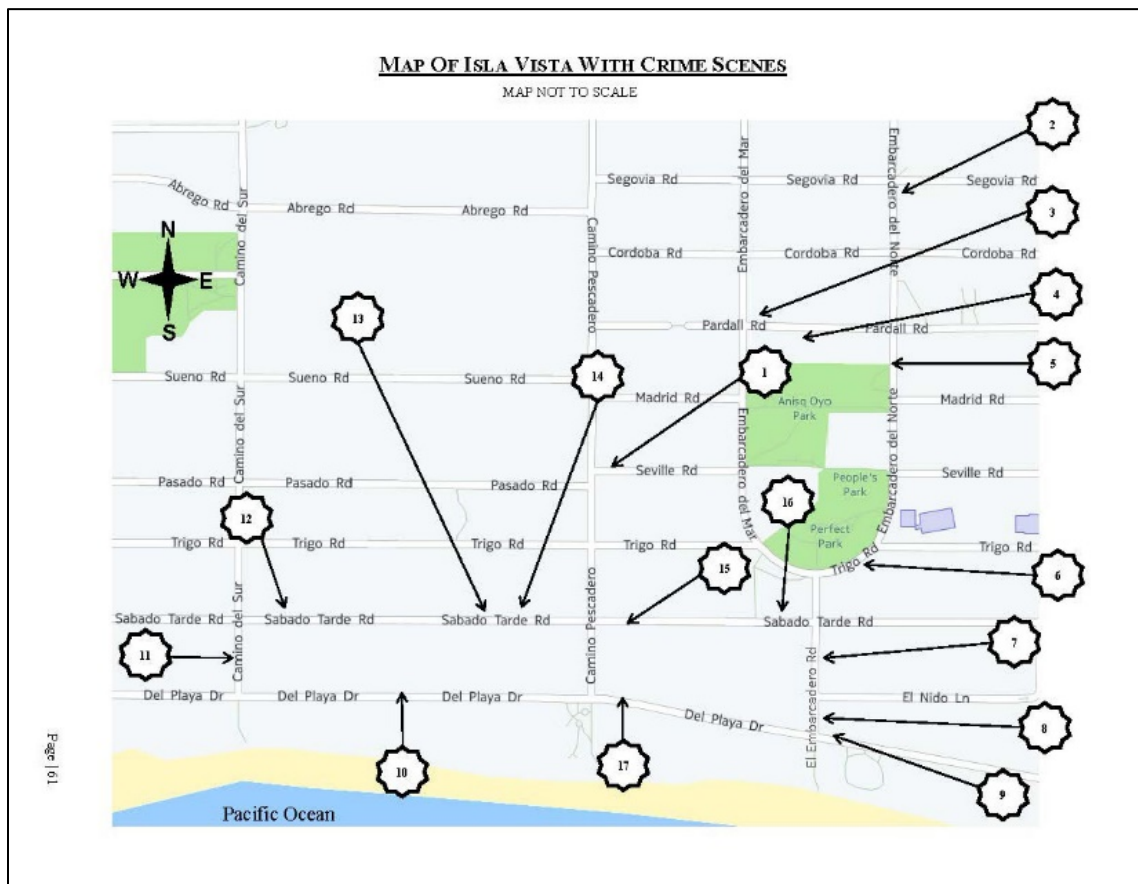


Figure 2. Crime-scene map of Isla Vista. Spontaneous memorials were located at sites #1, #2, #4, and #6. Source: Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department.

One of the difficulties of dealing with spontaneous memorials is the question of ownership. For those contributing to the site, they are often considered to be the property of the entire community. However, when they spring up on private property there is often a conflict of interest where the practicalities of maintaining a lawn or operating a business differ from the public use of the site. How long should the property owner leave a site in place? What actions should they take to keep the site safe and prevent the candle flames from igniting paper materials or dried flowers? How large should they allow the site to grow? How do they keep the site from inhibiting the flow of pedestrian or vehicular traffic? All these questions faced those whose properties had become, through no fault of their own, sites of community tragedy and memorialization.

In-Situ Site Curation and Material Collection

Several days after the murders a Ph.D. student named Melissa Barthelemy began curating the memorial sites in situ. She left blank sketch books and chalk at the sites so that people could record their thoughts and pay tribute to those who had died. Melissa also began visiting the sites on a regular basis to keep them tidy, to move flammable materials away from candles, and to place paper items in plastic sleeves to protect them from moisture. She left notes at the sites asking people not to remove materials. Melissa also communicated with property owners to discuss the sites and to request that they contact her when they were ready to remove the memorials. In addition, she began collecting newspapers with articles about the events in Isla Vista. Melissa took photographs of the sites and memorial activities she was witnessing throughout the community. Shortly after she began curating the sites, she contacted the UCSB Library to see if we would be willing to house a collection of memorial items.



Figure 3. Spontaneous memorial at the IV Deli Mart. Photograph © Claire Bredenoord.

While there were commonalities at all the sites – candles, flowers, sympathy cards, etc. – each site was unique. The memorial site on the lawn of the Alpha Phi sorority house was focused on Katie Cooper and Veronika Weiss. They were part of a group of three members of the Delta Delta Delta sorority who just happened to be walking by when the attack occurred. The street near the site was decorated with chalk art, much of it including the Greek letters of the victims’ house or those of other houses whose members were expressing their grief. Visitors to the site covered the lawn with flowers, candles, origami cranes, stuffed animals, and personal items associated with Katie and Veronika. The site outside of the Isla Vista Deli Mart primarily focused on Christopher Michaels-Martinez. There were items left by his intramural sport teammates such as a basketball and an inscribed tennis shoe. One of the most unique items left at the site was a sandwich with a note – Chris had stopped at the store that night to buy a sandwich. The site outside the Capri Apartments focused on George Chen, James Hong, and David Wang. This site included several notes in Chinese, handmade paper lights, and a skateboard.



Figure 4. Sandwich and note at the IV Deli Mart memorial site. © Claire Bredenoord.

Within the Library we took preparations to receive the memorial items when sites were cleaned up. First, we checked to see if we had a memorial collection related to the 2001 mass killings. We were surprised that nothing had been saved related to that event. We contacted the library at Virginia Tech to learn more about how they had dealt with their memorial collection. The Virginia Tech shootings involved many more fatalities in two on-campus buildings. Our victims were injured and died in multiple locations around Isla Vista, so the spontaneous memorials were decentralized and spread around the community. And, unlike Virginia Tech, we did not have to deal with the realization that the perpetrator was one of our own. The killer in Isla Vista was not

a UCSB student, so there were no conflicts involving memorialization of the perpetrator such as had occurred at Columbine High School or Virginia Tech.¹⁷

Melissa worked with various property owners to set up times to collect materials. The first site we visited was the Capri Apartments, from which we collected items on June 17. The 7-11 site was also one of the early pick-up sites, with the objects collected on June 21. On June 20th we learned that, after graduation, the gardeners at the sorority had cleaned up their site and boxed all the materials. Working with the advisors for our local Alpha Phi chapter, we picked up materials from the house on September 6 while the residents were still on summer break. The last property to take down their spontaneous memorial was the Isla Vista Deli Mart. For the Deli owner the event had been particularly traumatic, as the victim had been killed just inside the store. Also, because the store location is on the main street connecting the campus to Isla Vista, this site was especially prominent in the community mourning process. To clean up the site, Melissa met the store owner early on the morning of July 2 when the number of observers would be small. Once items were collected, they were staged in the Public History Reading Room in the Department of History, and in my office in the Library. We moved the materials from the History Department to Special Research Collections just before the start of the new school year.

The Collection

One of the most important steps with any collection is to define its scope. Our group came up with the following collection scope statement:

The UC Santa Barbara Library has agreed to preserve and make accessible historical materials related to the tragedy of May 23, 2014 in the Department of Special Research Collections. An Ad-Hoc Memorial Preservation Group consisting of faculty and graduate students from the History Department, librarians, and undergraduate student representatives has formed to steer the collecting process. The group is actively collecting two types of materials in both digital and physical formats: 1) a representative sample of condolence items and 2) records documenting the University's response to the event.

Operating under this definition, we have also collected materials from various campus departments and organizations. In addition to condolence items these include materials generated by departments in response to the tragedy or as part of the overall effort to improve the situation in Isla Vista. Additionally, we have collected examples of student coursework from classes that have addressed the tragedy.

We have made curatorial decisions at every step of the collection process. One of the most difficult issues for memorial collections related to school shootings is the question of the perpetrator. When we spoke to the librarian from Virginia Tech we asked about this issue. They told us that, since the perpetrator in their mass killing was a student at the university, they had included him within the scope of their collection. We were fortunate in that the killer in Isla Vista was not a UCSB student. Because of this fact, we did not feel that we had a responsibility to memorialize him. In addition, no one working on the project even thought of checking the location where he died for memorial items. If there was a spontaneous memorial at that site, we did not know about it nor did we collect items from it. That said, there are a few items in the collection that are related to the perpetrator. He is, of course, named in newspaper articles and in the final crime report from the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department. In addition, the congregation of St. Marks University Parish, the Catholic community in Isla Vista, made posters for all 7 of those who died on May 24. We retained the poster for the perpetrator within that set of posters when we added it to the collection.¹⁸

Another decision was what to do with the many candles and flowers left at the sites. For the candles, we decided to retain only those candles that were modified or personalized before being placed at the memorials. We felt that these were the most significant. We also could not keep real flowers as they are difficult to preserve and can attract insects that can damage materials in Special Research Collections. To ensure that a sample of dried flowers would be a permanent feature in the collection, Melissa Barthelemy hired an artist to make acrylic paper weights containing samples of dried flowers.



Figure 5. Candles from the memorial sites. Photograph by Claire Bredenoord.

There were also items that someone placed at the sites but were not there when we collected the materials. Examples included a signed basketball and a small stuffed bear wearing a wrestling singlet which were seen at the IV Deli site. These items are now documented only in photographs. We also scanned condolence materials belonging to the UCSB Associated Students and the Delta Delta Delta sorority because, at the time, the members were not ready to part with the items. It was only in 2017 that both organizations formally donated these materials for the collection.



Figure 6. Inscribed basketball at the IV Deli Mart memorial site. Photograph © Claire Bredenoord.

In addition to digital surrogates of materials in the collection, there are other digital-only materials in our collection. We have collected memorial videos, photographs of the memorial sites, comments from websites, screen shots and saved versions of web pages, and PDF files. It is impossible to document everything from the Web and from social media, so we have tried to collect a representative sample. At this time, we have processed the physical collection, but have only organized and inventoried digital materials.

The variety of items that we collected from the memorial sites are extremely interesting. There is such a wide selection of objects. As one might expect, there are numerous religious items. Many of the memorial candles had images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, angels, or different Saints. There are crosses made of various materials, crucifixes, angel figurines, and posters with religious messages. In addition, many of the sympathy cards that people left at the sites have religious imagery and messages.

There are also many materials that reflect the character of our university and life at UCSB. These include items with UCSB-related messages such as “We Gaucho Back” (our mascot is the Gaucho), leis in the school colors of blue and gold (often shown as yellow), programs from the campus memorial service and graduation, as well as tassels and cords from commencement regalia. We are a beach-front campus where students enjoy living by the Pacific Ocean. Seashells, including one converted into a candleholder, beach rocks shaped like hearts, and a set of six pairs of flip-flops inscribed for each victim all illustrate this aspect of life at UCSB. In addition, sports items such as sneakers and a skateboard remind us of the active lifestyle of the victims and their classmates.



Figure 7. Seashell, modified to serve as a candleholder, recovered from the 7-11 spontaneous memorial site. Photograph by Claire Bredenoord.

The collection also includes items that we either know or suspect were the property of the victims. A flag scarf collected at the Alpha Phi lawn memorial is known to have belonged to Katie Cooper. Her favorite holiday was the 4th of July and she loved the American flag. From

the same site we have a pair of white Converse shoes that belonged to Veronika Weiss. Her friends have commented that she always wore this style of shoes. They remember her as being quite athletic and active in sports. This pair of shoes has not been processed into the collection, as Veronika's mother has expressed an interest in having them returned to the family.¹⁹ Another athlete in the group of victims was Chris Martinez. One of his teammates left a bright orange Nike sneaker at the IV Deli site, inscribed with messages about what a great teammate he was. It is unclear if it belonged to Chris or not. Someone also left a copy of *The Merchant of Venice* at the site that may have belonged to Chris. There is also a signed skateboard from the Capri Apartment site that may have belonged to George Chen. We know that he loved to skateboard.



Figure 8. Inscribed shoe from the IV Deli Mart memorial site. Photograph by Claire Bredenoord.

Other highly personal items collected from the sites include materials that were signed by family members and close friends of the victims. These items do more to document the impact of this tragedy than any others in the collection. For example, a small inscribed American flag from the Alpha Phi site reads "Katie Cooper, I cannot even begin to put into words how much I miss you and always will. You were my best friend and like a sister to me. We were quite the pair. You will never be forgotten. Rest in peace darling girl. XOXO Kels." Many of the sites included

notes and posters with personal photos of the victims. From the IV Deli site we have two posters with photographs left by a cousin of Christopher Michaels-Martinez and the cousin's girlfriend. From the Capri Apartment site there is a sympathy card that was left by George Chen's family with messages in both English and Chinese. All of these items reflect the relationships between the victim and those who knew him or her. By preserving them we hope to keep their memory alive through the artifacts that people used to commemorate them.

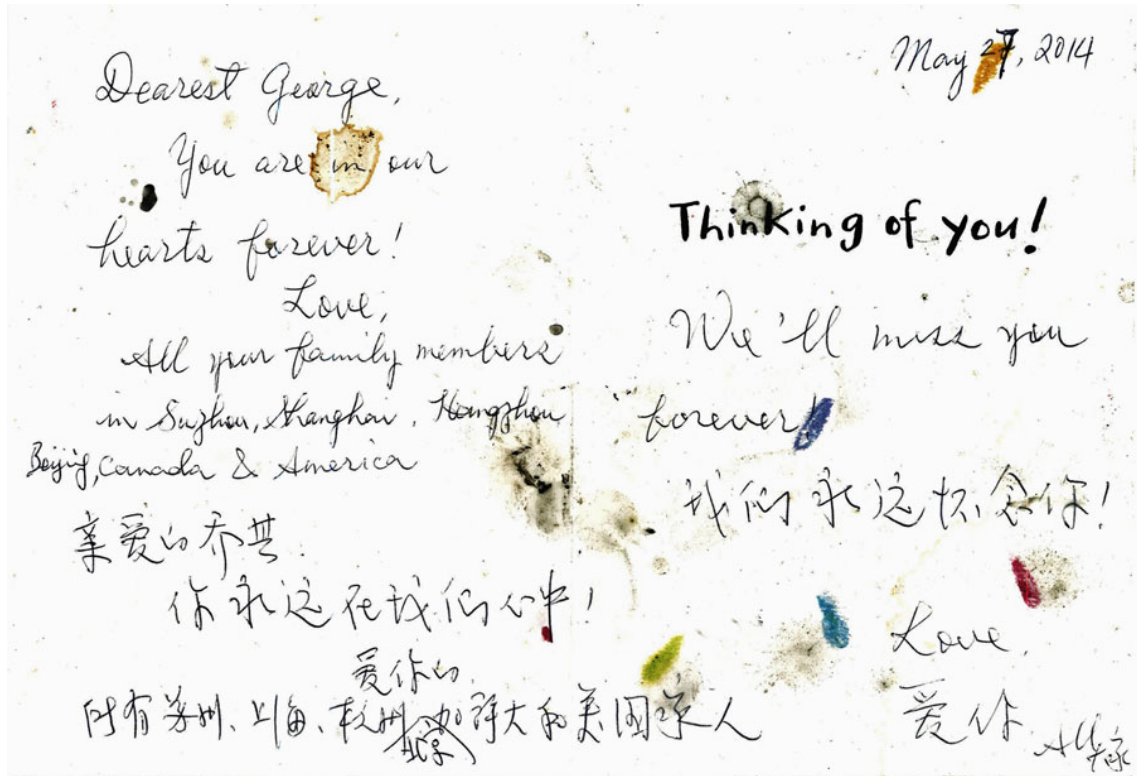


Figure 9. Card addressed to George Chen, from the Capri Apartments memorial site. Object scan.



Figure 10. Inscribed American flag from the Alpha Phi memorial site. Photograph by Claire Bredenoord.

Stuffed animals are often left at spontaneous memorial sites. In this category, we have a large stuffed Dalmatian with a puppy that we collected from the Capri Apartments site. It wears a necklace. From the Alpha Phi site, we have a variety of small stuffed animals, a large Winnie the Pooh, and a large stuffed doll of Kenny McCormick from the *South Park* animated series. The Kenny doll is an excellent example of how simple everyday items can be used to convey meaning in a memorial context. When I first saw it, I thought it was an odd choice to leave at such a site. However, when I thought about the role of Kenny in *South Park* it began to make more sense. In many early episodes of the series, Kenny died in a number of horrible and morbidly amusing ways. However, in the next episode he would always be back with no explanation of how he was still alive. In a later season of the show it was revealed that Kenny is, in fact, immortal. Once the story of Kenny is considered, it seems quite logical that someone would have left him at the site of a horrible murder. Perhaps he represents a wish from a friend that the victims might come back the next day.



Figures 11 & 12. Stuffed toys from the Alpha Phi memorial site. Photographs by Claire Bredenoord.

Many contributors to the memorial sites chose to convey their grief and solidarity through artwork. There are paintings on paper and canvas, as well as drawings created by high school and college students. We also have a wonderful collection of colorful paper hearts decorated by children at the Isla Vista Elementary School. The teachers at the school distributed hundreds of these hearts to businesses around the Isla Vista area where they were displayed in the front windows to remind the students and community members that they were loved. To me, though, the most beautiful representation of artwork in the collection is a set of painted rocks that we collected from the different sites. Someone, we may never know who, painted a personalized rock for each of the six murdered students and left them at the appropriate memorial site. Each has the name of one of the students and is decorated in a different way. Another painted rock, this one heart-shaped, is painted in a floral motif and includes text that reads “To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.”



Figures 13 & 14. Colored hearts from Isla Vista school children. Object scans.



Figure 15. Painted rocks from the memorial sites in Isla Vista. Photograph by Claire Bredenoord.

Some items present a special challenge when they are accessioned into an archival collection. For example, we had two bottles of champagne that were left at the Alpha Phi site in honor of Katie Cooper. When dealing with items like this we have to consider the memorial value of the artifact, as well as any risks that might be associated with storing it in the archival stacks of our library. Are bottles of champagne stable over time? Is there a chance that over the years they might pop their corks and spill liquid into the storage container? Since archival boxes are made of cardboard, is there a risk to other items on the same shelf or in the same section of shelving? Because we live in earthquake country, we also have to consider the possibility that during a seismic event the box containing the champagne could fall off the shelf and the bottles could break. On consultation with our Special Research Collections staff we decided to empty and clean out the bottles before placing them in padded storage boxes.



Figure 16. Decorated champagne bottles from the Alpha Phi memorial site. Photograph by Claire Bredenoord

The collection also contains numerous items that represent how the campus community is continuing to memorialize those we lost, how we are working to move on from this horrible experience, and the spirit of community that has resulted from the tragedy. We have items from the “Come Together: Remember, Reconnect, and Unite” event that was held at the beginning of the Fall 2014 quarter. To show their support for our students and community UCSB Alumni, singer Jack Johnson and the band Animal Liberation Orchestra, performed in the same plaza where students had gathered to begin the candle-light vigil the night after the killings. This event symbolized both our determination to remember those affected by the tragedy and the need for life on campus to return to normal.²⁰

Another set of items that document this sense of community are materials from the “I ♥ UCSB campaign” launched by the Office of Student Life. If there is anything positive that came out of the events of May 23, 2014 it is that our student body seems to have developed a collective sense of social responsibility. Several Halloweens and Deltopias have passed without significant disturbances of the peace in Isla Vista. Our students seem to understand that, if they are to claim Isla Vista as their own, they must take responsibility for the community that exists there. UCSB students, alumni, faculty, staff, and members of the broader community have also created a permanent memorial garden with custom designed park benches for each of the victims of the Isla Vista tragedy. The Isla Vista Love and Remembrance Garden at People's Park was dedicated during the first-year anniversary memorial observances.²¹



*Figure 17. Plastic duck, clutch-back pin, and postcard from the “I ♥ UCSB” campaign.
Photograph by Claire Bredenoord.*

One of the most challenging aspects of our project was how we processed it and used it in conjunction with the memorial events planned for first-year anniversary of the murders. We believe that, above all, our project should be an educational experience. With this in mind, Professors Ann Plane and Randy Bergstrom of UCSB’s Public History Program held a special seminar during the Spring quarter of 2015. The course, titled “Directed Readings in Public History (History 192 DR) – Isla Vista Community History and Historical Commemoration”, focused on the culture of memorialization, especially related to the May 23 tragedy. As part of the course students divided into different practicum groups, each focused on a different aspect of the topic. During the quarter I worked with seven of the students to process the archival collection. The students gained practical archival experience while they helped to build a lasting memorial to those affected by this tragedy, as well as a historical record of the event. At the same time, another group of students worked with Melissa Barthelemy to curate, install, and interpret an exhibit for the 1-year memorial using items from the collection. Other students in

the class gained experience in oral history and community history by engaging in projects to further document the history of Isla Vista.

The complications of designing and installing an exhibit while simultaneously processing the collection cannot be overstated. There were several times when we had to accelerate the processing of specific artifacts so that they could be transferred to the exhibits team for inclusion into their exhibition. In addition, Melissa and her team created a highly touching and meaningful exhibit in a very short amount of time. The exhibit, entitled *We Remember Them: Acts of Love and Compassion in Isla Vista*, spanned 6,000 square feet and hosted over 1,800 visitors during its 10-week run. Melissa worked closely with parents and friends of the victims in order to ensure that the exhibit “served as a tribute to those who were killed and injured, and highlighted the ways our community came together to heal through loving acts of remembrance.” In the years since the exhibit, members of our project team have presented at multiple conferences, both in our local community and at the national level, to share our experiences with others in the historical, museum, and archival fields. Through all these activities we are working to turn a tragedy into a practical lesson in the role of librarians, archivists, and historians in documenting contemporary history.²²



Figure 18 & 19. UCSB students processing materials for the collection. Photographs by Karen Lindell.

Lessons Learned

While we hope that no other community will ever go through an experience like this, the sad reality is that it will happen again at another school. If it does happen in your community, it is important that someone take action to document the event and the community reaction as quickly as possible. If it had not been for the early intervention of our activist historian, Melissa Barthelemy, much of the material from the memorial sites would likely have been lost. She has brought together people from across the university and the community to make this project a success. We were not able to save everything, but what we have collected will serve as a resource for future researchers. In the first year after we posted the finding aid for the collection online, the collection was used by six researchers and in several courses on the topic of memory and memorialization. We believe that it will continue to be an important resource, not just for memorialization of the six victims, but also for researchers in a variety of fields.

If you are faced with working on a project such as this future, there will be many impediments that pop up along the way. You might find that the project does not fit within the usual scope of your institutional collections. Sometimes, though, you just have to make exceptions to the rules. You will encounter people who are emotionally attached to materials and are not ready to give them up. Others will be eager to turn over the items so that they can move on. The key here is to work with each donor on a case-by-case basis. For those who seem hesitant to part with materials, ask for the opportunity to scan or photograph materials so that they will be represented in the collection. For those who are in a hurry to have items removed you will want to accommodate them, even if you are not thoroughly prepared to receive the materials. You will likely have to make exceptions to your policies on how materials in the collection may be used. Donors may come back during anniversaries of the event requesting to borrow the items that they donated in order to use them in a memorial situation. You should be prepared to honor these requests if at all possible, while still insisting on proper handling and display of the items. Most certainly, your memorial collection will contain some of the most unusual materials ever collected by your institution and these items may present new challenges for processing and preservation. We can assure you, though, that the process of collecting, processing, and housing these materials will be worth the effort. The collection will be a valuable resource for scholars

from many fields and will serve as a permanent memorial to the victims and documentation of the impact of the tragedy on your community.

Collections like this are difficult to plan for, and even more difficult to keep up with. Develop a record-keeping system early on and keep it up to date. For most projects of this nature, provenance will be the most logical way to organize the collection. As you receive materials from different sites and offices log all dates and sources and take a quick inventory of what type of items you received. As you work to process the collection this information will prove quite valuable. Above all, flexibility is the key to being able to complete this type of project. You won't be able to collect everything, so concentrate on collecting a representative sample. It will be enough to document the event and serve to memorialize those affected by the tragedy as well as providing a resource for the historical record.

For our institution, a major challenge has been how to deal with digital content. We need to develop policies and more infrastructure for the storage and preservation of digital archival materials. For now, we are maintaining digital content on duplicate external hard drives. We missed some major content because we simply were not prepared. For example, our advisors from Virginia Tech told us to capture screen shots of our university home page. By the time we heard this advice, however, the page had already been changed and no one at the university level had thought to record a screenshot. Fortunately, we later found this content on the *WayBack Machine* website. We missed other online content simply because we were not quick enough to capture it. Again, this is why it is important to be prepared and to start working as quickly as possible. It might be useful to develop a formal planning document on how to deal with a community tragedy. Most institutions plan for protecting their collections in the event of disasters, but how many have plans for documenting one? It also seems, in retrospect, that it would be far easier to develop such a plan before a tragedy occurs than it is to create it on the fly while your employees and community members are coping with the aftermath of the a tragedy.

Probably the most difficult aspect of the project will be the emotional impact it will have on everyone involved. Over time as you work on a project like this, you will find that you become more desensitized and it will become easier. However, other people who participate may still be

highly emotional about the tragedy and materials related to it. You need to recognize this fact and make allowances. Remind those working on the project to take breaks and to watch out for their emotional health. Make sure to inform them about the counseling services that are available to them. Be certain to give them the option to “opt out” of working with materials that are directly related to friends they may have lost. The work is important, but it is never more important than the psychological well-being of those involved.

Most importantly, do not forget that there are other institutions where similar events have occurred and where they have created memorial collections out of tragedy. We benefited from the experiences of Virginia Tech and others have learned from us. We feel that this project demonstrates how public historians and archivists, both experienced and accidental, can contribute to communal memorialization when history strikes their communities.

About the Collection and Exhibits:

The physical collection is available to researchers in the UCSB Library’s Department of Special Research Collections. Digital content is available by appointment with the collection curator, Annie Platoff (platoff@ucsb.edu).

- Finding Aid in the *Online Archive of California* for the collection:
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8571hkp>

Digital versions of the “We Remember Them: Acts of Love and Compassion in Isla Vista” are available online:

- Google street-view version: http://we-remember-them.library.ucsb.edu/?page_id=40
- Digital version from 2019:
<https://islavistamemorialproject.omeka.net/exhibits/show/werememberthem>

About this Paper

Presentations based upon this paper were given to the Western Association of Women Historians in May 2015 and the Society American Archivists meeting in July 2017. In September 2016, the project was awarded a Leadership in History Award from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) both for the archive and exhibit. The award is shared by the UCSB Public History Program, the UCSB Library's Department of Special Research Collections, and the UCSB Divisions of Student Affairs and Humanities and Fine Arts.

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About the Author

Anne M. (Annie) Platoff is a librarian at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She holds a B.A. in political science and history from Kansas State University; an M.S. in library science from the University of North Texas; an M.A. in historical studies from the University of Houston – Clear Lake; and a graduate certificate in museum studies from Arizona State University. In addition, she is currently a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom. While she is not an archivist, Annie applied her experience from several museum internships to curating the May 23, 2014 Isla Vista memorial collection for the UCSB Department of Special Research Collections. Annie's usual area of historical research and publication is related to vexillology, the study of flags. She is the author of a book about flags in the Russian Federation titled *Russian Regional Flags*. She has also published articles on the use of the bear as a symbol of Russia, Soviet children's flags, and the *Znamia Pobedy* – the Soviet banner of victory over the Reichstag. Annie is the leading authority on the use of flags in the U.S. manned space program. She is the author of "Where No Flag Has Gone Before: Political and Technical Aspects of Placing a Flag on the Moon", the official NASA history of the Apollo 11 flag. She has also published a monograph about flag use by NASA from Project Mercury to the International Space Station, and papers on the role of flags in moon-landing conspiracy theories, the flags of the Space Shuttle Program, and the use of flags in Space Shuttle mission

patch designs. Her dissertation research is focused on the role of flags and symbols in the civil religion of the Soviet Union.

Notes

URLs listed in the notes were active as of May 2015.

¹ “Our Campus,” <http://www.ucsb.edu/campus/>, accessed April 15, 2015; “Points of Pride,” <http://www.ucsb.edu/pop/>, accessed April 15, 2015; “A Campus Like No Other,” <http://www.ucsb.edu/campus/campus-intro.shtml>, accessed April 15, 2015; “2013-2014 Campus Profile,” <http://bap.ucsb.edu/institutional.research/campus.profiles/campus.profiles.2013.14.pdf>, accessed February, 27, 2020.

² U.S. Census Bureau, “2010 Census Interactive Population Search: CA - Isla Vista CDP,” <http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/ipmtext.php?fl=06:0636868>, accessed March 27, 2015; “Isla Vista, California,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isla_Vista,_California, accessed March 27, 2015.

³ “Isla Vista, California,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

⁴ Our students have longed claimed that many disturbances that occur in Isla Vista are caused by people who are not affiliated with the university. This claim is supported by the statistics released about the Deltopia riot of 2014. In a memorandum to the faculty, the UCSB Chancellor reported, “The Santa Barbara Sheriff’s Office recently released revised numbers of arrests and citations from the Deltopia weekend, and they were quite revealing. Of the 470 individuals arrested or cited, 4.5 percent (21) were affiliated with UC Santa Barbara; 4.7 percent (22) were affiliated with Santa Barbara City College; and 3 percent (14) were from other UC campuses. Of those arrested or cited, 70 percent were not affiliated with any university, and the remaining 30 percent included students from 66 different institutions.” Henry Yang, “A Message for Faculty - IV Safety Progress Report,” July 30, 2014, <https://chancellor.ucsb.edu/memos/?7.30.2014.A.Message.for.Faculty...IV.Safety.Progress.Report>.

⁵ “Isla Vista, California,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

⁶ As with any such event, the name of the perpetrator has become widely known. Our focus, though, is on the victims, the campus, and the community. As part of the “No Notoriety” Campaign I have made the conscious decision not to name him here or to add to his notoriety. *No Notoriety: No Name. No Photo. No Notoriety.*, <http://nonotoriety.com/>, accessed April 11, 2015.

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⁸ “In Memory of Our Fellow Gauchos,” *Daily Nexus*, May 29, 2015, <http://dailynexus.com/2014-05-29/in-memory-of-our-fellow-gauchos/>; Kelsey Brugger and Brandon Fastman, “Portraits of Isla Vista’s Victims: Remembering the UCSB Students Killed During the May 23 Rampage,” *Santa Barbara Independent*, May 29, 2014, <http://www.independent.com/news/2014/may/29/portraits-isla-vistas-victims/>; “Who They Were: Isla Vista Rampage Victims,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2014, <http://graphics.latimes.com/towergraphic-santa-barbara-shooting/>; “In Memory of

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<http://www.whittierdailynews.com/general-news/20140526/slain-westlake-village-woman-mourned-by-friends-family>.

⁹ Peter Munteer, “Isla Vista Community Gathers to Mourn, Share Memories of Those Lost,” *Daily Nexus*, May 25, 2014), <http://dailynexus.com/2014-05-25/isla-vista-community-gathers-to-mourn-share-memories-of-those-lost/>.

¹⁰ “UCSB Mourns [statements regarding the Isla Vista Tragedy],” *The UC Santa Barbara Current*, May 24-30, 2014, <http://www.news.ucsb.edu/node/014194/isla-vista-shootings>.

¹¹ Shelly Leachman, “‘We Remember Them:’ Estimated 20,000 Attend Memorial for UC Santa Barbara Students Killed in Isla Vista Tragedy,” *The UC Santa Barbara Current*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.news.ucsb.edu/2014/014197/%E2%80%98we-remember-them%E2%80%99>; Daniel Slovinisky, “Campus Faculty and Local Residents Gather in Harder Stadium to Commemorate and Honor Victims of Friday’s Tragedy,” *Daily Nexus*, May 28, 2014, <http://dailynexus.com/2014-05-28/i-v-community-remembers-fellow-students/>.

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¹⁷ Rebecca Metzger to Gail McMillan, email, June 6, 2014; Tamara Kennelly, Archivist, Virginia Tech University, personal communications: email June 9, 2014, telephone conference call June 23, 2014, follow-up emails June 24, 2014.

¹⁸ Tamara Kennelly, Archivist, Virginia Tech University, ³³telephone conference call, June 23, 2014.

¹⁹ During a visit to the exhibit that was created as part of the 1-year memorial observation, Veronika's mother expressed a desire to have her shoes. The shoes had not formally been inventoried into the collection yet, so we pulled them and are holding them until a time that they can be transferred back to the family. We suspected that this might happen when the families saw the memorial items and had decided it was in everyone's best interest to be flexible in this regard.

²⁰ "In Photos: Jack Johnson at the UCSB Memorial Event," *Daily Nexus*, October 9, 2014, <http://dailynexus.com/2014-10-09/in-photos-jack-johnson-at-the-memorial-event/>.

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