

The History Professional *An Interview with Jan Seidler Ramirez*

Jan Seidler Ramirez, PhD, is the founding Chief Curator and Executive Vice President of Collections at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York City. Under her guidance over the past 16 years, the Museum's collection has grown to include thousands of objects, artworks, photographs, films, oral histories and audio artifacts, architectural relics, and other primary evidence materials relevant to 9/11. She previously served as Museum Director at the New-York Historical Society, where she helped to conceive and grow its "History Responds" collection in the early aftermath of the September 11th attacks. Prior to that, she was Deputy Director of Collections and Chief Curator at the Museum of the City of New York.



Jan Seidler Ramirez

Interview by Thomas Faith

What are your duties at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum?

As Chief Curator from the outset of the Memorial Museum project, I've led the charge to build a permanent, multidisciplinary collection that would convey the reality and legacy of the 9/11 attacks, anchored in their human impact. Wearing the added hat of EVP of Collections, I oversee the documentation, cataloging and interpretation of these assets, the work of the innovative team managing their preservation, cultivation and maintenance of trusted relationships within our diverse stakeholder community, and the creation and updating of our polestar Collections Management/Acquisition policy. This living document enables the Museum to strengthen and extend its collection strategically as a resource relevant to understanding 9/11's ongoing legacy. The mass homicide committed on September 11th is over. The day's repercussions are not.

Is there a particular aspect of your personal or professional experiences that you think most influences your approach to your current position?

The longer my museum career in the "practice" of history, the truer the truism that the Past is Prologue, or at the very least, alive in the present. The 9/11 terror attacks and today's novel Corona virus are not the same threats. However, both were abrupt, lethal invasions that found us unprepared. Each provoked insecurity and pervasive grief, and disordered daily routines. Their societal trauma has been deep, and unresolved. At the Memorial Museum, 9/11's pain and losses are not soft-pedaled. But nor are they our dominant emphases. The narrative encountered by visitors unfolds through the lens of 9/12, emphasizing the response to, navigation through, and rebound from an ordeal that launched the 21st century. It's not a straight shot to resilience, and the aftermath of 9/11 was beset with challenges and controversy. But its human hallmarks also included collective grit, cooperation, resourcefulness and altruism. We persevered, with adjustments, as we will demonstrate again through this global health crisis.

What do you think are some strengths of the September 11 Museum's collection?

The Museum occupies the archeological cavity or "artifact"

of the disappeared World Trade Center. The authenticity of our setting generates an exceptional chemistry between the site's skeletal vestiges and the once-native objects restored to it. The collection's "material witness" holdings, which are especially deep, speak wordlessly to the awful physics of the terror attacks. Such hard evidence is telegraphed through aircraft fragments, battered rescue vehicles, torn and twisted remnants of architectural steel, and massive "composites" representing the compressed, heat-fused remains of successive floors of the Towers. Perhaps more poignant are the several thousand human-scaled objects entrusted to the Museum by victim's friends and relatives—including recovered personal effects. These attest to the intimate workings of terrorism on everyday people caught in the maelstrom of 9/11. Other strengths are the diverse oral histories captured with bereaved family members, survivors, disaster responders, volunteers, investigators and members on the military, and an archive of indelible sound-records from the day, among them, voice-mail messages left for loved ones by those in extremis.

What online projects has the museum undertaken?

The Museum offered a variety of on-line ventures pre-Covid19, exemplified by our signature *Anniversary in the Schools* webinar. This September, it drew close to 350,000 attendees from all 50 states as well as 35 countries and territories abroad. *Inside the Collection* (<https://collection.911memorial.org/>), our catalogue portal, has logged heightened use as a remote tool for accessing collection content, which we've augmented steadily since mid-March. The Artists' Registry, introduced a decade ago as an on-line database and virtual gallery, has also experienced brisk traffic. Over the past 7 months almost everything has transitioned to an on-line variant, from public programs, teachers' workshops and special exhibitions to the annual benefit dinner and our traditional May 30th ceremony marking the conclusion of recovery and cleanup operations at Ground Zero. Perhaps the stand-out among these newest offerings are a series of virtual tours, including virtual field trips geared towards students and educators. Facilitated via a Zoom platform, the format has freed visitors from the geographical obligation of traveling to lower Manhattan to experience the Memorial and Museum. A host of digital offerings are available to sample on 911memorial.org/explore.

What considerations do you make when helping a public audience interpret the history of September 11?

During the 8 years of planning, building and installing the National September 11 Memorial Museum, the operating assumption was that most of future visitors would cross the threshold importing a direct memory of the indelible day acknowledged in our institutional name. That expectation has dissolved. Today, we are welcoming ever more from the Successor Generation: those born after, or too young to have personal recollections of the September 11th attacks even though they inherited the consequences. How should they infill the vow to “Never Forget 9/11” if they weren’t alive to remember it? Introducing “Gen Z” to the history of 9/11 is the keystone of the Museum’s current K-12 and curriculum development offerings. (As a cohort, today’s school-aged kids are likely to know more about conspiracy theories spawned around 9/11 than any corroborated fact connected to the events.) Programs have also been tailored to address generational transition within government branches and investigative/intelligence agencies that were immersed in the response to 9/11. Newcomers did not endure the storms that galvanized their senior leadership yet will be expected to implement policies and pursue priorities emerging from that cascade of events. As incoming recruits, they, too, require a historical framing to better comprehend and contextualize the mission assigned to them.

How did disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affect your work?

As the division of the institution most dependent on, and dedicated to hands-on contact with the collection (often working together in small teams—in enclosed galleries, storage spaces, conservation workrooms, and conference rooms) disruption has been our everyday reality. After the Museum’s enforced hibernation, we monitored the collection via surrogate eyes supplied by our baseline security and facilities staff, who retained site access while the rest of us complied with home-quarantine and non-essential travel directives. As curators, conservators and collections managers, we adapted as best we could to the necessity of virtual communications and collections care, learned new tech skills on the fly, and scrambled to troubleshoot and address ever-evolving circumstances beyond our control. Throughout, we supported one another—and our donors and stakeholders—with as much good cheer as could be mustered. Routines, visitors and cherished colleagues were sorely missed. On a more positive note, once the Museum landed its firm reopening date after Labor Day, never was there a more energized campaign of Ultra Cleaning led by our eager Collections crew. They devoted 870 + hours to dusting, vacuuming and preparing hundreds of objects for re-launch in the galleries—running through countless cartons of gloves, masks and HEPA filters.

What steps has the September 11 Memorial & Museum taken to safely reopen?

The 9/11 Memorial and Museum reopened in stages, under modified hours and occupancy mandates, each adhering to State and City guidelines during these provisional times. In accordance

with state reopening guidelines, the outdoor Memorial plaza went back on-line first, on July 4th. Situated below it (and sharing the Covid19-era designation of “attractive nuisance” along with our peer cultural institutions), the Museum resumed welcoming visitors with timed entry tickets on September 12th. This was a day after our annual anniversary observances were held on site for 9/11 families and invited dignitaries, this year’s guests adhering to the “new abnormal” of entry temperature checks, mandatory wearing of masks, and continual social-distancing reminders. Like most urban museums, we haven’t yet met our daily capacity. For New Yorkers and tri-state residents who’ve been hesitant to come in the past and contend with crowds or their own emotions, this is actually an optimal time to explore the Memorial Museum. The space feels tranquil. The Historical Exhibition galleries, normally densely populated with visitors, are easy to maneuver.

What are some things you hope to accomplish at the September 11 Memorial & Museum in the next few years?

Next September will mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11, a milestone that—pre-March 2020—had guided planning for a year’s worth of initiatives claimed under that banner. Due to the fallout of Covid19, some have now been cancelled, deferred or scaled back. Nonetheless, we are committed to delivering our mainstay commemorative and educational programs while exploring alliances with other groups and organizations to leverage this important opportunity for national reflection. Also under creation is a new historical exhibition about the events and repercussions of 9/11 made available to communities through a partnership with the American Library Association. So, please stay tuned! On the curatorial front, we continue to build the collection to reflect the sobering human health toll from exposure to World Trade Center contaminants. This effort documents the escalating fatalities among rescue and recovery workers at Ground Zero in particular. It also aims to gather evidence of the positive gains made by survivor activists who, joined by a core group of elected officials, took the cause to Capitol Hill and prevailed—more than once—in securing Victim Compensation Fund support to help those sickened, disabled and dying as a consequence of their service at the three September 11th crash sites.

Finally, what is your favorite aspect of your duties?

Like many large Museum collections, ours is catalogued by the asset type, medium, maker, date, use and provenance. Principally, however, it’s an archive of human stories hinged to a notorious calendar date. Over the years, it has been fascinating to hear the limitless ways in which individuals use “things” to connect themselves to the watershed events of 9/11 and weave quite profound meaning from the encounter. I’ve never tired of logging in these associated narratives. Donors have been from all walks of life, spanned multiple generations, hailed from across the United States and a diversity of other places around the world. Even when artifacts repeat themselves—whether shoes worn by survivors, shovels used by recovery workers, or wallets traced to victims—no two have shared the same backstory or nuanced association. The democracy of the Museum’s collection is extraordinary.