

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Michael L. Jackson  
Interviewer: Brian Knowles  
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MR. BRIAN KNOWLES: Today's date is 22 May 2014. I am Brian Knowles, acting as an oral historian for the National Archives History Office. I am conducting an oral history interview with Michael L. Jackson. He is an exhibit designer with the National Archives Museum, Archives I, Washington, DC. Morning, sir. And if you would, could you go over the dates of service that you've been with the National Archive?

MR. MICHAEL L. JACKSON: I started working at the National Archives in February of 1994. And prior to that I worked for the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art for eight years. I've been in Washington, DC area since 1986.

And my educational background, and I have some other museum background prior to coming here in '86. I worked several years as a preparator in the Detroit Institute of Arts.

I have a fine arts educational background, with a bachelor's degree and a Master's of Fine Arts degree, and have done a few years of adjunct teaching of studio art, drawing, painting, design.

But I've been here since 1994. And I was hired here as an exhibit designer. I had been an exhibit designer at the Smithsonian for a few years before coming here, Smithsonian's Museum of African Art, that is. And I've been an exhibit designer here from 1994 to the present.

I've seen the organization go through some organizational, structural changes. Have been here for at least four Presidential appointees, Archivists, and some Acting Archivists—in between the appointees. So I've seen a lot of change here at the Archives in 20 years.

My work as an exhibit designer is a little misleading because here at the Archives there's a couple of us in the Exhibits Office, along with the curators and researchers, a couple of exhibit designers. But, typically here exhibit designers work with the curators to research. They come up with the exhibit ideas and, of course, the exhibit idea, the theme of the exhibit, goes through a lot of approval processes up and down the chain of command here, more so recently than 20 years ago.

Twenty years ago it probably really didn't go past the Assistant Archivist's Office for Public Programs. And, at that time that person was a woman named Linda Brown. And Linda ran the Public Programs, which consisted of the Volunteers Program, the Education Program, and the Exhibits Program.

And I was hired by a woman in that office named Emily Soapes, who was in charge of just the exhibit staff, the curators and the designers. And, at that time, our office was a little more autonomous than it is now. And we didn't have a Foundation for the National Archives that was active in raising money for exhibits and therefore more interactive in planning, in the discussions of our exhibits as we have now.

Back to what an exhibit designer does here at the National Archives. Typically, the exhibit designer works with the curator, comes up with a layout plan for the exhibit, has discussions about what graphics

might be in the exhibit. So the exhibit designer typically did a layout of the gallery, of exhibit cases and anything that was on the walls, all graphics.

The exhibit designer creates drawings for building new exhibit cases, if that's the case. Whatever structures need to be built and fabricated to go into the exhibits here at the Archives is all done by outside exhibit fabrication contractors.

The exhibit designer also usually does the exhibit graphics. That is, all of the in-case labeling and any kind of illustrations that go on the wall, any kind of text panels that go on the wall. We design the banners that go on the front of the building. We design the titles that go on the title wall.

We work with the curator to, to come up with photographic or illustrative contextual images that go with the documents in the exhibit. And then the exhibit designer is also the contract officer's technical representative for the process of soliciting bids to build our exhibits and install our exhibits.

The Archives has never had, in the 20 years I've been here, I've never had staff or facilities in-house, for building exhibits and installing exhibits. So all of that work is done by outside contractors. And in the time I've been here it falls on the exhibit designer to work with the contracting office, now in College Park, to come up with a statement of work, and solicit the work to be done by contractors.

And then the designer and the contract officer review the proposals and make a choice. Typically, we would get three or four proposals for each exhibit project, each new exhibit. And once the contractor is chosen, the exhibit designer oversees, well, there's a schedule of work that's part of the statement of work, listing the schedule of when the exhibit opens, and all the steps of the work that'll be done by dates from the time they get the contract until the time the exhibit is finally installed.

And so it's up to the exhibit designer to oversee that fabrication contractor making visits to the contractor's fabrication facility. Then when it comes time to bring the exhibit into the space, the exhibit designer does all the preparation to get the fabricators into the building. And, that's gotten a little more complicated in the last 12 years or 14 years, than it used to be before September of 2001. Meaning that our security here has been beefed up considerably from what it was in the 90s, prior to 2001.

So just, just to review exhibit design, my title's exhibit designer, but the exhibit designer does a lot more here because they don't staff other kinds of people for soliciting the contractor and overseeing the contractor install the exhibits. And there's a lot of more things that we do within our own staff and within the process of getting exhibit design built and installed.

I would say the exhibit designer's time, in my case, probably less than 20% of my time is actual design work. It's more meetings, interacting with curators and other offices within the process of getting an exhibit approved, getting an exhibit designed, getting the exhibit built, and then installed.

And that process, over the years, we've built a couple of permanent exhibits, including the *Public Vaults Exhibit* and the *Records of Rights Exhibit* in the Rubenstein Gallery. Those were very big exhibit projects.

Marvin Pinkert, who ran the Exhibits Program for the last ten years up until two years ago, I think Marvin came here around 2000 or 2001. And he was the one that had the vision for building the *Public Vaults*. And, also, he had a pretty strong part in, in, in the vision of the *Records of Rights* exhibit in the Rubenstein Gallery before he left here. I think Marvin left the Archives in May of 2012. And that exhibit finally got installed in December of 2013. So it went through some change after Marvin left, but not a

lot. I mean the basic concept and subject of the exhibit was basically his vision in collaboration with our curators.

I'm kind of wandering here, so I'm not sure—

MR. KNOWLES: [Interposing] No. You're doing great.

MR. JACKSON: Where I was going, I guess, is in these two major permanent exhibits, the designers here, Ray Ruskin and myself, were more involved in a team of people working with the outside designers. You know, dozens and dozens of meetings over two and three-year periods to get these exhibits designed and installed.

So we became more like in-house experts in a way, just we worked with the designers in that we knew a little bit about how our documents needed to be exhibited, and so we were part of a larger team.

We were not the designers for those exhibits, we became in-house consultants working with outside designers and that was perhaps more time-consuming than if we had designed the exhibits ourselves. I mean, , these two permanent exhibits, the *Public Vaults* exhibit and the *Records of Rights* exhibit were a tremendous amount of hours on a lot of Archives staff, including curators, conservators, registrars, heads of exhibits, Foundation staff, and exhibit designers, and our exhibit registrars.

So the work has really changed in 20 years, since I started here. And, that's kind of where we are today. These two large exhibits were funded by people, through the Foundation, funded by corporate people or individuals. Like Mr. Rubenstein, primarily funded the *Records of Rights* exhibit. Mr. Rubenstein provided the Magna Carta.

And prior to the *Records of Rights* exhibit, we built an exhibit for the Magna Carta that we worked with an outside design firm to design it. And it was installed in the West Rotunda Gallery and Mr. Rubenstein paid for that temporary exhibit until—and it was all planned all along—that document would be the centerpiece of the *Records of Rights* exhibit, the Magna Carta, I'm speaking of.

So that's kind of where we're at today. We opened that permanent exhibit in December of 2013. And currently, since that exhibit opened, Chris Smith, who was the head of our Exhibits Office. After Marvin Pinkert left in 2012, Chris became the head of Exhibits Office. She retired in December. Currently our office has an acting head. And, they will be hiring a new head of Exhibits within the next two or three months, I am told. Do you have any questions?

MR. KNOWLES: Yes, lots. Well, not going too off the beaten path here, how did you become interested in working at the National Archive?

MR. JACKSON: I was an exhibit designer at the Museum of African Art from 1987 till '94 when I came here at the Archives. And the Museum of African Art was a new museum. And the director at the Museum of African Art had announced to the entire staff, which was about 50 people top to bottom, that they should consider their jobs at the African Art Museum as a training ground, that they didn't have the budget to give people promotions or raises and that you should consider this job as a good starting point in your career and a good experience in a museum atmosphere.

The director's name was Sylvia Williams. And she told the entire staff herself, whatever grade level you are, that's what you're going to be. Because, she said, we have about 125 world class pieces of African

art. And she said, "In my tenure here, I intend to grow that number considerably so I'm using budget money as it comes in. I'm buying to grow the collection." She said, "I see that as my vision here."

So I came to the National Archives when there was a job opening here. And came here, to be very honest, came here for a grade promotion. And I started here as a GS-12 in 1994. And I was a GS-11 at African Art. And African art was good training ground for me.

And I had worked at the Detroit Institute of Arts, part-time and full-time over a fair number of years because I went to school in Detroit. I lived in Detroit. I went to Wayne State University in Detroit. And that's where I first got interested in working in a museum environment but at that time I never would have thought of myself as working in an archives kind of environment. But that's how it happened.

To be very honest here, I came here because there was a one grade higher opportunity than where I was. And I knew that where I was, I wasn't going any further than that grade level. So that's totally honest.

MR. KNOWLES: What was your first impression of the National Archives?

MR. JACKSON: I think I had been in the Rotunda and what we call the Circular Gallery, which no longer exists, but it was a semi-circular gallery, a hallway about 12 foot wide that wrapped around the Rotunda, that was our temporary exhibit space for many years. And the West Rotunda Gallery was also part of that exhibit space. It was used more as an introductory space.

And the East Rotunda Gallery was a really small gift shop all crammed into that East Rotunda Gallery, where they had a cashier. So our temporary exhibits started in the West Rotunda Gallery, then you went around and you came out of the exhibit into the gift shop, which made a lot of sense. A lot of museums are like that. When they have major exhibits, they typically have a gift shop at the end of the exhibit, if you've been to art museum exhibits.

My first impression was that it's pretty darn dark and dingy in here. The Rotunda has always been pretty dark. And, it's primarily because the light levels are kept so low in there to preserve the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence. Because those documents are on exhibit year-round, year after year after year after year.

And, so that was my first impression, we need some more light in here. Of course that never quite happened, until recently. But I thought that the Rotunda was a grand space. But I thought it was, frankly, after having worked in other museums, I just thought the space was a little dark and dingy and took some getting used to. It's still dark. I wouldn't call it dingy anymore because I was involved in a recent upgrade of the lighting in there. So, hopefully, it's better lighting in there than we've had in the time I've been here. Recently converted the whole lighting system in there to a new LED lighting system, happened this past February.

MR. KNOWLES: So you mentioned your fine arts background. How did you feel beginning to work with archivists, historians, and conservators?

MR. JACKSON: Well, it's definitely a change from your own vision as an independent painter and artist. But that was something that I accepted well before I came here. And, you know, I actually enjoyed working with many of the people that I worked with here. We have some pretty interesting curators here.

When I got here, and one of them is still here. Bruce Bustard, who is a Ph.D. historian, was here when I got here. He's been an excellent curator. He's been great to work with over the years in the various projects I've worked with him on.

And another curator that was here, her name was Stacey Bredhoff, who now works at the Kennedy Library. She left here to go to the Kennedy Library, I believe, about four or five years ago. And Stacey, I worked with Stacey on a number of projects.

I've worked with a lot of conservators over the years, from our Conservation Lab. Because the exhibit designers have to work with the curators. There's restrictions on how much light is on documents. There's restrictions on how documents can be displayed, how they can be fastened or not fastened to a mount. If you're displaying volumes or books, you have to work with the conservation people on specific openings and the angles of the openings. And so the exhibit designer interacts very much with the curator, the conservator, and the registrar that's working on each exhibit.

And my experience has been, overall, positive with all of them. I mean we certainly had our—if you get designers and conservators in the same exhibit, designers and conservators their interests are going to conflict.

The designers want to enhance the presentation. And the conservators want to make sure there's very minimal amount of light necessary. And minimal amount of handling and fastening of original documents within an exhibit case. So, yeah, there's sometimes conflicts.

But I believe that probably happens in every exhibit project where you have conservators and designers and registrars and curators. I mean it's in everybody's best interests that the documents are preserved a long time.

So, you know, there's some people that would rather we not exhibit original documents. In fact, the idea has come up over the years, at various times, of exhibiting facsimiles of documents. Having come from an art background and an art museum background, I believe people come here to see original documents, not facsimiles.

I can't imagine going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and seeing a facsimile of say a Rembrandt painting or in the more modern world, a facsimile of a Jackson Pollock painting. So I bring that kind of belief and feeling about that here.

We used to exhibit new documents in all the Rotunda cases. And we changed them out once a year. And in between that documents that required less light exposure, we changed those out every three months or six months. But about five, four or five years ago, we went to all facsimiles in there that more or less tell the story of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. So gradually we're moving in that direction where we show more and more facsimiles.

And, of course, the electronic components of our exhibits, like the large computer table in *Records of Rights* exhibit, there probably are about 300 images of documents. But people have access to see more and learn more about the variety of documents we have through that process. But they're not seeing real documents. They're seeing, you know, digital images on a monitor.

And so the positive thing is people can interact and go into folders and pull out various documents through the table and see a larger variety than we'd be able to show them if we were just showing originals in that space.

My hope is that we continue to always have original documents in whatever new exhibits we come up with, along with the electronic exhibits where we can show them more content of what we have here in the Archives.

MR. KNOWLES: Well you came in with a lot of experience with already being trained. Did you come in and have a mentor or have somebody provide you guidance or training to work for the National Archive?

MR. JACKSON: When I came here I was replacing another designer. And, so there were two designers here. The other designer that was here when I got here, his name was Steve Estrada. And Steve and I, I would say we were sort of on equal footing as far as experience.

Stephen actually came here two years before me, maybe three, maybe even longer than that. And, and he worked at the Museum of American Art before he came here. And so there was another fellow that was working with Stephen here. And I can't think of his name. But he left here to go work for the Museum of the American Indian.

The Museum of American Indian on the Mall hadn't been built yet in 1994, but it was in the planning stages. And, I believe they were doing exhibits up in New York where a lot of the Smithsonian's American Indian material was stored in a facility up in New York City. So I can't say that I had a mentor here.

I had a mentor at African Art, whose name was Richard Franklin, who was a very disciplined and understated kind of exhibit designer. And I learned a lot from Richard. Two of which I try to pass on to people that I know here that are working in exhibits.

Richard taught me that good exhibit design is the sum of all its details. And I take from that good exhibit installation is the sum of all its details. In other words, if you have sloppy detail here, and a sloppy detail there, that somebody's let go because of time constraints or whatever, it lessens the quality of the installation.

Most museums are very detail oriented. Everything's done very well. So the exhibit will hold up over time. But two, because it's been designed that way. Designers are very attentive to detail. You know, are the miters on the picture frames put together, you know, as well as they can be? That kind of detail.

That's my mentor. And, you know, another term for it, and, and I've heard it as kind of a cliché, but I think it's true. Designers and artists have used this term for probably centuries, but I've heard the term, God is in the details. So that's my overall mentor. The details have to be done well or the overall design is lessened. If the details aren't paid attention to, if the details aren't carried out.

So Richard Franklin from the Museum of African Art was my mentor. And there was no design mentor when I came here. That's not a criticism of the Archives, it was just the way we're set up. I came in here as an equal to one other designer.

And Emily Soapes was our supervisor in 1994. Chris Smith became our supervisor. Chris had been a long-time Archives employee, who was a curator before she became a supervisor of the curators and the exhibit designers. Chris became the supervisor, I believe in the late 90s.

MR. KNOWLES: So was there any sort of education or training?

MR. JACKSON: Well, you know, in my generation, and I'm in my sixties, most of the people that worked in exhibits, in exhibit design, in the museum world, whether it was a history museum, a natural history museum, an art museum, most of the people came from either a graphic design background or a fine arts background.

But, beginning in the 80s, as museums grew, as budgets grew, as there's more and more exhibit work, there began to be college programs for exhibit designers. And even writing design was covered in some college programs. So there are several programs around the country now in universities where you can get a degree in exhibit design.

But when I finished college in the 70s, I don't believe any of those programs existed. Yet there was a need for exhibit designers in museums. For example, the guy that first hired me as an assistant designer to him at the Museum of African Art, the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art—Richard Franklin.

Richard, his first passion was, was art. And he had a graduate degree from Yale, a fine arts degree, has a painting degree. And, you know, painters have a pretty hard time making a living. And adjunct teaching doesn't pay very much at all. And it's even worse now, I think, than it was 30 years ago.

So Richard started working as an independent designer and gradually got into a full-time opportunity at the Smithsonian. And I think that's what happened to a lot of people who came out of art school with a bachelor's degree or a fine arts degree. They either ended up teaching or some were successful and could make a living on their art and others moved toward the museum world to get jobs. And I was one of those that came from an art background.

But I think most people in design now either come from an architectural background or they've gone through a graduate school program, younger people that are coming into museum design field.

We've got a young lady in our office who's a graphic designer. But she's got a master's degree in exhibit design. And I think she's got an undergraduate degree in graphic design. The graduate degree is from a college up in Philadelphia and I don't remember the name of it. And she got her undergraduate's degree in an art school in New York. She's very well educated.

And those kind of programs were not around when I went through school. I don't think people came out of school in the 60s or the 70s, and said, "I'm going to be an exhibit designer." I've sort of just gravitated to it over the years because I needed, you know, I needed a job. I wasn't making any money painting, so I needed a job.

MR. KNOWLES: That's a good reason.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: So how does the process work for creating a new exhibit?

MR. JACKSON: Well, here at the Archives, it's changed over the years. When I first got here, it was, you, you know, the curators, and the head of Exhibits would agree on a theme for an exhibit, say two or three years in advance of the exhibit's opening. And a curator would do the research. And come up with the materials that were going to be in the exhibit after a theme is approved by the head of Public Programs and the curator or the head of Exhibits.

And then once the curator did the research and chose the artifacts, whether they're documents or a combination of documents and artifacts. And, typically some photographic materials that give some context to the documents and artifacts. Then the curator works with the designer. They discuss the curator's vision or idea or the story that that curator's trying to tell. And the designer works with the curator in a kind of cooperative effort to come up with an idea of the layout of the exhibit, the look and the feel of the exhibit.

And then the designer proceeds to make the drawings. And as the drawings come along, you know, there's more interaction with the curator. And I think at the end when the drawings are done or when the curator and the designer have pooled their efforts, they get approval for their final design layout, you know, the wall colors are chosen, the exhibit case designs are made.

There's a process where the conservators are brought in to approve the exhibit, the method of exhibiting documents or artifacts, and they often give guidance on that, working with both the curator and the designer.

And then, and then once the designer has created all the fabrication drawings, created the layout of the exhibit, made color choices for graphics and wall colors, maybe fabrics inside cases, the finishes on the cases, all of those drawings and specifications are sent out to an exhibit fabrication company. We typically solicit three or four bids for, from known exhibit fabricators and, in the area. And, there are a lot of them in the D.C. area. And, and then we review their proposals. And we choose the one that—we don't always go with the lowest price—we go with what we describe as best value.

We know what quality of work we're going to get from different fabrication firms. And, you know, in that process there's probably the head of Public Programs or the head of Exhibits takes what we're doing to upper levels for, you know, for final approval.

But over the years it seems like the process has—now we have the Foundation that's involved in the planning of exhibits. They're not necessarily involved in the planning of contenting for the exhibits. But, their interest has grown because more and more we are funded by outside either corporate funding or private funding that the Foundation goes out to solicit funding for our exhibits.

It wasn't that way until about the early 2003, 2004, we began to get funding for our exhibits from the Foundation for the National Archives. And through the 90s we had, you know, our office was budgeted. We had budgets with government funds for exhibits.

And more and more we have less government funds. And we have to work with the Foundation. Therefore, as we plan, we go through the exhibit selection of subject, selection of title, selection of documents, there's more and more interaction with the people in the Foundation.

So that they have an idea of what we're doing. And they are able to communicate more clearly to the outside people that they are trying to solicit funding from.

And so it, so over the last ten years, the process, there's been more and more people brought into the process of developing an exhibit from outside our office, including the Foundation.

For several years, before the most recent restructuring, we were under the Office of Washington Records. And the head of Washington Records was a man named Mike Kurtz, who started working here right out of college in the early 1970s. He has since left.

But, until recently he would be like the final approval. And I imagine that he would run whatever we were doing by the Archivist and let them know what the exhibit was going to be next year or six months down the road. So I'm sure everything that we've done, and I'm not in touch with this stuff, but I'm sure everything that we've done is taken to the highest level at some point before we proceed to get it built and installed.

But more and more it seems there's more-higher level people involved in it now than there was prior to around 2003, prior to 2003. And even in the last five years it seems like there's more people involved than, than 2003 to say 2010.

MR. KNOWLES: So does the time frame from concept to opening the exhibit, has that time frame expanded with the more elaborate structure of processing the exhibit?

MR. JACKSON: That's a pretty good question. It depends on the size of the exhibit and the cost of the exhibit. We also do a lot of what we call feature document exhibits, which we set up either in the East Rotunda Gallery or the West Rotunda Gallery.

And typically it's a one case exhibit with one document and some graphic, some information about the document. And typically those exhibits are, you know, like the anniversary of the Constitution or some President dies. And I've been here for, through a few of those. Those are very impromptu exhibits. But, I remember when Ronald Reagan died. I don't remember what document we exhibited but we put an exhibit, we put an exhibit together within a few days. I think the curator on that was prepared for that because everybody knew, because he was ill for a long period of time. And so the curator who did that exhibit had something picked out, probably a couple of years ahead of time.

But we do a lot of impromptu exhibits. This facsimile of the *U.S.S. Constitution*, we exhibited that original drawing, which we have. It's a record here at the Archives. That's a facsimile copy. We exhibited that at the request of the Archivist, the current Archivist, three years ago, I think. Maybe for the anniversary of the beginning of the War of 1812. I can't remember specifically.

So, small exhibits can happen within a very short time frame. But an exhibit like the *Records of Rights*, which was big money, lots of money, outside exhibit design firm, a lot of time, and a lot of bureaucracy to get it done. Because there were so many people involved in it, that, the concept of that exhibit, I believe, we started talking to the design firm about that exhibit two and a half to three years before that exhibit opened.

So I would say the curators started talking to the design firm about two years. And our curators were researching the topic, the theme and coming up with ideas for documents, I believe, about three years before that exhibit opened.

So that would be three years out beginning research for an exhibit to the time it opens to the public, for both the *Public Vaults* exhibit, as well as the *Records of Rights* exhibit, both permanent exhibits here.

The Public Vaults Exhibit opened in November of 2004. And I believe the research for that exhibit probably started around 2001.

And, again, that was an outside design firm. And, but an exhibit in the O'Brien Gallery. And that's where we have our somewhat major, but temporary exhibits.

I would say the idea, the theme of those exhibits, are being discussed sometimes three and four years out from the opening. And they go through approval process through the upper levels before they're finalized, before they decide well, there's an exhibit coming up in there that's going to open, I believe, it's going to open in the fall or next winter, on Prohibition.

And the Archives has a lot of records on Prohibition, various posters and laws, and I believe there's been talk amongst the exhibit staff of a Prohibition exhibit probably started three to four years ago. And it was a curator that came up with the idea. And, you know, curators come up with ideas and they get talked about in meetings and some of them take and some of them are discarded.

And, but I would say that the ideas start to germinate three or four years in advance. But the actual work, the researching for documents and the writing of the script for the exhibit, the research starts, maybe two years ahead of the exhibit opening.

And the designer gets involved maybe a year ahead of the exhibit opening, approximately. Ideally, further ahead but, in reality, it often doesn't happen more than a year ahead. Because sometimes when a designer gets involved the curator is still coming up with final choices for documents. And there is input from other offices once they know what we have.

Our curators go to the archivists for different Record Groups and seek out suggestions. We're thinking about an exhibit on Prohibition so they go to these different Record Groups and ask them, "Do you have any records that we might consider for our exhibit?" So archivists are brought into this process too, but in that kind of way.

I think every once in a while we'll have an archivist come forward and make a suggestion for an exhibit. I think it happens, but it doesn't happen often. I think they would like to have more input than they do. I don't know that first hand. But it's a big place and the Exhibits Office has become public face of the Archives in some ways.

And I think that there are archivists that would like to be more involved in what's exhibited. And I don't have any specifics on that, but I do know that that goes on over the years. It's not a problem, it's just part of our process of developing exhibits and the content of exhibits.

MR. KNOWLES: How has the touchscreen technology influenced exhibit design and creation?

MR. JACKSON: Touchscreen technology probably has been around maybe about ten years now. It's gotten more and more complex. We have a big table touchscreen in the *Records of Rights* exhibit. I can't remember the size of it. But I know it's at least 20 feet long and 6 feet across. And people can work from four different positions. And they have access to the same records from two on one side and two on the other. And, and it's a big draw up there in that exhibit.

So how do touchscreens influence exhibits? I think that, you know, Marvin Pinkert, who was the Director of Exhibits and Public Programs here from around 2000 to the time he left about 2012. Marvin Pinkert is

the one that introduced the use of touchscreens in our exhibits. We wanted more interactive exhibits. He believed that interactive exhibits were more attractive to younger people and would bring more families to the Archives. And make our exhibits more attractive to a wider audience.

So I think they have influenced how we do exhibits because you bring kids through an exhibit and if you watch them, I mean that's where they go. They go to the interactives. And they figure them out pretty quickly. They figure out how to use them. Sometimes I think a certain percentage of them are mostly interested in figuring out how they work. And then they move on to the next one, whether or not they get involved with the documents, I'm not sure how, how successful that is as far as getting people involved with more documents.

I'm sure it has a certain level of success and is successful in that way. I just don't know to what extent it is. I do know that interactive exhibits are very expensive to bring them into our exhibits. You pay an outside firm for the computer program. You pay our own people to do the research for the documents that we want in the program and the script, the text that we want in the program. We have to pay an outside exhibit fabrication firm that has the technical skills to purchase all that equipment, put it all together, and specify what we need.

Typically our exhibits with interactives in them, computer interactives, we have to maintain a contract with outside firms so there's a constant, monthly outlay of maintenance contracts for all of our interactive exhibits. And the more interactive exhibits in an exhibit, the bigger that monthly cost—currently we have a contract with a fabrication contractor in Lorton called Design and Production, they go by D&P Inc. They installed both the *Public Vaults* in 2004 and the *Records of Rights* in 2013. And the Foundation maintains a contract with them for servicing those exhibits, X number of hours per month. They show up here in the morning hours, prior to opening. So we have ongoing contracts. I don't know exactly what those contracts are, but, you know, I think they're a few thousand dollars a month.

And just maintenance, not to mention stuff that breaks and needs repaired. Sometimes that's covered within those contracts. And if it's a major problem, then it's probably not. But, you know, interactive exhibits have changed museum visitors' experience greatly here at the Archives. And it's going on across the country.

I don't know if you see them as often in big art museums. You see some of them, some in art museums, but not to the extent that we have them in the *Public Vaults* and in the, in the *Public Vaults* exhibit and the *Record of Rights* exhibit.

MR. KNOWLES: I asked that because, compared to some of the other national museums here in D.C., the National Archives Museum actually has a lot more of them per gallery than most of the other museums do.

MR. JACKSON: I think part of the reason is Marvin Pinkert came here in the year 2000. I believe he was hired in, 2000 or 2001. He came here from the Museum of Science and Industry, which at that time was a very progressive, large, well-funded museum. I don't know if you've ever been there, but it's along Lake Michigan, south of Chicago and it's a huge place. And it's a museum that is based on the concept of interactive experience as opposed to putting pictures on the wall or putting scientific gadgets, you know, in a vitrine, a display case.

They have one of the early commercial airliners hanging up. That you can get on the airplane and sit in a seat and the pilot gets you ready for takeoff and you go through the process of taking off with the noise and, so Marvin brought that here. That, interactive experience, whether it was an interactive with a computer or it was interacting with an environment. They have a coal mine shaft there. I think that's where I was with him when we went there. I think they have a coal, I may be thinking of a museum in Minneapolis that he took us to.

When Marvin first came here in 2000 or 2001, he made a mission of teaching our staff about interactive experience, whether it's interactive with an environment in a history museum or computer interactives. So, Marvin was the visionary behind the *Public Vaults* exhibit and the *Records of Rights* exhibit. And so you see more interactives in those exhibits because that's part of his vision, part of his belief for museum exhibits.

MR. KNOWLES: So what's your preference?

MR. JACKSON: I'm still, you know, I'm an old codger. I still really like to walk in and see a document, a real document, a label describing the document, maybe a contextual image that gives me a little more idea about what the document's about. I like to see real documents. That's my preference.

But I was working in exhibits long before computer interactives come along and I came from a fine arts background. I'm not a computer person, although I've used computer in my work for the last 20-some years.

But I started doing all my drawings on the board. I actually have an associate degree right out of high school of architectural drawing. So I learned to draw. I went to college for two years to learn to draw architectural drawings for buildings and highways, and bridges and that sort of thing.

So, it's been an adjustment for me, interactive exhibits. But I sincerely believe they enhance our *Public Vaults* exhibit and our *Records of Rights* exhibit. It's just, I think we have seven cases in the *Records of Rights* exhibit that have real original documents that we change out regularly, keep them fresh.

And so there's still enough people here that believe in original documents that we still have original documents interacted with the interactive exhibits. I wouldn't be surprised to walk in here eight or ten years from now and find no more original documents in one of our temporary, you know, year-long exhibits. I wouldn't be surprised to see that happen. I'm not saying that it will. But, you know, there's a growing trend of more and more interactive, computer interactive, specifically, exhibits.

MR. KNOWLES: Well, one particular question I had with the exhibits was how do you choose the voices for the narrating the audio exhibits?

MR. JACKSON: Wow. You know that's a question I'm not sure I have the answer for. We have a couple of people on staff. And we have somebody down in the education department who works with outside contractors when we have to get a narrator for something or when we have to have footage put together in a, in a kind of a video for presentation in the exhibit. We work with outside businesses that do that kind of work for the museum industry, the advertising industry, the movie industry, whatever. And we have two people, Darlene McClurkin, who works in the Exhibits office. That's when she usually gets involved with an exhibit, when it involves photographic imagery, when it involves footage of video. I

mean the Archives, as you may know, has all kinds of footage of, you know, World War II, for instance, just an incredible amount of footage.

So when a curator wants to bring some sort of footage and it needs to be narrated, usually Darlene and a man in our education program, Tom Nastick—Tom Nastick runs the film program here at the Archives where we show films down in the theatre on a regular basis.

So those are the people that are brought into the exhibit design and conceptual stages of the exhibit to go out to the contractors that will get us a narrator or whether or not they're looking for a specific voice, you know, whether they have this idea they want, say, Robert Redford to narrate. I don't know if they go that far or if they just work with a narrator that's a professional, local actor. I mean a lot of actors get into doing that, that's part of their repertoire, in order to make a living. So I don't know how the narrator is chosen.

MR. KNOWLES: Okay.

MR. JACKSON: But, but there is a process.

MR. KNOWLES: I was going to say, you have a volunteer here if you need one.

MR. JACKSON: You know, I wouldn't be surprised. Is that something that you would do, is that what you're saying?

MR. KNOWLES: Yeah.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: Yeah. And your interest in architecture. And I was touring one of the galleries last week and saw that there is a couple architectural drawings hanging up on the walls to showcase some of the documents that the Archive has. I was interested, why isn't there anything about the Archives building itself? It's such an interesting icon.

MR. JACKSON: [Interposing]—that exhibit's been there since 2004. And I was not involved in exhibit, the early stage of it. And then for a period I was involved in changing out the original documents.

Through the core of that exhibit, the big hallway, is called the *Record of America*. And when you come into the west side of the exhibit, the entrance to the west side, are records from our early history. There's probably a George Washington letter in one of the cases on the left or right as you walk in. And as you go around and come out the other side, there's more contemporary and different kinds of records, like sound. There's some sound recording. There's an interactive with some Vietnam War, I want to say casualty lists, but I'm not sure about that. But, the architectural drawings that you're referring to are kind of in the middle, kind of like early 20th Century, or late 19th Century?

MR. KNOWLES: Yeah.

MR. JACKSON: And there's a chronologic order to the *Record of America*. And I'm not sure how the drawings are chosen. And the Archives has a lot of like what I call presentation drawings where architects have drawn—like sometimes we see elevations of a new building, like a new postal museum from the 30s or a new courthouse from early 20th Century. These projects that were funded by the government.

We have, we have a lot of the architectural records. I don't see too many actual architectural drawings. I think we did exhibit an architectural drawing of the Washington Monument in that space several years ago. And they're typically originals, so they're only out there for, depending what the media is, sometimes it is six months, sometimes it's a year. If the drawing has watercolor in it or a certain kind of ink, they don't like to leave it out there. Watercolor has some pretty strong restrictions by conservation, typically three to six months. Because light will eventually fade watercolors. Not all watercolors because they're all made with different pigments and different metals. But some watercolors will fade quickly. And the same with oil painting over the long term.

So there are a lot of drawings of this building, I've actually seen a lot of the blueprints. I think we have the original vellum drawings done by the architect John Russell Pope out in College Park in the records division that has the big map-size, you know, Richard Smith used to be the head of that operation until he retired about four years ago. But I can't tell you for certain if I remember architectural drawings from this building. But I've actually been out there and looked at the architectural drawings myself.

MR. KNOWLES: I was just, I was just curious about that.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: So have you worked with any odd or strange or interesting materials?

MR. JACKSON: Probably the most interesting project that I've worked on here at the Archives is when the Archives started planning for a renovation of the Rotunda. And the Rotunda was closed down from 2001, the summer of 2001 to September 2003. I think we reopened the Rotunda on Constitution Day, which is September 17 in 2003.

And in that time, I was on a team of people, Archives people, and then there were a lot of people from the National Institute of Standards and Technology out in Gaithersburg. The acronym is NIST, N-I-S-T.

The conservators, designers, engineers, optics engineers, paper conservators—there was a large team of people from inside the Archives. And then consultants from the outside of the Archives, a team of I would say 20 to 30 people, that began planning for the removal of the Charters from their old sealed encasements that were also built by NIST in the 1950, '51, '52, somewhere along there.

And so when the Rotunda was closed we started these meetings and planning, I think in 1999. And most of the meetings took place out at College Park or out in Gaithersburg at National Institute of Standards and Technology. And it was a group of NARA people along with NIST people and some other private consultants, physics people, and engineering type people to come up with a new plan to take the Charters out of their present encasements, which were pretty thin. Encased between glass and I believe bronze frames. And they were sealed. And were sealed with helium gas to keep oxygen out—apparently oxygen's not good for the documents long term.

And so I was on that team representing the Exhibits Office from an aesthetic point of view. Because we had conservators, we had a lot of conservators on the group. We had, as I said, engineers, physics people, optics people, but we didn't have anybody to have some say about how these are going to look in these new cases, what the new encasements are going to look like. And how they are going to appear in the new exhibit cases that are being built in the Rotunda for these encasements.

And I was that person representing exhibits. My boss, Chris Smith, was on that team of people. And it was a two-year process, the design process. And, you know, Exhibits got to weigh in pretty well on the look of what's out there now. The way the documents are sitting on a platform, kind of floating in a dark space so you can't see the interior of those encasements. Just another example, we had lot of influence on the shape of the frames. Because we had some understanding of how the lighting would be in those cases, which nobody else did. Nobody else was an exhibit designer on this this team of people.

And one other thing that we had a strong influence on is the gold frames. The materials for the encasements, the frames are made of titanium. And in the year 2000 titanium was kind of the metal du jour around the country. I don't know if you're a golfer, but that's when titanium golf clubs became very popular. Because titanium shafts are lighter and stronger than steel. And so there was a lot of titanium in the atmosphere almost. So there was this company, somewhere in the northeast of the country, who heard of our project. And they wanted to donate the titanium that would be part of the encasements for the original Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

And there were some people in the project, in particular one guy who was one of the higher-up engineers in charge of the project, who had direct contact with this company that was donating the titanium, which is an expensive material. And these encasements are—I can't remember the size of them, they're about 30 inches or more high. No, they're closer to 40 inches high because the documents are close to 30 inches. So the encasements are more like 40 inches high, 30, 32 inches wide.

And so it's a lot of material. And the Archives accepted the donation. So there were people who wanted to the frames to be raw titanium. You know, to sort of pay homage to the people who made the donation, not to put their name on the cases or anything like that, so my boss and I thought that was a bad idea, the raw titanium. Because raw titanium really looks like your stainless steel kitchen sink. It has that same gray, silvery, so we pushed for gold plating.

MR. KNOWLES: Yeah. So it can breathe.

MR. JACKSON: And, and probably at that time, gold was probably \$300 or \$400 an ounce. And now it's, you know, it fluctuates between, I don't know, \$1400 and \$1800 an ounce now. Maybe if it was at that price, and I went out and did some research and I found a local company that did gold plating down in Lorton, right off, you know, like within a mile off 95. I can't remember the exit. But I actually went down and visited them. And talked to them about it. And so what I learned is they can't plate titanium. They have to put a nickel plate on the titanium, and then gold on the nickel.

So I think that we ended up getting the nickel plating done somewhere else and the gold plating down there. And the, and the gold is 23.999% pure gold, 20 karat, 24 karat is pure. And this is 23.999. I mean this is pure as 24 karat. Yes. It's pretty thin plate. I don't know what the micron measurement aspect, but anyway, our office definitely made that happen or voiced loud enough that it happened.

Our conservators weren't crazy about the idea because they were concerned that, you know, if you touched it, it might scratch. Or if you, you know, people handling it, and they, they were going to be handling these things. There, the, the, the conservators have to maintain the, the vaults and the documents. And so they're concerned about people touching, their staff touching them, and the fingerprints not coming off the gold very well, but that's how we got gold plated.

And of all the projects I've been involved here, I was involved in the project in '99, 2000, and 2001 until we had a final design. And then NIST built the encasements in their shops out in Gaithersburg in 2000, 2001, and 2002. And I wasn't really privy to the budget, but it was a few million dollars to build those encasements. Because there were so many high level consultants involved in part of the team—you know, there was a lot of research on what glass we use. And how do we finish the interior of the aluminum bases, which turned out to be, again, Exhibits had a big influence here.

We suggested a black interior so with the minimal light you couldn't really see the interior. If you could see the interior of the bases are made of aluminum. The black that you see around the document on the platform are hard anodized aluminum. And if there was enough light in there you could probably see the machine marks. Because the aluminum, the bases, were machined from about 4 inch deep, 4-1/2 deep by 45 or 42 inch by 30 inch, 30-something inch blocks of aluminum.

And there was research on what grade of aluminum are we going to use. I mean, I didn't know there was so many different kinds of aluminum. But we used something that was referred to as aircraft quality. And there's a designation for it, anyway. The NIST people were very knowledgeable and they made the recommendation of what aluminum we used.

But, the bases are all machined out. There's no welds. So those encasements with the frames and the bases are about that deep, outside dimensions.

If you ever get a chance, up in the *Public Vaults*, which would be the southeast corner, is a little film of one of our meetings at NIST. And there's kind of a quarter model, a full-scale quarter model of how the encasement is built. And it's a pretty interesting thing. Because it's machined just like, before they machined the final, so that we had some models to work with and approve.

And so you can actually see how those encasements are built if you look. We have a quarter model in an exhibit case that's the quarter model is displayed, I believe, on a 30 degree angle. Maybe it's a 45, I can't remember, with a mirror on the bottom so you can see what's going on in the bottom of the encasement.

And, so that was one of my major projects. Probably the project that I'll always feel the best about. Very interesting project because I got to see the actual sheets of documents, actually, you know, set on the platforms and make sure they fit.

And where that work was done in a secret location in College Park, where they were located for a few years. You know, while the Rotunda was closed down. So it was very interesting to get to see those like that close and outside of any kind of glass or encasement. I think that was your question, what interesting projects.

MR. KNOWLES: That was, that is definitely fascinating.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah. The most recent project that I worked on that was a pretty interesting project to me, was the exhibit about the 50th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis.

Because in 1963, I think I was in seventh or eighth grade. And sat in our living room with my parents watching Kennedy give that speech about the danger that's at hand because he gave the speech about the Russians have missiles in Cuba. And the missile range pretty much covers the United States. And, and that, you know, people need to be prepared. Because Kennedy was determined to force Khrushchev

to take the missiles out. Anyway, the exhibit was designed by Ray Ruskin and me. And it was, 50 years, '63. So it was the 60th anniversary.

No, 50th anniversary in 2013. It was called *To the Brink: the Cuban Missile Crisis* or, I think the *Cuban Missile Crisis* was the sub-title and *To the Brink* was the title. And a lot of original documents, and the curator was Stacey Bredhoff, who works at the Kennedy Library. She used to work here.

And she worked with Ray and me to come up with that exhibit. So that's another exhibit that I'm very proud of. And, you know, it was an exhibit that was important to me because it was an event that I remember very clearly. And it was a scary time. Because Kennedy went right on national television, you know, right after evening news. And made this announcement that this was happening. And, it was scary because it was at a time when people were making bomb shelters, you know. The threat of nuclear war was pretty high with the nuclear testing was going on. The Russians were testing and then we would test a bigger bomb. And then they would test a bigger bomb. And that was going on in that period. So I remember it well.

And so working on that exhibit was very interesting for me. There've been a lot of other exhibits between now and when I started here in '94. But that one stands out. The Charters encasement project stands out.

MR. KNOWLES: Now, do you have any interaction with tourists or with researchers?

MR. JACKSON: Well, our curators research their own exhibits. Do you mean if I have, oh, do I have interaction with tourists?

MR. KNOWLES: In the process of conducting your job with the exhibits.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah. I understand. It's not part of my job to interact with tourists. But sometimes I'm up there. I mean, I'm up in our exhibits frequently. And if tourist asks questions, you know, typically they'll see the badge. And, you know, so every once in a while a tourist will come up to me and ask a question about an exhibit. And if it's something I have an answer for, I'll interact with them. If it's something I can't answer, I will try to get information and either get a way to contact them or give them the name and a phone number to contact.

Usually one of our curators. So I don't have a lot of interaction with tourists, but it's not part of my job. I'm not a spokesman for the Archives. I'm a behind the scenes guy.

MR. KNOWLES: Well have there been any challenges that you've had to face working here at NARA?

MR. JACKSON: I'm going to try to say this as, as simply as I can. Having worked at the Detroit Institute of Arts, which was a quasi-city organization, but was run more by a foundation.

Having worked there for a few years in the 70s and into the early 80s, and then working at the Smithsonian's small Museum of African Art, which had a staff of 50 or 53 people top to bottom, the level of bureaucracy was very minimal in those places.

And so, probably one of the biggest adjustments for me here at the Archives, to do your job, it's a heavy bureaucracy. Sometimes I think that it's that way, not because it's a government agency, but it used to be part of the GSA.

And I think when I first came here there was a lot of the paperwork, a lot of work orders and, you know, Form SF, standard form, number, number, number. I mean we had a lot of that. And I think it was a carry-over from when the Archives split and became an independent agency from the GSA, I believe in 1985. So I believe some of the bureaucracy has carried over. But, in my experience, it's gotten heavier. Especially in the last five years. So that's a challenge for any creative people.

Now, I think the curators there's maybe not as much so, but the designers, we're involved in designing and getting the things built by outside contractors. And so there's a lot of laws and restrictions about, you know, contracts can only be a certain amount. And if they're over a certain amount, then they have to go out widely available to bidders. And there's a lot of hoops to jump through.

And, and I'm going to say this very straight forwardly, the most recent restructure, from where I sit, has not made anybody's life better here. I haven't talked to one person who feels that it's made our operation more efficient and better. That's just the way I feel about it. That's been my experience.

I hope it works out in the long run. But I've been here for 20 years. So, you know, every time we get a new Presidential appointee, two out of the four that have been here in the time I've been here, have restructured the place.

The first one was John Carlin, who was, who was a governor. And he was a pretty dynamic Archivist. And I think that his restructure worked fairly well. He was here during the renovation, during the changeover from when we shut down the Rotunda for two years and had the renovation.

But the most recent change, combined with the government budget cuts, I don't know. A lot of people are not happy about the change, they don't see how it's really helped us. In my mind it makes more sense for the Archives to hire the Archivist and not the White House. And let the Archives hire, you know, either someone who knows how the place has worked in the past. And knows how to make it work better. Or, you know, or have a national search for an experienced Archivist, whether it's the head of a state archives but, I don't know that the Presidential appointee thing works best for the Archives.

MR. KNOWLES: You mentioned the sequestration of recent years, but has there been any other significant events that have, that's affected your career? Like Presidential elections or September 11th attacks, any interesting stories?

MR. JACKSON: Well, September, September 11th has had a big impact on the Archives in that the people who ran the security operation in the Archives prior to September 11, was, well, there were two people down here and there were more people out at College Park. And things were quite different.

We didn't have our bags inspected as we left each day. We didn't have all of these magnetic passes from one part of the building to the other. People like myself and the curators had access to stack areas. And, of course, the stack areas that had the more valuable things, the priceless things, those were locked and those were maintained by archivists. And you had to make arrangements to get in to see, you know, for example, the Emancipation Proclamation was kept in a vault along with some other documents, and sometimes we would have to go up there for one reason or another, either to take a measurement because it's going in our upcoming exhibit.

So it's a lot harder to get access to the storage areas now. Although, I just heard recently that they're reintroducing the idea or somebody's trying to reintroduce the idea to give curators access again

because curators actually used to go into the vault areas when they're looking for certain subject materials, they could go into these storage areas and go through the storage boxes and just kind of leaf through documents and look at them without having to check them out and go to a reading area or, you know, one of the public research areas out in College Park. In fact, I think, there was a time when curators checked out those materials and took them to their office to look at them more closely.

There were proper procedures for doing that. It wasn't just sort of they walk in and bring something back to their office. So the security of the building and the size of the security staff, the professional NARA staff, has changed a lot since 2001.

And I think early on there was thought that those documents could be a target. I don't know where you were September of 2001. But, you know, a lot of us were waiting for the next shoe to drop after those initial bombings. I remember I'd take the bus to go over to the Pentagon. I mean, I took the train to the Pentagon. I live in Annandale. I take the train to the Pentagon and then I take a bus from the Pentagon out to Annandale. That's my public transportation route every day for a lot of years.

And I remember after 9/11, my thought was Washington, you know, Washington is going to get hit again, sooner or later. And I always thought, in that period, we didn't know if there was another hit coming shortly, the logic was, very possible there is. So I avoided the subway. I thought the subway, you know, a place like L'Enfant Plaza or, you know, these big intersections where there's a number of trains stopped at once and a lot of people, so L'Enfant Plaza and what's the one up here on the Yellow Line, the first one up?

Well, the next two stops on the Yellow Line where they intersect with the Red Line and those kind of places I thought there were perfect places for a bomb. So for six months I went out here on Seventh Street and caught a bus over to the Pentagon rather than the train. And in the morning I would transfer from one bus at the Pentagon to another bus, a local bus that came in here. For six months after 9/11.

So, that was the effect on me personally. So I'm not surprised that the Archives' security was beefed up and changed significantly. In fact, we have a lot of ex-military security people running the security operation here at the Archives. Dave Adams is a 20-year Air Force guy. I'm not sure what his position in the military was, but I think he was in security. So we have a lot of, Dave Adams, who's the head guy here in this building. What was your question again?

MR. KNOWLES: If any major events have affected your career?

MR. JACKSON: Affected my career? Well, I think coming here in 1994 from the Museum of African Art changed my career a lot. Because it's a very different kind of place than an art museum or a cultural, African Art is kind of a cultural museum as much as an art museum, African culture museum.

And, you know, I stayed here. I stayed here a long time. I had one possible opportunity for another exhibit design position when I was about 50 years old. It was out in Kansas City, in Nelson-Atkins Museum. I had an interview but I wasn't offered a position.

But it was at a point in my career where I had to decide am I going to stay in the government or am I going to go back and work in an art museum where I came from? And after I had been given an interview date, I went out there and checked out the museum, incognito. I went out there on my own money. I wanted to look at the facility and their collection before I went out there a couple of weeks

later for the interview. And so that's when I made a choice to stay here at the Archives. And I had been here, at that point I had been here five or six years, I guess. So I think just coming here changed my career a lot.

And, working here I've gained an appreciation for what the Archives does. And the rich variety of the kinds of material we have here, the history of the country. And, and I've come to appreciate these old, original documents, even these very simple 19th century typeset with the big signatures. I don't know.

And the only other thing I would say changed my career here, was being involved in that encasement project. I think I met a wider range of people who work here. And developed somewhat of a kind of a solid guy kind of reputation. Interacting with a number of people from other offices and outside people, including the people out at NIST. I became golfing buddies with a couple of people at NIST as a result of working with them for two years.

MR. KNOWLES: Well do you have any associations or organizations you're a part of, such as the SAA or any of the others?

MR. JACKSON: I've been in and out of the American Association of Museums, as a member. I've gone to AAM conferences off and on through the last 25 years. But other than that, no. I don't belong to any kind of exhibit design organization. I'm sure there are some out there. I'm not aware of them.

No. I guess I'm just not that ambitious about this, this career, to be involved in a lot of different, frankly, for many years the job has been very demanding. And there's just not a lot of time for a lot of other kinds of committees and outside organizations. At least from my perspective. A lot of other people, professional people, join organizations. I don't know. It's just never been my inclination.

MR. KNOWLES: That actually reminds me of a question I had for you earlier. In your work, do you have any connection with the Boeing Learning Center, since it's also on the museum side of the building?

MR. JACKSON: No. I did not. One of the people in our staff who was a curator, left a few years ago to go work for the, I think he's working for the White House Visitor Center. His name is Will Sandoval. And Will is a former military man.

He was a major in the Army, who was in the Gulf War. And still talks about it with great fondness, his experience in the Gulf War. Of course, most military experience in the Gulf War was a lot different than the Iraq War. But Will was a very capable person. And he had the discipline, had the follow-through discipline of his military background. I was in the Navy a long time ago. So I kind of know there's a discipline that you learn when you're in the service.

If you're in the Army now, and you come out of boot camp and you go to Iraq. And then you come back for a few months and you go back to Iraq. I don't know if you have that same discipline that you carry into your professional world after you get out, as Will might have had.

But Will Sandoval was part of the planning, working with the Foundation and Marvin Pinkert and Lee Ann Potter, who was the head of the Education Program at that time. So, Will worked in our office. Lee Ann Potter worked for Marvin Pinkert. And between Lee Ann and Marvin and Thora Colot, who ran the Foundation at that time, the Boeing Learning Center is their vision, a combination of the group.

And Will was the one from our office that worked with the contractor to get it built and installed. And we miss Will because Will gets things done. He knows how to communicate with the contracting world. And a respectful communication and therefore gets cooperation and we miss him here.

But, Will Sandoval, in our office, was responsible for the fabrication, getting the fabrication and the installation done. And Marvin Pinkert, Lee Ann Potter, and, to some extent, the Foundation, who paid for it with Boeing's funds. The Foundation is the one who solicited the funding from Boeing. They're the ones responsible for the Learning Center, the in-house people that are responsible. I had nothing to do with that project.

That work was all being planned and done in a period between 2001 and 2004. I can't remember when the Learning Center opened. I think it opened around 2004. But Ray Ruskin and I were involved in planning and working on designs of the exhibits that were going to in the new O'Brien Gallery, which was also new in 2003, I think, when the building re-opened we opened a new exhibit in there.

There may have been a few months delay on that. But, in the O'Brien Gallery we have changing exhibits. Some of the exhibits have been as short as three months. And other exhibits has been up almost a year over the last 10 or 11 years. But those will continue to be changing exhibits in that space.

MR. KNOWLES: Do you think it's going to be difficult to let go of your duties and responsibilities from the Archives?

MR. JACKSON: I do. And this is something that is sort of becoming clearer to me. I announced to my boss and our staff that I was going to retire sometime in late March. I made the announcement that I was going to retire April 30th. And then in April there were some financial advantages to changing to the end of May. And so, two weeks after I started processing for April 30, I changed my mind to May 30th. And since then I figured out I do have some apprehension about retirement. I feel like I have a lot invested our Rotunda.

There is one other project that I would like to talk a little bit about that was very important to me. But I'll talk about it after, we recently redid the lighting in the Rotunda and in the East and West Gallery and in what we call the Constitution Avenue Foyer, which is that area below the steps up into the Rotunda where the big vaulted ceiling is. And we used to bring the public in that way. But, what was your question again?

MR. KNOWLES: Letting go of the—

MR. JACKSON: [Interposing] Letting, letting the work go, yeah. Yeah. I think I have cared about a lot of the work. I care about the Rotunda. And I care about the quality of the work in the galleries. And I care about the upkeep of the galleries. And part of me worries that, and maybe this is just an egoistic thing. But part of me worries that if I'm not here, other people don't pay attention to those things. And you know how, if somebody in the office is taking care of something on a daily basis or weekly basis, nobody else worries about it, because so-and-so's taking care of it.

Now another guy in our office is tasked with overseeing the day-to-day maintenance and operation of the two permanent exhibits, the *Records of Rights* t and the *Public Vaults*. But, I don't know. The Rotunda is kind of like this hallowed space. And, yeah. I kind of worry and it's hard for me to let go of

making sure that everything goes well up there, because I was involved in the design and the eventual production of the exhibit cases up there, all of them.

I wasn't the designer. But I was involved in the team of people that oversaw it, come up with the requirements, what we needed there. And in all those cases, so I have a lot of my work and time here is invested in a lot of what's in the Rotunda. Even including the inside structures of the exhibit cases, the side cases on either side of them. So it's, yeah, it's hard to let go.

Because right now we don't have anyone really in charge of the Exhibits office. And I don't know who they're going to hire. But I hope they have a provision for maintaining. Because it really does take the Exhibits office to keep an eye on things, to keep things clean up there. And, because it's kind of our exhibit areas. And so, if somebody's not paying attention, stuff can go in disrepair and not be paid attention to and I've kind done a lot of that over the years. And so it's hard to let go of that.

And I've watched our exhibit program sort of be, well, more people from the outside are involved in our program. And I'm not always sure that's for the best. And I'm worried about where that's going. I'm not going to go into any detail about that, but I worry about the direction our Exhibit Program is going. Because we really haven't had anybody in charge of it, anybody with a real strong vision since Marvin Pinkert left here two years ago.

Chris Smith was our director in the time that Marvin was gone. And Chris is a long-time employee of the Archives who retired in December. And she was well-liked by a lot of people. And she did a good job of running the Exhibits Program. And, you know, her vision of the Exhibits Program was not the same as Marvin's vision. And frankly, Marvin was a very dynamic person and I hope we get somebody like that to replace Chris, who has been gone now for nearly six months. And I hope we get a person to run the program that has vision and has influence with the people outside of our program, who has the trust of them. Yeah.

I'm concerned about where we're going. But, so, the Archives, you know, to a large extent, I've defined myself by my work here in the Archives, and the other museums that I worked in—I didn't get married till later in life. I don't have kids. So I think many of us who are single through most of our career, we tend to define our self-esteem and our identity is more about what we do rather than about our family, you know what I mean? I'm mean, it's a generalization and I know.

I have some, I have some apprehensions about the adjustment from being part of this all these years and getting up on the first Monday morning and realizing I'm not going to work anymore. But I'm also ready. I'm 65 and there have been a lot of stressful years, but it's been pretty relaxed around here since we opened the *Records of Right* in December. And within our office it's been a little more relaxed. There's still a lot of work going on, but there's a lot of pressures, exhibit deadlines, they're never changed. That deadline got changed a month because of the government shutdown. The government shut down in November, October, I can't remember when we were shut down.

MR. KNOWLES: October, I think.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah. It was, almost three weeks. And that exhibit was initially supposed to open in early November, I think. And it got pushed back to mid-December. I can't remember if we opened, I think we opened before Christmas.

MR. KNOWLES: And wasn't the Archives, or the Federal government closed that day, when the exhibit opened? Or that was the Signatures exhibit.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah, the Signature exhibit.

MR. KNOWLES: It was the closed the day of the snowstorm.

MR. JACKSON: The snow, yeah. No. But it wasn't, yeah. I was here for the opening of the *Records of Rights* exhibit. I remember coming to work that day, going home, changing clothes, picking up my wife, and coming back for the evening.

MR. KNOWLES: Well you mentioned the lighting in the Rotunda, I wanted to the talk about that.

MR. JACKSON: I've been thinking about retirement for two years. And one of the things that I wanted to see finished that I had been sort of talking with the facilities manager about and talking to my boss about and we had a new lighting system put in the Rotunda when we opened in 2003. It was a fiber optic lighting system. And there had been some changes made to the fiber optic cabling that diminished the light quality a few years ago. And so we began to look into how to improve that. And meanwhile, LED lighting is sort of growing and getting better and better, the commercial LED lighting.

And so I was involved in bringing an LED lighting designer and another company into the building who would install whatever lighting we put up there, whether we redo the cable, fiber optic cable lighting. They convinced me to not spend a couple hundred thousand dollars redoing the fiber optic or upgrading the fiber optic lighting that was already ten years old, and we would be better off investing a few more thousand dollars and tearing out all of the fiber optic lighting and putting all new LED lighting.

And there was efforts on my part and my office's part to have that happen. And we got facilities interested in the idea of having it happen, upgrading what we have. And so it was something that I started working on to make it happen, you know, kind of behind the scenes. I don't have the authority to make something like that happen. But, over the years I have gained a certain amount of influence with certain people. And, and so we finally got to a point where people agreed with the idea of replacing the old system with the LED.

So I worked with an engineer out in College Park, Ron McGanty, who's a COR, who's kind of in charge of big construction facilities projects like out at the libraries or this facility. And we wrote up a statement of work with some guidance by the LED people about what we needed. And so we wrote up a statement of work a year and a half ago. And got approval for it from people out at College Park, facilities management people, to go ahead.

And when we got prices some people backed off and thought it was too much money. But in the end, the person in charge of facilities out at College Park said go ahead. And we were trying to get it done in a period, because scaffolding would have to be built. Because all these light fixtures up on the high ledges in the Rotunda and in the vaulted ceilings, everything's up on high ledges.

So, we thought scaffolding would have to be built. It would be on wheels and moved out into the work areas at night and moved back into the corner of the Rotunda in the daytime during public hours because we couldn't shut the Rotunda down; the work had to be done at night.

And we were working with Grunley, which a general contractor who's been in the building now for, I don't know, 12, 14, 15 years. And they get these kind of projects. The Archives does the funding through them. And they work as the general contractor.

So I was determined to stay here till we finished up the Rotunda lighting. And finally got a contractor and got proposals last fall. And then we finally got a schedule to get it done in February. And our office certainly didn't do it but I felt like I was part of that project and part of getting it done.

And it goes in that territory where the lighting in there was kind of dingy, the fiber optic lighting. It had a certain color to it, and so we got this cooler light that's a little cleaner looking with the new LED system. And, not to mention part of the reason the project got approved out in College Park by the facilities manager, the over-all facilities manager out there, was the Archives is on a mission—and it's all in Federal government is on—to use less and less carbon energy. So by taking all of those 100, 200, 150 watt metal halide fiber projectors, the source of the light goes through the fiber into the light heads that disperse the light. By removing all of those and putting in this LED system we're using about 20% of the energy that we were using for the same space just six months ago.

MR. KNOWLES: Wow.

MR. JACKSON: The LED fixtures are not cheap. And they only last six to eight years and you got to replace them. But, but they're not using carbon. The fixtures themselves, you know, like 8 or 9 watts is equivalent to a 65 watt fixture, the LED 8 or 9 watt output is, produces the same light that a 60 or 65 watt fixture does. So—

MR. KNOWLES: [Interposing] Wow.

MR. JACKSON: So we're pulling a lot less electricity to light the Rotunda. Probably about 20 to 25% of what we were using before.

MR. KNOWLES: Well have you been recognized with any awards or citations in your career?

MR. JACKSON: I think I got an Archivist Achievement Award, a group, you know, along with a larger group of people, for both the Charters Encasement Project and the new Rubenstein Gallery project, *Record of Rights* exhibit. I certainly earned other spot awards over the years. I can't really sit here and tell you what they are. I've never been motivated by awards. But I'm appreciative of the awards I've got. I may have gotten another one for the Magna Carta exhibit that we put up a couple of years ago, but I can't remember.

But I'm the kind of person that all of those certificates that I've gotten over the years are stuffed in a couple of folders in a file. I appreciate them but I'm not one of those guys that's got them all up on the wall in my office. Not even one of them. But I do appreciate that I've been recognized. Yeah. I feel like I've been recognized, well-recognized for my work here at the Archives through the years.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. What do you see as the biggest challenges for the National Archive in the future? From your perspective.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah. Well, I don't have a lot of insight, I have no insight into the Archives side of the Archives. I don't interact with the Archives side very much. And I don't know the archivists in the

Archives. I've always been on the exhibits area and pretty much stay to myself and within our office over the years.

So I'm sure there's a lot of Archives issues. I know that there's a lot of issues with electronic records and how does the Archives collect those from government agencies? How do we store them? Because there's so many different forms and formats. And I know that's a big issue.

I think that the, I think that the current structure of the Archives is going to be a challenge through the years with, in the incoming years. I know that the people who created the structure probably don't like, hearing that, but that's my perspective. I think, I'm not sure it's going to work over the long term.

I don't know what the right answer is, so I don't speak up a lot about it to them because I don't have a better idea. I thought things worked okay before. And I don't think that things work better now. So I think that that's going to be a challenge.

The, I think one of the big challenges for the Archives and will be for the Archives, I think the idea of a changing political appointment for the Archivist in the United States every time we change presidents, I think that, I don't know that that works good for the Archives itself.

I think they come in meaning well and wanting to make a difference, wanting to, but, you know, sometimes you're, they're only here for, we had one guy that was only here for two years, Mr. Weinstein. And I don't know what the background reasons for that were. I mean I've heard things, but I, and then, and then we got the current Archivist after Mr. Weinstein left.

And he's the one that brought in the corporate structure. At least that's the way I understand it. And I, I've heard it described that way. So I, I, I think that having a new Archivist every several years that wants to reinvent the wheel, and that's happened several times in the 20 years I've been here, I don't, I don't know that that is, is good for the Archives.

It frustrates the people who, the people, the career people here who, you know, nobody likes change. I mean sometimes change is necessary and sometimes change is good. But change for the sake of change is not always necessarily good. I'm not saying that's what we have now. I don't believe that the change we have now is for the sake of change.

I believe that, that the Archivist and his team, you know, genuinely believed that a new structure would be beneficial. But I know a lot of employees around here who don't see it. And so I think that's going to be a challenge.

And, but I've, I really, I have, I have, I have nothing against the current Archivist of the United States. I mean, I'm sure he's doing the best he can do. And he's doing it in good faith trying to do the best he can do.

But I think we need career archivists who are excellent, to have the ability to rise to the level of the Archivist of the United States.

And several years ago, and I can't remember if George Bush appointed John Carlin or if he's, if he's, I think it was George Bush that, in early, no, it had to have been, it had to have been Clinton.

John Carlin was a pretty good archivist even though he didn't have any, he didn't have any archives experience. He was a politician from Kansas. He was a conservative Democratic governor of Kansas. And

a successful one that served, I believe he served two terms out there and then he got, and he was a pretty effective archivist because he trusted the Archives' staff to, to reorganize itself. And he brought about the reorganization.

And I think, I think, I don't think he wanted to leave when, when the new president, I think it was George Bush that appointed Mr. Weinstein. And Mr. Weinstein replaced John Carlin. Are you familiar with, have you ever looked at the photographs over here?

MR. KNOWLES: Mm-hmm.

MR. JACKSON: Yeah. I think Carlin was, was pretty well liked by the staff. He was a, he was a hands-on archivist. Our current Archivist is a hands-on archivist.

As far as the other challenge, it's probably recovering from the drastic budget cuts that the Archives has taken, you know, in the last four years. And in that time the Exhibits Operation budget has been trimmed to, to very minimal amount. And now we're depending on the Foundation to raise money for exhibits.

And if we keep, if we keep trying to create these expensive interactive exhibits, they're, they require a lot of funding and, and maintenance. And so, I think funding of exhibits is going to continue to be a challenge.

But I, I think they always will because it's a real positive face of the National Archives. It is our, the public face of National Archives and it introduces to the public that come in here as tourists to see the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And they happen to wander into our galleries.

It, it opens their eyes to the fact that we're, we have all this other stuff. And that, that our records of the history of the country or the history of the government of the country. And so I think there'll always, you know, I think the exhibits will always be funded.

I just think it, I think, I think the government, the Archives recovering from these budget cuts, which doesn't look they're going to grow anytime soon, or they're going to grow our budget anytime soon. It's going to take, take a while. It's going to be a challenge.

MR. KNOWLES: Well my last question for you is, what are you going to miss the most?

MR. JACKSON: There's a camaraderie here amongst the exhibit staff. So I'll miss a number of people that I've worked with for a lot of years, especially within the Exhibits and the Public Programs part of the, part of the Archives. And, and frankly, the work has been very gratifying.

The actual work, not, not the hoops that you have to jump through in the bureaucracy to get the work done. But, the actual work has been, has been very gratifying. And the exposure to a lot of very interesting documents.

I mean, being with them, you know, on, on, you know, in, in back rooms and storage areas and seeing these things first hand. And just learning about what's here.

But I would say two things, the people that I've worked with, not all the people I've worked with, but a lot of the people I've worked with. And I'm being a little facetious. I think, I think if everybody's honest,

you know, you don't enjoy working with all the people you work with, but you enjoy working with some or most of the people you work with.

But, but the work and the people, you know, the people I've worked with has been the most, the most gratifying. And then, of course, within the work was, was the projects that I've mentioned, have been most, to me, it was a privilege to work on the, the encasement of the charters documents project.

I mean, it was just downright lucky for a guy who grew up in a small town in Michigan. And fumbled his way through college on his own. And ended up here at the National Archives. And when I think about it, it's pretty amazing to me because it wasn't planned. Just, just kind of happened.

So, working at the National Archives, for me, is a pretty big deal. And I'll always be proud of that.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. Is there anything else you want to discuss or mention?

MR. JACKSON: I think I've talked and babbled on long enough.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. Thank you for your time sir.

MR. JACKSON: Thanks. Thanks for giving me this opportunity. I appreciate it. I—

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National Archives History Office  
700 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington DC 20408  
Tel: (202) 357-5243  
Email: [archives.historian@nara.gov](mailto:archives.historian@nara.gov)

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I authorize the National Archives History Office to use the recordings and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the historical objectives of their oral history program.

In making this gift I voluntarily convey ownership of the recording and transcripts to the public domain.

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