

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Keith Shuler
Interviewer: Daria Labinsky
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Daria Labinsky: OK. Hi, this is Daria Labinsky. I'm interviewing Keith Shuler, and today is February 17th, 2021. OK, Keith, why don't you start off by telling us about where you work now and what your position is.

Keith Shuler: Currently, and pretty much always, for the past 30-odd years, I have worked at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library. And I'm an archivist, GS-12 archivist, with all the duties incumbent upon that. Started there as a technician, and was lucky enough to get an office position, and have enjoyed my work there for the past 30-some years.

Daria: OK, where did you—what was your education, your background, before you got there?

Keith: Education-wise, I got my bachelor's degree in history from Indiana University, and when I finished at IU, I did a quick tour in the military. And after I got out of the military, ended up coming to Georgia. No jobs in Indiana at the time, Rust Belt, unfortunately. And came to Georgia, worked a couple of jobs, and then went back to school and got my master's degree at Georgia State University, again in history, with an emphasis on the French Revolution and Napoleon. [Laughs] So, go figure that one.

Daria: Could you tell us a little about your military background?

Keith: Sure. When I was at IU, I ran into a couple of guys who were ROTC candidates, and they convinced me that that would be a good idea. And it was, it's been very helpful career-wise and just life-wise, I think. But so, I went in, went into ROTC when I was at Indiana and finished that course, came out, and the summer after I finished, I went down to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. San Antonio is still one of the most beautiful towns I've been in—and went through my "Officer Basic" course and became a Medical Service Corps officer. And Medical

Service Corps officers are neither doctors nor medics, for the most part, they work a lot of the ancillary jobs in the medical field. So you'll find them in hospital administration, medical logistics, those kind of fields.

I, on the other hand, was what they call a "Muddy Boots" MSC officer, which was that my first job in the military was as a medical platoon leader. So I was a med platoon leader with the 20th Engineers, which was part of the rapid deployment force on Fort Campbell, 101st Airborne Division, Air Mobile.

And then my second job was as the executive officer for the 86th Combat Support Hospitals Headquarters Company. So basically, if you're an executive officer, you get to do everything, again, sort of ancillary that the CO, you know, basically has to have done, but is not necessarily, doesn't have all the time in the world to do. So, for instance, you become things like the, you know, the tax officer, the voting officer, the arms room officer. In my case, I worked with the chief warrant officer in the motor pool, also was one of my jobs, also worked with the guys in the medical supply and repair unit that was part of the hospital. You know, a lot of different, a lot of different jobs on a daily basis that need to be done, that sort of fall to an executive officer, health and welfare inspections, I was a drug rehabilitation officer. You know, there's a whole variety of different, of different charges.

And then, eventually, it came time to decide whether I wanted to be a first lieutenant, and I knew, had been told that our particular branch, Medical Service Corps, was very much over strength. So it was sort of more manpower that it needed. And once I made first lieutenant, waiting to be a captain was going to be a wait, which never looks good on a promotion board for any reason whatsoever. So the jobs were few and far between for captains. So, you know, being stuck as a first lieutenant, you know, for an extended period didn't seem too much fun to me. So, I mean, I took an early out with an honorable discharge and said, "Now, let's go see what's out in the world."

Unfortunately, I didn't research the world first. [Laughs]

So, my career options were somewhat limited. It was, you know, it was the early-mid-'80s and jobs were scarce. But that kind of sums up my military career. Unless you want to hear some

really good stories about being in the Army, which I don't know if you want to do that, because we'll be here all day. [Laughs]

Daria: That might be a separate interview. They [the Oral History project] have a separate “veterans” section. Was 86th Combat Support, was that also—where was that at?

Keith: That was also on Fort Campbell.

Daria: Fort Campbell, OK.

Keith: Yeah, they were the combat support hospital for the 101st Airborne. Really good bunch of guys, really good bunch when it comes—you know, since this is for posterity, I'll just say it out loud—when it came to the people that I worked with in the military, especially the guys that worked under me, the guys that worked around me, I had some very good soldiers, and every one of them knew their job, knew it well, and performed it to the utmost to their abilities, and I was always very pleased with, always very proud of the guys. They were real, very conscientious of their work and very well-trained medical professionals, too. So it kind of made my job a lot easier, which was nice there.

Daria: OK, so how did you get from Georgia State to the National Archives?

Keith: Well, that's an interesting story right there. I started out at Georgia State, and I was a teaching assistant down there. So I was working with professors, and my intention was to get my master's degree and get my Ph.D. and go teach somewhere. Again, apparently, I didn't research the world, because there were no teaching jobs at the time but I was working as a teaching assistant, and we were getting no tuition breaks and \$150 every two weeks, so we weren't making a whole lot of money.

And I'd gotten a job working at ... wasn't Barnes and Noble, let's see, shoot, the other bookstore that was at the time, I forget the name of the bookstore—Walden, Walden Bookstores [Waldenbooks]—and had just secured a job and was going to start in a couple of weeks working at Walden Bookstores part time, because there's something about paying rent and eating, that, you know, you want to do. But I was sitting in my cubicle that I shared with another individual—

Eric Brauer—and one of the other teaching assistants came over. Her name was Lisa Grubbs. Great, great, great folks.

And Lisa asked Eric, she said, “Well, how did the interview go?” And he said, “You know, it was OK, but I don't think it's something I want to do.” And I turned around and I said, “What interview?” And Lisa said, “Oh, I'm working over at the Carter Library project (at the time), the library had—the construction hadn't been completed, so they were still over in the old post office across from the Russell Building in downtown Atlanta. So, and they were still a project, so they hadn't really opened.

And I said, “Oh, that's interesting.” And Eric said, “Yeah, it's just something I didn't want to do.” And I looked at Lisa, and I said, “What does it pay?” [Laughs] And she told me, and it paid, like, you know, half again what I was going to be making at the bookstore. And I said, “Can I get an interview?” And she said, “Sure, I'll call.”

And so she called, and it was either that afternoon or the next day, I went down and interviewed with a couple of the folks down there. I talked to Don Schewe, who was director at the time, and Martin Elzy, who was assistant director. And when they described the job to me, I was like, “Well, this isn't bad, sure.” And I told them I'd go ahead and take it. And at the time it was a part-time job.

So it was, you know, they were still employing students as part-timers at the time. And I did that for about a year and a half, I think, two years, while I worked on my master's and when the—

Daria: What were you doing?

Keith: Oh, a lot of the—just, you know, a lot of refolding, relabeling, that kind of thing, not being, you know, not being completely vetted at the time. So, you know, I didn't have any kind of major clearances or anything yet with the agency. I spent a lot of time moving stuff from nasty old folders to nice new folders and, you know, putting stuff in Hollinger boxes and stuff, which was OK. I mean, like I say, it was part-time work. I didn't expect it to be, you know, glorious and glamorous. And it served its purpose. I mean, like, refolding, reboxing, entire C

track, a couple other things. And it was, make sure the right folders are in the right boxes, and the right files are in the right folders, that kind of thing.

But did that, like I say, for about two years, and then, I'd just finished up doing all my classroom work and still had to work on my thesis, finish up my thesis. And the supervisory archivist— Dave Alsobrook, who is a great guy— Dave came to me and said, "Hey, there's an opening for an archives tech if you think you might want to apply. And he told me, he said, "You know, it's competitive, so you're not guaranteed you're going to get it." He goes, "But you have been working here. So it kind of gives you a leg in." He goes, "You think you might be interested?" I said, "Well, can I think about it overnight?" And he said, "Yeah."

And I went back and I talked to a couple of my professors, and they were very honest with me. They said, "Keith, we know you want to teach, you want to get a Ph.D. But the field is flooded. It's just flooded." They said, "We've watched you teach in class, and you can relate to students and everything else. And you present material well and everything else," they said. "But, it's just darn near impossible to get a job, and it's not looking any better for the next few years."

And so I kind of went, "OK, maybe, maybe time to change life course here." Went back to Dave, and I said, "Yeah," and he told me what I needed to fill out and I filled it out. And after I think it was about a month or so, few weeks, I got a notice that said, "Hey, guess what, you got the job." And so I started, went ahead and did all my clearances and everything they needed to do. And I started working for the National Archives full time, so that—

Daria: Ok, so what year was that about?

Keith: Oh, gee, that would have been—this is where it gets confusing for me, because I'm not good on dates. [Laughs] I think that would have been about '86, I think. '86, '87, I think maybe '86, '87, right around there.

Daria: So the building opened in '86.

Keith: Yeah. Which was really interesting, because every once in a while we'd go over and kind of look, and you could kind of see it taking shape and everybody, I mean, everybody was really

enthusiastic. I remember one day we went over to look over at the—they had finished all the inside. Nothing was up. It was just bare concrete and walls. And I went over with Jim Kratsas, who was the museum curator at the time. And I mean, he was very excited. He was like, this is going to go over here, this is going to be over here, and we're going to put this up here. So it was kind of nice to see it go up.

But yeah, I was working there when they opened up, when they opened up full time, and they opened up—the museum opened on October 1st—Carter's birthday—of '86, and then the Research Room opened up in January of '87. And we had quite a few records open, I mean, we had—the entire White House Central File Subject File was open. And so, we had quite a few researchers walking in, and press people that were all excited about being able to actually see stuff. So it was great.

Daria: Did you go to the opening, were you guys invited?

Keith: Actually, we were—they didn't need all of us, unfortunately. And they—it was kind of one of those things like, if you want to come and you're not working, you can come. But there's going to be so many people here that, you know, if you prefer to stay away, that would be OK. So, I was like, I don't know if I want to deal with the traffic and crowds and everything else. So I kind of hung back and let everybody kind of do their thing, and came in the next day and was like, "OK, yeah, we're open." [Laughs] So yeah, but it was, I mean, it was really nice, it was a really nice opening, we got a lot of briefings on it and everything else.

And there's kind of an interesting, funny story in there, too, it's going to be—Dave Alsobrook, who was the supervisory archivist, has actually written a book about being an archivist, working with the National Archives [*Presidential Archivist: A Memoir*]. He's going to have it in his book. But—Don Schewe was the director and was given a briefing on the opening, and how everything was going to be physically set up. And out behind the library where the ponds are located, there's sort of a hill. And he was talking about where the press was going to set up and everything else. And Don said, "So the shots are going to be across the grassy knoll at the presidents." And I kind of looked at Don, and said, "Never say 'shot,' 'grassy knoll' and 'presidents' all in the same breath." So that got kind of a laugh.

But it was a good opening, you know, the speeches were well done, good speeches, and a good crowd. So it was pretty good. And when we opened the Research Room that January, that was—you know, of course, our first research card was President Carter, so that was kind of cool. And we've been serving researchers ever since.

Daria: Did you help with the move, did you guys have to, like, physically do any of that?

Keith: We actually hired, they actually hired a company to do the move, and their job—you know, we had to go in and mark the boxes. So we had codes that we kind of, sort of an alphanumeric code as to what floor, what shelving unit, what shelf it was going to go on. So we had to go through and mark all the boxes in that manner, before they moved out of the old post office downtown. So that was kind of a job, kind of a chore. But Martin Elzy was great at organizing and things like that. So Martin had kind of figured out the plan and kept us on track as to getting it done on time and how it was done and everything.

But we had—I can't remember the name of the company that moved us, but they had some individuals come in, and it was like, "Take this box and this box and this box." And we followed them out to the trucks and moved all the nonsensitive stuff in that manner.

Now, I wasn't privy to how they moved any of the sensitive material that was classified, so—but I know it was moved separately. So I assume that it was moved with a whole lot more security and under some sort of guard. But that was not one part of the move that I was involved in. So I'm not sure how that was done. But I just remember we filled up, you know, box moving truck after box moving truck after box moving truck. It just—there were times it seemed it would never end.

And unfortunately, of course, I think there was, like, one or two times during that move that a truck showed up, and we opened the back of the truck down on the loading dock, and one of the FRCs had fallen off the top of the pile, and there were kind of papers everywhere. Because moves happen, and things happen during moves. But you know, Dave Alsobrook, Martin Elzy were pretty well experienced guys, and had worked up in DC with Presidential Libraries, and had been involved in moves before. So the minute the back of the truck went up and they saw papers, the first thing they did was say, "Don't touch anything."

And so they would kind of go through, and interestingly enough, they'd look and see how it had fallen, and where it was laying and everything, and then kind of look at the papers and they were very, exactly managed to get stuff back where it should be. And so the “disaster averted” kind of thing. But yeah, we just had numerous trucks showing up at the loading dock, and then they'd put the stuff on floats and bring it back into the stacks, and it'd be like, “OK, put this one here and this one here and this one here,” so kind of an eye-opening procedure to watch just how much planning goes into moving that many boxes and coordinating the people and the trucks and everything else. So it was a real exercise in logistics.

Daria: Can you talk a little about the White House Central Files, since that was, you said, pretty much the first collection that was opened, and I don't think everybody knows what that is about?

Keith: Oh, well, basically, the—when things come into the White House, for the most part, they kind of go to individuals or offices that need to deal with them. And so, if it's public mail, it goes to the correspondence unit, if it's something that an agency is going to deal with, they'll get it, the proper people in the White House will get it over to a particular agency.

But eventually, just like any other business office in the world, because the White House is really just—the White House is a business office, just in the business of running the country, is kind of the way that it was explained to me, and I think that's a pretty good explanation—the Central File is kind of, I don't want to say overflow, but I guess that's the easiest word to say. The way it works is, when people get too many files in their office, or when things need to be filed away permanently, they go down to the Central File. And it's just that, it's a central filing unit. And the Central File, the people that work on the Central File, will look at the documents, decide what the document is about, and they have a list of category codes that they keep.

So, for instance, FG is “federal government organizations,” and like—I'm trying to think, I can't think of any of the codes directly, but say, for instance, like, FG-40 might be the Department of Education or something like that. So they file—what they'll do, what they'll do is, they'll take each of the documents, mark the documents that—and a lot of times, these are photocopies or

onionskin copies of their replies to letters, things like that—they'll mark these copies with the major category code that they fit under.

So, for instance, let's say if the letter, if it's a letter and it deals, if it talks about, mostly about the Department of Agriculture, but it also talks about the director of the Department of Agriculture and also the state of Idaho, OK? Since it's mostly about agriculture, up in the right-hand corner of the document, they'll put the category code for the Department of Agriculture, and then they'll do, like, the director's name under that. And then a code for the state of Idaho. And if it's a multipage document, they'll photocopy the front page. The original copy, they will put in that first category code at the top on the right-hand side. And then they will take two photocopies for the other two categories and put that first page photocopy in each of those locations. So there's a way to cross reference back to the original copy.

But it's a very—it's sort of a general subject file. A lot of times, you don't get a whole lot of really specific things on bills or actions that are taken in the White House. A lot of that material stays more with individuals' collections. But the Central File does deal with those kind of collections, too, so a lot of times you'll see boxes in the Central File that are marked for, like, Hamilton Jordan, and it'll be an entire box out of his office that deals with a particular subject that he dealt with. In that case, when you find—they kept a log of those kind of materials.

And so when we process a collection, we'll go through, look at that log, and make sure that there is no material marked as a Central File box or folder that needs to go back into, say, Hamilton Jordan's collection or Jody Powell's office materials, or something like that. So we try to reconstruct the office files in the way that they were when they were in the White House as best we can.

And there are other adjuncts to the Central File. There's the White House Central File Name File, which is just that, it's a file of materials kept by name of correspondent or by correspondent organization. So you might have, you know, John Smith's letter to the president in there, or you might have the National Organization of Women's correspondence to the White House in there. And that's all done alphabetically. And the alphabetization is sort of difficult to deal with sometimes, because, like, [the folder labeled] "N-o" might include "N-o-a, N-o-c, N-o-d," and so you've got to kind of extrapolate when you look at it.

But it's a good collection, too, because, you know, a few times we've had people come in and say, "Hey, my dad wrote a letter to President Carter," or, "I wrote a letter or postcard when I was a kid, do you have it, might you have it?" And you go look at a Name File, and it'll actually be there. So, it's kind of nice to hand, just somebody that walks in off the street and say, "Oh, yeah, we got this." So it's always nice to see their face light up a little bit.

And then the other part of the Central File is, you have the White House Central File Oversized Attachments, and CF—Confidential File Oversized Attachments. Confidential File Oversized Attachments are a little bit more sensitive, a lot of times are not really confidential, but in either case they're both sort of oversized. They're not necessarily physically oversized, but maybe volume oversized, like, you know, seven or eight folders on one subject that somebody just needed out of their office. And again, we'll try to reintegrate those into the various collections.

But the Subject File is literally just subject by subject, you know, cached away and in folders and Hollingers. And the folders are filed by category code, also. So you've got to have your manual to be able to know what the codes are. And I think the consolidated manual is probably, gee, gosh, it's got to be three inches thick, four inches thick. So a lot of category codes, a lot of cross referencing, that's kind of where it's at. But a lot of times it's a good place to start researchers, especially if they're not sure where they want to go in their topic, it's a good place to start them, because they can kind of zero in a little bit better and sort of narrow that topic by using the Central File.

Daria: Is that your favorite collection?

Keith: No, it's not. [Laughs] I mean, we have a lot of good collections. I don't think we have anything that is like, that I would say, "Oh, we just need to not pay any attention to this at all." Everything's useful in one way or another. But I've got a couple of favorite ones. I like Speechwriters because Speechwriters was the first really big collection that I worked on. And it was interesting to kind of watch and sort of look at how a speech developed, you know, a major speech, even small speeches, you know, quick speeches, to see how they were developed, you know, within the White House and in the speechwriters' unit. I think I kind of have an affinity

for that, because when I was in high school, I did three years of speech and debate. So, you know, I sort of fall back on that.

I like the Staff Secretary file, the Presidential Handwriting file, simply because it's the president's outbox. And so there's always a lot of good things in there to look at and see.

But you know, even some of the stuff that I processed here in the last couple of years, like Cynthia Wilson's papers, she worked a lot—she worked on the Alaska Land Bill. And these were her personal papers. And they, you know, the stuff that she had in there was just really eye opening on the Land Bill and really on Alaska itself, was kind of one of those, “Oh, now I want to go to Alaska” sort of collections, really informative, just about the geography and topography, and the people, and Native American tribes. And then all the effect of the Land Bill itself, and how they were going to work with that, and a lot of the debate back and forth. So that was good.

So, those are kind of three of my top ones. But I don't know that I have one that I would say, like, “This is my favorite,” and I don't think that's a bad position for somebody that's an archivist, because I think if you have a favorite—you know, I've seen people that have had favorites and, not illegitimately, I mean, it's not a bad thing, but you have a kind of tendency to steer people to that, because you know it more than anything else and—not that that's a bad thing. But I kind of take more of a sort of a scattergun, I guess—maybe that's too random—more of a broad spectrum approach to it, because, you know, I kind of like to be able to say, “Yeah, this would be a good collection for you, but this one and this one and this one also might help.” So I kind of try to keep an open mind on what's good. So I just think that everything is good and try to point researchers in that direction.

But, you know, if I had to pick one—if you ask me what my favorite document was, then it gets really easy, because I do have one favorite document that I found when I was working on the Staff Secretary Collection, on the Presidential Handwriting materials. There were three of us that worked on that, Jim Herring, Gary Faulk, and myself. And so we sort of split it up year-wise. And I think it was, gosh, I forget what year it was I worked on it, I'd have to look at the collection—“Oh, yeah, that's mine.” But it was a memo from Gerald Rafshoon to President Carter, and it was talking points, which are usually just one little, one page. And they're usually

about individuals or press that are going to come in and talk to the president. And Rafshoon in the body of the memo said, "Hey, these guys from *Sports Illustrated* are going to come in, and they want to talk to you about fly fishing, and sports, and softball games, and everything like that. So, these are the two individuals, and this is some stuff you want to talk about." And at the bottom of it, there's a handwritten note from Rafshoon, and it says, "Mr. President, this time when asked about your athletic prowess, break from standard practice and lie. Ha ha ha."

And President Carter actually wrote a note underneath it, and sent it back to Rafshoon. It says, "Jerry, that wouldn't be a break from standard practice. Ha, ha, ha."

And I love that document because, you know, first of all, it's funny and it's nice. It's kind of a, it sort of hits you out of nowhere, and it reminds you that these people have a sense of humor. And the other thing it does for me, too, is it reminds me that, you know, yeah, you're the president and yeah, you're running the biggest, most powerful nation on the face of the Earth. And it's not an easy job, and it's complex, and it's a serious job. But you can still have a sense of humor.

And the other thing is, that it reminds me that these guys, it doesn't matter the fact that they're the president. They still put—they're still like me, they put their pants on one leg at a time. And they just have a bigger, more important job. And it reminds me that they're human, and I think that sort of hits home when you look at criticisms of a president—and let's be honest, every one of them get criticized, you can't make 100 percent of the people or 100 percent of Congress happy every day. It's just not going to happen. But it reminds you that even through the criticism, they're trying to do the best job that they can. And so that is really my favorite document in the library.

I mean, of course, the notes on the Camp David Accords, his handwritten notes, is kind of up there, too, because you see what a great sort of reader of people President Carter can be. When he looked, when dealing with two peoples who have not seen eye to eye for generations, and he's able to sort of get an understanding and a read on their mind. It's interesting to see how he does that. So, yeah. So that's kind of the greatest hits here.

Daria: What part of your job do you like best, is there a—

Keith: Gee, you know, I mean, I kind of like it all. I mean, it all has its moments. It all has its moments, and it all has its moments. It's—I often tell, when I get people that ask me, when you tell people what you do, you know, a lot of times they go, "Oh, that sounds really exciting." And you're like, "Well, yeah, but it is a job, you know?" And so, the first six months is like, "Woo! And then you're like, "OK, it's a job, and it's not a bad job."

But, you know, I mean, I've had enjoyable experiences kind of across the board, you know, processing, reading things. It's, you know, sometimes it is tedious, let's be honest, because sometimes it's fairly mundane stuff. Other times, very exciting to see how decisions are being made and who's saying what about what. Working with researchers, you know, sometimes you have to put in a little extra effort, and sort of delve a little bit deeper, I think. And I mean, if I had to sort of, you know, buttonhole one thing, it would be—working with researchers can always be fun.

You know, it's nice to see that you've given them something that is going to be useful and that sort of makes their day and sort of completes their research. And they're always grateful, so that's always nice. It never hurts to get kudos. And especially, like, undergraduates, it's always nice. Somebody that's never dealt with primary source material before, and they're kind of at a loss. It's sort of fun to be able to say, "OK, take this approach and look at it this way and frame your thesis question, keep asking that, look at the material."

So it's kind of nice to help in that, sort of furthering their abilities in that way. But even though we don't do a ton of conservation work—and again, that can be sort of very, you know, [a] rigid, work-hard kind of thing—a lot of times it's interesting, when we do get to do it, to see what methods we can use locally, and how it's done, and sort of get coached through things.

So it's all kind of fun most of the time. It's all kind of a job sometimes. But if I had to pick one thing, it would be working with researchers. It's just fun to talk to people. You know, because we do spend so much time not talking. I have a tendency to be a little loquacious. [Laughs] And it's fun to see what different people are researching, and how they're coming at the material. You know, everybody's got a different way to approach it, and everybody's got a different idea

on how to interpret the same thing—which I've always found interesting, that four people can walk in and read the same document and get four different things out of it. So that's kind of, if I had to put one at the top, it would be working with researchers.

Daria: Do you, how do you—first of all, how has the library changed over the time you've been there?

Keith: Uh. Wow, that's a long time to cover. I think one of the things is sort of the, I'm not quite certain how to phrase it, I want to say the depth of the research, but that doesn't really kind of hit it. It sort of does and sort of doesn't. You know, when we first opened, everything was kind of new. And so, you know, people were coming in, and it was, like, “Oh, we're going to write on Camp David,” or “We're going to write on the hostage crisis,” or “Oh, we're going to write on the Olympics.” And so, there were sort of these broad, really broad topics that people kind of came in and researched. And, of course, you know, when you first open, you have a limited amount of resources that you can provide people with.

So over the years, as more things have opened, people have found ways to sort of drill down into those broad topics that were initially broached for the Carter administration. So they found ways to sort of tunnel in and get more specific on, you know, “OK, what was Begin's thinking during the Camp David Accords?” Or, “What was Sadat's thinking,” or “How did they react?” So they were able to get a little bit more specific, because of the amount and types of materials that we've opened. And so, as the years have gone on, that has kind of changed.

The approach to what we're processing, and how we're processing, has shifted a little bit, too, because, obviously, in the early years, you're trying to get a little bit of material out, OK? So you don't neglect a really, really complex or hard collection, but you might set it aside for two or three years. And so, something that is as labor intensive as, say— I'm trying to think of a good one, particularly like personal—like Cynthia Wilson's material, OK? There was a lot of loose material that took a lot of organization and things like that. So, yeah, you could do it your second year, but why not wait until your third or fourth year? Because in your second year you might be able to open four or five, you know, less complex collections that'd give you more material. Which is not an invalid way to approach things.

And, of course, as time has gone on, of course, we've had to kind of, we get more and more involved in doing more declassification of material and things like that, because it becomes more available as time goes by.

So that's kind of changed. Our approach to working with researchers has never changed. You know, we're always, we always want to be helpful, always want to be respectful, always want to be professional with them, and friendly. And actually, the way that's changed over the years is, you kind of develop, you know, sort of deeper relationships with researchers that keep coming back. You get a little closer to them. You might not get downright on a personal, friendly level with them. But you get to know them a little bit better and can kind of interpret their needs and anticipate where they're going a little bit better. So that's kind of changed.

Organizationally, there's been more of a movement to integrate the archives and the museum staff a little bit, so that we kind of know what each other is doing, which I think is a good plan, is a good plot there.

And of course, as the years've gone by, we get a little bit more conscious of going back and looking at collections and saying, "OK, now we're going to redo this," in terms of conservation, or reboxing, or those kind of things to, you know, make sure the material is still going to be there 100 years from now. But the job itself, the work itself, the day-to-day processing, reviewing, describing, those kind of things haven't changed that much.

Description-wise, we've had to become more attuned to an electronic environment. So our finding aids have sort of been shifted to present themselves in, you know, in a more effective way in an electronic environment. But when it comes down to it, it's really sort of a matter of organization, in that—how are you going to organize it and make it show up on a screen a little bit more effectively in terms of how a reader in an electronic format sort of looks at stuff, you know, they don't want to spend a whole lot of time looking at a title. They just want the title there, they want the links to go exactly where they want, they don't want to have to search through four or five pages to find exactly where they want to be. So we've sort of had to tailor our finding aids and descriptions more toward that format—which is, you know, it's the same information that we would present in a written format, a nonelectronic format. It's just organized in a different way and sort of presented in a different manner.

And description has become a little bit more, a little bit more involved. To start out, we never had ARC, we never had DAS, we never had any of those tools. So, learning how to enter that material effectively and efficiently—because it is time consuming, it does take time—so learning how to do it, and do it effectively and well and not spend, you know, an hour entering one folder in, becoming a little bit versed in how to do that is—there was a learning curve there for everybody involved. But for the researchers, it's great. An electronic search tool is a whole lot easier than thumbing through page after page of a finding aid. I still have a love for handwritten, our old hand-typed finding aids. But, you know, that's because they're old and so am I. [Laughs]

But the day-to-day job, I don't think that in terms of processing documents and dealing with the public, that hasn't changed much. Even though the electronic world is a little bit faster world, I think all the researchers understand that research is research, and it's going to take time. So they understand. So they're not like, "I want it right away." So, yeah, it's different in some ways, but I think the job, you know, in general, as a whole, hasn't changed that much.

Daria: Something you mentioned earlier, I thought maybe you should explain for people—you mentioned, when you process, looking at every page—why do you have to do that?

Keith: OK, so, yeah, when I first started work, I was told that Presidential Libraries was kind of a different bird, in that, you know, the federal records centers—and no shade on them, they do a great job, they do a lot of good work—they have a lot of challenges that they face in terms of the records that they have to deal with and everything else. And a lot of times they can do bulk reclassifications or bulk openings where they don't, they're sort of taking a whole box and saying, "Yeah, this is good to go." For us—and I'm sure that there are times that they get much more involved in just saying, "Hey, here's a folder, we can open it." I'm sure that there are a lot of times that they have to get very detailed in their work. I'm not familiar with the complete job that they do, but I do know that they do a good job.

With us, the material, because it comes out of the White House, can be very sensitive. And it can be very sensitive in a couple of different ways. One, of course, is that it can be sensitive in terms of, you know, portions of it are classified, OK? And of course, you know, if it's classified, it

has to be removed from any kind of open material, and it has to be safeguarded in proper ways. So we look at every page to make sure that none of that material is released. OK?

The other way that it's sensitive, too, is that you've got to look out, just like in any other review situation, you've got to be aware of people's personal information, Social Security numbers, driver's license, those kind of things. And, you know, it's very—the stuff, that personal information can kind of sneak into the records in sort of odd ways. For instance, one of the collections I was working on had some documents from veterans that were writing in about problems they were having with their veteran's benefits. And they wrote letters to the president, and they would put in their service number. Having been in the military about the same time, you recognized right away that somebody's service number was their Social Security number. So, if you're kind of not aware or not noticing that “hey, there's this pattern to these numbers,” you know, “could it be?” —You want to make sure that kind of stuff is taken out.

And then, of course, you get people that write the president and will, you know, there might not be a Social Security number, and there might not be anything, any kind of that sort of content that in a digital world could be devastating to somebody's credit rating or reputation or whatever. But people will write in to the president with their problems and they will, in some cases, fully describe what is going on in their family or in their life. And, you know, that's their personal business. And so you want to take those kind of materials out.

And like I said earlier, the White House is a business office in the business of running the country. And they hired people, and they had to make assessments on people that they were hiring, and they had to make assessments of people that they'd already hired. And, you know, life is life. And sometimes those assessments are critical. And again, that's somebody's job performance and everything else. And so, those are the kind of things you want to be sensitive of, and so, those are the kind of things you look for.

And then you add on top of that that a lot of times—well, not a lot of times, but occasionally—somebody would write a report to send up to the president, or send out to an agency, and they would include information from another agency, and perhaps that material was classified, and they would sort of fold it into a report. And so you have to be aware of, when you're reading things, you have to be able to go, “This sounds very suspicious, and it looks

like something that should not be open.” And so then you have to kind of do a little bit of research and say, “Yep, OK, they put these numbers or this information in here, one or two sentences that really, we can't let go.” And so you need to be able to withdraw that. And the way, what I was taught was that if you weren't certain about withdrawing something, you withdraw it. It's just always better to err on the side of the angels, OK?

And, you have to go back and fully research something for a couple of weeks to make sure, a couple of days or whatever, to make sure and get the authorization from the proper agencies and the people, to make sure something can be opened than to open something you shouldn't have opened. You can always release something, you can't take things back, is kind of it. So we were always taught to be very, very cautious and very, very conscientious in our review of documents. So I've always tried to be, and everybody at the library always has been.

Daria: Did you ever work with President Carter?

Keith: Unfortunately, no. I've never had the opportunity to work with him. I've met him a couple of times. I've shaken his hand. And it used to be the norm that they would have great Christmas parties [at the Carter Center] and great Fourth of July parties. And, you know—my wife has actually, has the privilege of being better acquainted with President Carter than I am. Because when we were going out, I went to the Christmas party, and he actually came across the dance floor and asked her to dance one dance. Yeah. [Laughs] And of course, you know, she's my wife, so I like to think it's because she was the prettiest girl there—and she was. But yeah, he actually danced with her. So I kind of stood on the sidelines and went, “Wow, so many years working here, I get to shake his hand, she gets to dance with him.”

But yeah, I mean, I've been in a couple of meetings where he's been there and it's—the first time, I've gotta laugh, because the first time I ever met him, we were actually over at the Carter Center side in that central meeting room they have right when you go in. And I was sitting on—there was a couch in there, and there's a table, a meeting table, a bunch of chairs and some couches and chairs around the outside, and I was sitting, and I had my back to the door, and I was talking to Bob Bohanan, who was a librarian at the time, was our librarian. And I was in the middle of this discussion with Bob. And all of a sudden Bob jumps to his feet. And I

looked up and said, “Bob, what are you doing?” And I turned around, and Carter had walked in the room. And I’m like, “Oh, God, this is embarrassing.”

So that was the first time I ever met him. And then, oh, lucky for me, about a couple of weeks later, we got to get our pictures taken with him. So I was hoping he wouldn’t remember who I was. [Laughs] But he’s got a great memory, so I’m sure he did. [Laughs] But as far as working with him directly, no, I never have.

Research-wise, I mean, I’ve had the opportunity to work with some pretty interesting people. Stansfield Turner, Leslie Stahl, Vice President Mondale, Kai Bird, authors, just a whole bunch, a whole raft of really interesting researchers and authors. But I think all our researchers are interesting.

Daria: Do you feel like the library is part of NARA? How does it, what’s the relationship, in your opinion, between NARA and the libraries, or this library?

Keith: I think that when we first opened, there was that sort of, that in-house divide or rivalry that you get in any agency when you have different departments within an agency. It was kind of, “Oh, those are kind of field offices,” and the presidential libraries and—I don’t want to say there was, early in my career, I don’t want to say that there was this, “What do we do with them?” sort of feeling. But there was, you did kind of get the idea that somehow we were a little different. And I think we *were* a little different, because of, just, what we did and the way we did it, our processing review procedures were different, are a little different than the rest of the National Archives. And the fact that some libraries were dealing with presidents directly and foundations and things like that, we sort of had to approach the material in a little bit of a different way sometimes. And organizationally, we had a museum. How do you deal with that? So, you know, there was that kind of thing.

But I think over the years, there’s been more of an effort to sort of draw really every part of the agency together, to sort of get everybody on the same page, and everybody kind of working toward the same kind of goals, and working up to, toward a final end in how we’re doing things and how we’re looking at the agency itself.

I think there's sort of been that move to—I don't want to say consolidate, because that makes, that sounds more like conformity. And I don't think that's true. I think that the overarching umbrella of the National Archives wants to be there. But I think it does want to recognize, you know, records centers, and presidential libraries, and regional archives, all of those. I think it wants them to have their own flavor. I think it just wants them to sort of have their own flavor underneath the umbrella of the National Archives and to make it more readily recognizable that it's there.

For the longest time—I mean, it's hard enough when you say you're a presidential library, everybody thinks you're a library, doesn't understand that you're an archive. But a lot of times, we would get people who go, "Really? You're part of the National Archives?" Because it wasn't that readily advertised. And now I think it's more recognizable that we're part of this and we do this, so it's changed. It's changed in that regard. And like I said, I don't think it was kind of, "Ooh, they're presidential libraries," you know, "We don't want to have anything to do with them." I just think it was kind of, like, "They do things differently" kind of thing. And so, they've kind of tried to fold that back in.

Daria: Is there any one thing you're most proud of that you've worked on?

Keith: Oh, wow. I try to do everything well, and try to take pride in everything, but is there any one thing? I think if we go back to that first big collection, I think it would go back to Speechwriters, because it was a very—I mean, it was well organized, but it was sort of—you had to do some work to put it together, so that it would make sense. I think also getting the actual speech files themselves and working to get them organized. I mean, they were generally organized, but you'd get, like, seven different copies of the speech in one folder, and it's sort of a challenge to look at each copy and say, "OK, this one needs to be first in the folder, because this was the first copy. And then it changed to this, and then it changed to this, and this and this and this and this. And this is the final copy."

And how do you take a speech where they've got the first draft, and to get the final draft, they've made, like, 30 different changes in it, but what they've done is taken and typed out strips of paper and taped it over the top of the original, because people want to know, "What did the original say?" So how do we deal with that? How do we work with that?

And again it was the first really big collection that I worked with. So I'm proud of that, and I think as sort of a semi-apprentice journeyman archivist at the time, I think it was a challenge for me, and I came through it.

I mean, Staff Secretary stuff, you can't help but be proud of that, because it's such high-quality material in terms of the information that's there. But I've tried to do the best on every collection that I've worked on. Some have been easier than others. Some have been a lot of, you know, "Gee, what do I do with this entire box of loose paper?" [Laughs] An entire FRC of just, you know, somebody had no folders, no topics, no subjects, no nothing. So those have been kind of, some of the ones when you get those are challenging. At the end of it, you feel very good about getting it done.

But if I had to pick one, I'd say Speechwriters, it's interesting to see how they work on speeches, how they develop them, and sort of, how they reacted to the reaction, those kind of things. So, yeah.

Daria: Do you have any kind of stories you want to share, work-related stories?

Keith: Gee, 30 years, I think I got one! [Laughs] It's kind of fun, because when you work in a presidential library, you deal with material, and some of the stuff is so high powered, and you talk to different people every day. And I had one colleague, Gary Faulk, God rest his soul, he was a good fellow. And Gary had been working with us for a while, we'd gotten into a couple of conversations. And Gary was, he was very much, "Aah, famous people don't faze me." And it's funny, because you do sort of develop this atmosphere of, you know, Lesley Stahl walks into the Research Room, and you're kind of like, "Oh, that's nice." Because, first of all, you don't want to jump up and down. [Laughs]

So, Gary, we'd been talking. He was like, "You know, famous people don't faze me." And it was 4:25, 4:20, something like that in the afternoon on a Friday, and Gary and I were the only ones back in the office—we had some other office administrative folks floating around, but we were the only two archivists, quote unquote—yeah, we were both archivists at the time—in the building. So we're closing at, like, 4:30, 4:45, something like that.

And the front desk calls, and they said, “We have two individuals out here that need to talk to an archivist.” And I answered the phone, and I said, “Well, we're getting ready to close here in a few minutes. We can't really do a whole lot for them. Can they come back on Monday, so we can talk to them?”

It's Friday. Let's be honest. [Laughs] You know, Gary and I are ready to go home. But we know we've got to do our civil duty, because we're getting paid to do this. And I said, “OK, one of us will come out and talk to them.” So I looked at Gary and said, “How do you want to do this?” And I think he said, “Rock, paper, scissors,” and we shot for it, and I lost. [Laughs]

So I walked out and I came around the corner, and there was these two individuals standing there. One individual just, I mean, the guy was tall and sort of rangy, you know? And I thought, “Wow, he looks kind of like I might have seen him somewhere before.” And the other fella—I mean, I'm embarrassed to say this—the other fellow was actually a professor from Georgia State University, and he was an economics professor. And to this day, I can't remember his name, because what happened to me was, he looked at me, and he said, “Hi, my name is Professor So-and-so from Georgia State University. And we're having a symposium today, and one of the speakers thought he would like to come down and just see the library and talk to a few people.” He goes, “This is John Kenneth Galbraith,” the economist.

And I went, “Really?” [Laughs] And I told him, I said, “I'm sorry, but we're getting ready to close here in just about 20 minutes. I can't let you do any research.” And he was, like, “No, I'd just really kind of like a tour and to get an idea of the kind of material.” So I said, “Well, if you'll wait here, I can go get a couple of boxes of stuff.”

And I went in the back, and I got a couple of Hollinger boxes and brought them into the Research Room, because he just wanted to be there for a few minutes. And he kind of looked at some stuff, you know, just a couple of boxes from the Central File on economics. And we talked about doing research, and what kind of researchers we've had, and that kind of thing. And I was so awestruck, I had no questions for him, [laughs] you know. But at the end of it, he was a wonderful, very polite, really, really astute, I mean, almost erudite, it was just ... kind of wonderful.

And at the end of it, we were talking and everything, and I said, "I've got another individual here that would just love to meet you"—because Gary had been talking about him, actually, three or four days before, some show, some TV show he was on. And he said, "Oh, OK. So I walked him back into the offices, and Gary was looking down, and I said, "Hey, Gary, I've got somebody here you need to meet."

And Gary looked up, and he went, "Oh, my God! You're John Kenneth Galbraith! I saw you on TV!" [Laughs]

And it was all I could do to keep from laughing, but, you know, it was that one second of total noncomposure, and then he collected it and stood up and shook his hand. And Galbraith just smiled, you know, that kind of stuff.

So, yeah, that's one of my favorite ones. And I think it kind of gets the nature of presidential libraries. You never know who's going to walk in, and you never know how you're going to react to them sometimes.

And in terms of finding documents, I think that, you know, that Rafshoon thing, just when I saw it, I was just like, "Wow, this is great!" And I can remember Jim Yancey, who has since retired and worked declassification for us. Really talented individual, very bright, wonderful guy, just a great guy, conscientious and, really, work-wise. And I mean, I can remember [him] getting so excited when "Charlie Wilson's War," the movie, was out, there are scenes where he's walking around waving a piece of paper about getting funds for Afghan rebels to fight the Soviets. And, Jim is, like—I remember when he showed me, he said, "This is the piece of paper!" because it had been declassified. And I was, like, "Cool! That's really neat!" So that kind of stuff, you know?

I think, too, stories just about helping researchers who, they're like, "Oh, my gosh, this is just what I was looking for!" Tor Petersen from University of Trondheim in Norway had come over to do research for about a month. Wonderful guy, just a great researcher who just—I actually went to lunch with him a couple of times. I make it a point not to get too personable with researchers, because it is a job and you don't want to get in a conversation, let anything slip

that you shouldn't. But I did. He was very personable. He was personable, was nice, had a lot of questions about the United States. So we went and talked a lot about American culture.

But at the time we had a system installed in the Research Room that had a ton of declassified documents on it, and it was all electronically searchable and everything.

But, you know, Professor Petersen, he didn't like computers too much. And when I said, "You should try it," he's like, "Well, I'm not sure." And, you know, he'd been there about three or four days. And I said, "Well, let me show you what it can do."

And I showed him, and boy, he stayed—he was like, "Wow!" And he spent several days just doing research on that system and loved it. And he was very excited about the information he'd been able to get so quickly, that it sort of freed him up to do a lot of other research during the rest of the time he was there. So it was nice to see him get that excited.

You know, I'm sure there's, like, three tons of stories that I could tell, but we really would be here all day. And I don't think you want to do that. But all in all, I think the, sort of the grandest story that I have out of this is that the job has been good, and it's been good to me. You know, you sure can't argue with the paycheck [laughs], and you sure can't argue with the people that you get to work with, and the people you get to meet. And it's been very convenient for being able to spend time with my family.

And, like I said, I've worked with a lot of good people, met a lot of interesting people, had a lot of fun. You know, the kind of people, I mean, I can remember, a couple of times, when we worked as a staff and we'd have a Christmas party, and we would all decide that any leftover food was going to go to a men's shelter or a women's shelter. So, you know, those are the kind of stories that you kind of hold onto that are good, good stories.

Daria: I guess I have to ask, what have you been doing during the pandemic? I mean, work-wise.

Keith: Well, I've kind of been all over the place, just like everybody else, you know, I've worked on a couple of finding aids. The Staff Secretary finding aid, initially when we did it, was accessible only through date. It was pretty much a chronological file. And so at one point, we

went back and sort of delineated topics for each folder in the collection, which is a lot of folders. And we had that in written form, and we had it in electronic form, but the formatting of it was a little bit too cramped and a little bit hard to read. So went through it folder by folder, entry in the finding aid, all 400-and-some boxes, and sort of, you know, grouped it with the folder title, which is a date. And then had to indent and group all the subjects under each folder, so did that. Did the same thing with Zbigniew Brzezinski's donated historical material, so went through and did that, put three collections in DAS, [I'm] sort of at the end of doing one of those.

And so've done that and have spent a wonderful few months here going back and fixing my mistakes [laughs] that I did in DAS. You know, did some training, a lot of stuff. I freely admit that I am old and of a generation that looks at computers and goes, "Wow, those are interesting and complex." So, you know, I've been trying to up my Google skills, which I found that I can learn it, and then if it's something that I don't use for a couple of days, I got to go back and relearn it a month later—the joys of being in your 60s, I guess. So, been doing some training, been doing some outside stuff. I found some great YouTube videos on customer service that I kind of went, "Wow, I never thought of that before," those kind of things. So that's kind of it.

I'm trying to think what else I've done. I think it's just been, gosh, kind of little odds and ends here and there, you know, work on this project, work on that project, but have managed to stay busy, much like everybody else. But it is still—not going into the office is kind of a trip without luggage. You're kind of like, "Wow, I wish I had somebody to talk to." Because my wife works at home, too, so we get, like, 30 minutes in the afternoon to say hi. [Laughs] And then at the end of it, it's like, "How was your day?" She's in one room, I'm in the other.

But it's been "anything but processing" sort of stuff. I've had several researchers write and say, "Hey, can you help me with this?" And in a couple of cases—since we're not open for research and we can't get to the documents—in a couple of cases, I've been able to sort of point them in a direction and say, "Well, why don't you try these people, try this this particular archive, or maybe you can get in touch with these individuals and they might be willing to talk to you." So that kind of stuff. I've managed to stay busy, do a few things.

Daria: So are you looking forward to getting back in the building?

Keith: Yeah, you know, I mean, it's nice to see your colleagues and talk to them, and it's a change, it'll be a change of pace from staring at my four walls, that's for sure. Getting into the building is something worth looking forward to. Getting back into the drive through Atlanta is not. [Laughs] That is the one thing that I have not missed, is Atlanta traffic. It's just miserable. That's the one thing I will say, the couple of times that I've had to kind of go far afield from home, to either a doctor's appointment or something like that, the fact that we have a pandemic and there's no traffic in Atlanta has not bothered me at all. [Laughs] It's been easier to get there.

But it'll be nice to get—the other thing is, too, there's only so much you can do outside of work. And when that starts running out, what are you going to do? You know, they can't pay you for sitting around doing nothing. So I don't want that day to come. I don't think any of us do. So when we can get back in, that'll be good.

Daria: Anything else you'd like to say?

Keith: Well, you know, it's been an interesting and fun 30 years, 30 some-odd years, I've learned a lot about the federal government. I've learned a lot about the White House, the presidency, what goes on, and why it goes on, and how it goes on. It's given me a whole different perspective and respect than I got in my history classes at university.

I've gotten to work with some really good people, had some good friends. Have really, I think from day one, have disproven that whole idea of, you know, government workers. They get a bad rap. I think my colleagues are intelligent, witty, capable, competent, efficient, effective, professional, friendly, you know, all the good adjectives you could throw at them would stick. So that's been nice. Not that it's been perfect, no place is, but I think that everything that I've said would [unintelligible]. So it's been something.

And the agency has been good and fair, and I think it's grown and changed over the years, which is good. And all in all, all in all, a good experience. I think that's pretty much it.

Daria: All right, thank you. I'm going to stop there. We're going to shut off the recording.

Keith: OK.

[STOP RECORDING]



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