

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Tasha M. Thian
Interviewer: Jack Kabrel
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MR. KABREL: This is Jack Kabrel. Today is June 24, 2016. I am conducting an oral history interview with Tasha Thian. This interview is part of the National Archives and Record Administration's Oral History Project. Welcome, Tasha. I appreciate you spending some time with us this morning.

MS. THIAN: Thank you, Jack. It's great to talk to you today. I truly enjoy working at the National Archives, and I look forward to your questions.

MR. KABREL: Great. The first one I'd like to ask you, just give us a very brief—in a minute or two—overview of the arc of your career at the National Archives.

MS. THIAN: Well, actually, it's fairly brief. I've worked here for two years now, and when I retire on June 30, it will be two years and two weeks, I think, exactly. I came over to be the Director of Corporate Records Management June 12, 2014. I've been doing the same job for those two years.

MR. KABREL: Okay. Very good. Tell us a little bit about your earlier education and work experience, before coming to the National Archives and what led you to coming here.

MS. THIAN: I started out my career as a part-time, temporary passport examiner, which seems to have no relationship whatsoever to what I'm doing right now. Eventually, I moved into different positions, and I went into supervisory positions, and then a division chief position. I was able to move over to another division chief position, which was the Chief of the Record Services Division, back in 1992 and I held that position for about nine years. I had another position that was more FOIA-related (Freedom of Information Act) after that. Then I went into a backlog reduction-type position in records management.

I love records management, eventually I became the records officer for another department. I have 18 years of experience in records management. I became a certified records manager with the Institute for Certified Records Managers. It's kind of funny because I worked very closely with the National Archives, but I didn't know about their own internal records program. I saw a presentation given on the Capstone approach and the email management system, and the speaker was the Director of Corporate Records Management. Obviously, they would have their own internal program, but I'd never heard of it before. I was curious about that. Later, that director left, I saw the position available, and it was the right timing for me. I got tired of the commute downtown, and wanted to have a work/life balance. I thought, "Well, gee, they're being very proactive and progressive." Their concept with the Capstone approach was truly amazing to me, because being in the business—being in the records management business—these are difficult decisions to make on record scheduling. This concept was so advanced and unique, I was really impressed. I thought, "Well, NARA looks like a good place for me."

MR. KABREL: Describe day one on the job.

MS. THIAN: Well, day one—okay. That's kind of your orientation coming in. I think it's just the general impression that I have, and I think this has been almost every day when I come in to work at A2. It's kind of an experience. My commute is easy. I come in; we've got parts that are just—I mean, they're amazing. Everybody is friendly; it's very welcoming. The building is very welcoming. I'm impressed with the way other offices work, like Security and Facilities. It's a top-notch place to be. You have the management that's really top-notch as well. I think it's really an impressive place to work. I feel blessed coming in every day to work here. And it's the same thing; it's not phony. You walk in, the guards are very friendly, and people are very happy to work with you.

MR. KABREL: You had said that you were very impressed with NARA's Capstone approach, which is a big-bucket approach to mailing.

MS. THIAN: Right.

MR. KABREL: When you finally were able to settle in to your new position with NARA, were those expectations met and realistic?

MS. THIAN: Well, I saw NARA as being—in the past. I didn't see NARA as being progressive. That it was very difficult to implement records management in an agency; and particularly, the large agency. The Capstone approach was so unique. It's so simple, it makes complete sense, and it just really alleviates the burden off the user. I was impressed with that. I'm still impressed with that.

I think that to have these concepts makes them easier to implement. In other words, if you have a senior official—and generally speaking, they are making the policy-level decisions, or the major decisions for the agency, and that type of thing—if you're capturing all of their email, then without having to have somebody come behind them, and print them, and file them. Or, "Was that a record or not?" It's simplified it so incredibly that people can do their job. Really, records management should work in the background. If you think about it, in a lot of IT systems, when you build an IT system and they have workflows, the system automatically captures the records. Whatever that process is, there's a capture, and there's an archive that stores records, generally speaking, with an IT system.

Essentially, you're taking what we call unstructured records like in the email system, and giving it structure. You're giving the records this position for it without a burden on the staff. I think that that's really a fantastic approach. I've enjoyed working with that approach because the email management system, the records management portion of it is administered out of corporate records management. I have a lot of activity with how that system works. It's impressive. We've had a lot of agencies come over and talk to us about it, and I've done presentations for the Executive Secretariat Council. When I showed it to them, I said, "It's just amazingly simple. This is what you do." People are like, "Are you kidding me?" Because all of the effort that they have to take to either print a file, or people making decisions is totally alleviated. It really is a great concept. It's a great marriage, where you have IT systems and records policies working together.

MR. KABREL: What successes would you say that you've accomplished with your two years at the National Archives?

MS. THIAN: The way I look at it, it's a team approach. I'm more the conductor, and then you've got the orchestra, right? So, the staff and all the people that are actually outside of corporate records management are important players. Some of those people that really helped out, such as General

Counsel (NGC), Office of the Chief Records Officer (AC), Digital Engagement Division (VE), information services, and all those partnerships came together to do a lot of different things. My staff were involved with all kinds of different initiatives that we did. One of the first things that I did was assess NARA's corporate records management program. It's tested against the CFR—the records management self-assessment criteria, and the Managing Government Records Directive. It determined the areas of weakness, and we start working on those various issues.

Two years later, we have things like a very viable records management website with lots of good material on it. We've done a lot of things with the email system to have a policy directive, and a records schedule, and those types of things. We have, for the first time ever, a mandatory records management-training module for everyone. I'm very impressed with the Archivist and all of the support from senior management to put things in place.

It might surprise you if you're not a supervisor or a manager, but we do have, now, that records management is part of the critical element for supervision. They're held accountable now in their ratings for records management. We have information in the supervisory handbook on records management. We've completely revamped the RIM network—which is the records and information management network—which has about 260 Information Management Officers (IMOs) and Records Custodians (RCs). We have presentations every two years, at least. Communication was a problem. We send records tips every week, so that it's very quick information, but it keeps it alive, and it keeps it where people can learn the records management concepts.

We've been working on backlogs in our disposal processing of temporary records to make sure we're accessioning permanent records. We have a larger staff now, to handle various activities. A lot has changed, and I have to tell you that was through upper management support. We have three additional positions. Essentially, if you count me, there's five new people in the organization. I think it's a different corporate records management, and there is this saying throughout NARA, "The cobbler's children have no shoes." I'm really hoping that, at least, they have one now.

MR. KABREL: Yes. Sort of like a "practice what you preach" type of philosophy.

MS. THIAN: When I was interviewed for the position, I was also interviewed by the Archivist. He did say, "The cobbler's children had no shoes." He recognized it; everybody recognized it. They want corporate records management to be the model for agencies, and we are really moving into that position. Other agencies would seek us out on several different things. For example, we switched over to the new 308 series, and people were interested in our position descriptions. Several of agencies need help for systems on email management systems, and they've come to me, and come to my staff on that. I think we're really moving in that direction as the model agency.

There's more to do, but I think that NARA has that ingrained in them, and they want to make sure that actually happens. Like I said earlier, when I worked at another agency, I really didn't know that NARA had its own corporate record management staff. They didn't attend meetings. Now, the corporate records management director is part of the Federal Records Council, and attends those sessions. There have been a lot of changes over the last two years that bring recognition to our program and upper management wanting us to be out there and be leaders.

MR. KABREL: It seems like there has been a lot of support behind this initiative. Could you identify any impediments that may have occurred during your two years, as far as going further in corporate records management?

MS. THIAN: I really don't think so at all. I think that there has been a lot of support. The only thing that's probably challenging—and I do want to emphasize that for records officers across the government, it is an extremely challenging position. I don't think that upper management really understands how challenging it is. Really, you're a change agent. Essentially what's happening is—and particularly in the vein of the Managing Government Records Directive—you're basically saying you're retooling the whole Federal Government.

The Managing Government Records Directive is really moving the government towards electronic record keeping. If you don't have systems in place already—which most don't have systems in place for things that will manage their email, for example, or manage their share drives, or manage social media, or manage digital photos, or those kinds of things—you're now saying that we have to have these IT systems. That is phenomenal, and we need to do that. It is huge to do that, even in an agency like ours, which is a medium-sized agency that has 4,000-plus seats, if you count our contractors, the government people, and interns, and volunteers. You've got a large group of people that you're going to have to switch over to these new tools. I think management has to keep in mind how difficult this job is.

It's bigger than I think they're planning, if you can understand what I'm saying. For example, NARA is going to be moving to a case management system. Case management system is awesome because the new technology would just floor everybody. It's amazing. It's kind of like every office having a dream, where they can have their own mini-IT system developed for them. If you're talking about implementing that, then you're really going to have 100 different instances of case management and you need to have people working on that. You need people in records management helping every organization so they know how to manage those records. It will be extremely time-consuming to transfer over with case management, with the replacement to the shared drives.

MR. KABREL: Would you say that one of the keys to record management is having everything being done behind the scenes?

MS. THIAN: Absolutely. If you can just imagine, if you were building an IT system—like Electronic Records Archive (ERA). Let's say you have ERA. ERA is capturing the transfer documentation; it's transferring the record schedule information. Within the system, you can determine, "Is it permanent? And what will happen to those records?" For example, the Transfer Record (TR) and the Legal Transfer Instrument (LTI) would be permanent records. If you have records schedules, what are they? Are they going to stay in the system? How would you do that? Then, you have a records schedule around that, but the system manages it. Nobody has to go in and say, "Okay. Is this permanent, or temporary?" You don't have to do that; it's already done for you. You just have to go in and populate the workflow. Yes, to the best that it's possible that you can automate this process, that's what should happen.

MR. KABREL: Do you feel that there's more to accomplish in your position? I know, technology being the way it is, will progress, and challenges will occur. As you're getting ready to leave right now, what do you feel there is left to accomplish?

MS. THIAN: There's a ton of things to accomplish. I have to say that I think records management is a never-ending job. When I reach out to management or supervisors, it's kind of like human resources management. You're always going to do certain functions with managing your human assets, right? Well, records management is managing the business assets, and you're always going to be doing things to manage those business assets. You may do it differently—you may do it in an automated way—but there will always be something, such as you'd be administrating the systems, or you would execute a disposition within the systems, or you would control the records' creation, walk it down; those kinds of things. Access.

What needs to be done? Obviously, according to the Managing Government Records Directive, we've got the 2019 goal. The 2019 goal is to automate everything. Even though it says permanent records, you can't really separate out the permanent records. Essentially, from now until the end of 2019, the efforts will be focused on converting everything over.

There is a tremendous amount of work to be done, and for records management, like I said, it's a never-ending job, so you're either cleaning up stuff and backlogs from years ago, from people's poor habits or just because the record's life cycle is long to handle those records—to eventually converting over. And then, there will always be long-term issues of converting to the next system, migrating the data, and all of those kinds of issues.

MR. KABREL: What aspects of the job do you enjoy most, would you say?

MS. THIAN: I actually—I love the people. I love working with the program. Records management is a program, and I love the different program activities. It's cool to be inventive, and work on an IT system. I've had a lot of fun with that in the past. I really enjoy it. I like to take things in a lab, and kind of figure out how it could work, and then roll it out. That's a really neat aspect of records management.

MR. KABREL: If you had one issue that you would tackle—whether inside NARA, or inside corporate records management, either one—what would you choose?

MS. THIAN: I think probably the biggest challenge—and it's in every agency, right? It comes down to compliance, and I've been trying to target it here as well, and it's really the managers and supervisors. I don't think they clearly appreciate their role with regards to managing the business assets. I don't think they understand that records management is set up to support them. For example, you have a records schedule. Well, the records schedule usually was generated working with their office to create this record schedule and to determine, kind of like a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), how long they keep their records, based on whatever legal or fiscal reasons, or historical reasons, for maintaining the records. I think many times, that managers and supervisors don't know that this is all set up for them; to help them manage their records. The parallel really is similar to the personnel system where we have work commitments, and we go and are appraised. We go through this whole process to properly manage our human resources. I think there really needs to be an emphasis on managing the business assets.

I would like to see a more shaping towards records management, but it's your business assets. How do you use them? How do you properly manage those records? I would like to see, in the internal controls reporting, that each organization, each supervisor or manager, is held accountable and has to report on what they're doing, what are their business assets—their record assets. I think that's one way to get

better compliance. They need to know they're the main driver. There's a lot of focus on, everybody has records management responsibility. Well, that's true, but the records supervisor makes it happen; and I don't think agencies get that across the board.

MR. KABREL: Some in the National Archives feel that we should get out of the records management business, and focus more on securing permanent records. What would you say to that?

MS. THIAN: That would be a complete lack of leadership. I can't imagine something like that.

MR. KABREL: Well, I think people feel that it's very difficult to get the agency to comply to record management issues, and that our focus should just be on securing permanent records to the agency.

MS. THIAN: I don't see how you could separate the two, to be honest with you. I think there are things that could be experimented with, because I think the whole appraisal process is very convoluted. It takes way too long. I think that if you had people in the agencies that are certified records managers, and they can test something—that they can appraise temporary records and things like that. I think there are ways to make it easier.

Part of the problem NARA has to realize—particularly in records management—and we'll take the Capstone approach. NARA created the Capstone approach. Luckily it was NARA, because if it was some other agency, I don't know how they would have pulled it off. I have to say, they treat corporate records management just like any other agency. In other words, Agency Services, often the Chief Records Officer, treats us like any other agency. I don't think other people realize that. We had some challenges on getting our Capstone list approved. Here, you have the very creators of the Capstone approach having a challenge, with another part of the organization getting the positions we proposed approved.

Eventually we work through it, and it's just any other records schedules. Other agencies can have some innovative approach, and we don't know that NARA would really support it and approve the records schedule. So, what comes first, the chicken or the egg? It's really hard to implement new innovative records management policies. I would like to see something more—in particular, in corporate records management—where we are more in the lab, test things out, and work through closely with the Chief Records Officer (AC) on these new concepts.

MR. KABREL: That leads to a question I was going to ask at the end of the interview, but I'll ask it now. Where do you see NARA going, into the 21st century? That being the case of what you just said about us being on the forefront, do you see NARA as an agency that will be a leader, as far as the technology goes?

MS. THIAN: I would like very much to see that. We established a working group. We call it the 1.1 Electronic Records Management Working Group (ERMWG), which is, 1.1 standing for the goal in the Government Managing Records Directive, which is to manage electronically all permanent records by the end of 2019. We stood up this working group; a group of the right people, the right organizations, and came up with how we would actually capture or automate records within the National Archives. We created this document, which is just recently signed. It's the Electronic Corporate Records Management Specification. What it does is it lays out in a high level the requirements needed for these eventual IT investments for the replacement to the share drives. How do you capture email stitching? How do you capture chats? How do you capture text messages? How do you capture voice messages? What about

websites? What about social media? What about special media, where you have video, and audio? How do you capture video and digital pictures? How do you capture those?

We laid out this specification, which really was written in IT-speak, and it's directed towards the IT environment that says, "Okay, we need to purchase these kinds of tools." Tools alone will not solve the problem. However, this is one aspect of, "Here's the tools, or the requirements for the tools." And what you can do is you can look across those requirements, and you could say, "Okay. I need to have a way to capture this, and this, and this." Maybe there's a tool that can do multiple functions and actually save money, save time, and it can capture other things. For example, some products are out there that can capture a website, they can capture social media, and they can actually capture text messages. You can look across the requirements and you can see, "Oh, okay." It doesn't have to be one product that captures everything. It could be multiple products.

I think it's a very innovative approach, but what we're working on with that, too, is the records management strategy. We have a draft of that—I don't think it's going to be ready by the time I leave—that talks about the other policy issues and the human part, where you've got the people issues, the different policies, the training, and the implementation. You have to bring those pieces together.

Yes, I would really love to see NARA taking some of these—working with some vendors, do some pilot testing, and see, "How would this work?" Because other agencies are hungry for it. They're hungry for that Enterprise Content and Records Management (ECRM) specification. They need that direction; they need something. I know, from the Federal Records Council, which I attend, they're just dying to have anything from NARA that can just kind of show them a path of, "How do you get to 2019? What does it look like? What does success look like? How do you deal with such a big problem, and how do you break it up?" Our ECRM specification actually kind of breaks up the elephant into chunks that can be solved.

MR. KABREL: How have cutbacks and sequestration affected your approach to creating this type of guidance?

MS. THIAN: This is where NARA has to do a better job—and it is true—that automation done right saves a lot of money. Period. You know, if you look at the email system that we have, there's nobody printing and filing. It's all handled for them. I'm sure they've saved a lot of money by using this new approach. NARA was very intelligent in how they picked the vendor for this system. For example, it has low storage costs. There's only one instance of the email in the system. If you're sending around a bunch of PowerPoint slides, or you're sending around these big attachments, it's not killing the system because there's only one instance of the email in the archive. It's all the metadata that actually is there, that shows everybody that got the email, and all that kind of stuff. It's very sophisticated in how it works. It's not only that you've got the automation, but you've got the right automation, and you've got something that actually does save money because it has low storage costs.

That's why that working in a lab, being very careful—because, you know, contractors, they want to make money. They want to send you something that, "Oh yeah, I've got this big system, and it can do everything for you, and it's a miracle worker," but then it's millions, and millions, and millions of dollars. That's where we've got to get more sophisticated in looking at different methods.

Actually, things are more advanced. Probably the biggest surprise to me in working at NARA was on the 2019 goal, where I was a little skeptical about, "How can you solve this problem?" Now, I know,

absolutely, it's solvable. I've been looking at some of the vendors, seeing how it can work. Once you can see how it works, it really opens up your mind to these new approaches. It was even more simple, for example, in capturing social media than I could have ever imagined. For NARA itself, I think it's key, particularly Agency Services and Corporate Records Management, to really know what's out there as solutions, and to experiment with them.

MR. KABREL: I think a lab approach to all the records management to inform and teach them as they go out to agencies would be a wonderful idea as well.

MS. THIAN: I think so, because people are coming to you. People are saying, "Well...What about this? What about that?" Then, you either have people saying, "Well, I can't commit to one." And another is like, "Can you just give me a list so we can go out and look?" I had people asking me questions. I said, "Well, you know, here's some that we came across. Here's four of them. Take a look at them, and go see what you think." But to not know which four, to even give a name for somebody? We need that kind of sharing. I don't know if we have to—I mean, certainly, we've got to make sure that the contractors are not participating in those discussions, because you're assessing different projects and things. You have to be fair and open, and we definitely encourage that, because that's how you get the best deal and everything; but people are desperate, and we've got only a few years before 2019.

MR. KABREL: Yes, very true. And the last one, on technology. One last question, the penultimate question is, is there anything more that you would like to say about corporate records management issues and technology? I know we talked a lot about it. Is there any final thing you'd like to say regarding that?

MS. THIAN: Just encouraging the lab concept, because I do know that we have to do some pilot testing and experimenting. There's a lot of automation issues that are going to be coming up; case management is going to be one of those. It's going to be very interesting. I think corporate records management will be embedded in that process, which is very good. Corporate records management is now a member of the Investment Review Board, so that any IT system that is purchased from now on must have the records management functionality; in other words, you can execute disposition; you can do legal holds; you can manage the records throughout the life cycle. We're moving in the right direction, but there is more to be done.

MR. KABREL: Are there any final words of wisdom, anecdotes, or stories that you'd like to impart before you leave?

MS. THIAN: I would definitely say that NARA wants to be the model agency. I think that's very impressive. A lot has been accomplished under David Ferriero as the Archivist. He's really committed to it. From what I see, upper management, like Jay Bosanko is terrific. He's the senior agency official for records management. I've been really impressed with the whole management team; Deb Wall, particularly. I think they are really moving NARA in the right direction. It's really been impressive to me. I've never had that kind of support for the records management program. I would just say for them to keep on doing; but it's a process. It takes a lot to be a records officer. The skill level is—and they recognize this—that they're going to have more advanced training for records managers. But it's a tough job. You have to be able to be a change agent. You have to know a lot about technology. You have to know about people and processes. It is an exciting challenge—very challenging—and at least at NARA, thank God that you've got senior support, which is fantastic.

MR. KABREL: Yeah. I think one of the most difficult problems as well is to be able to predict the future in some ways, to know where we're going to be headed with technology.

MS. THIAN: That's true, but things happen at lightning speed. And what a person might have done years ago—that you know, you have, now, one person probably doing three, and four, and five jobs. The only way you can do that is with automation. You think about some of the processes that really have been innovative over the last several years. Everybody has a smartphone. It just made you more efficient, right? I mean, you do a lot of—you have a lot of activities and work with that. That's where it's moving. It's moving where your mobile phone, you're going to be able to do a lot of work on the mobile phone. Things will be made easier for people. So, embrace technology, for sure, and we need to keep up with it and not fall behind. It does take a commitment, and you do need to have processes in place where, from now on, that records are captured with any type of new system.

For me, my words of wisdom really is that records management is a business asset, and I think if people look at it more as being a business asset, they wouldn't think it as being foreign. Like, "Oh, that's just what those people from NARA are requiring us to do." Your mission records, your mission business asset that we're trying to help you manage—and yes, of course, we at the - - have to follow the law, and all that kind of stuff, but it's really for you, and this is how you can use these records. This is how you can be transparent; this is how you can be accountable. I think that whole accountability piece needs to be there.

MR. KABREL: I think that we've come to an end. I'd like to thank you very much for service, and for your time today.

MS. THIAN: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

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