

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview

Subject: Joseph Suster

Interviewer: Daria Labinsky

Date: February 24, 2021

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Daria Labinsky: Hi, this is Daria Labinsky, I am doing a NARA oral history interview with Joseph SOOS-ter. Is that how you pronounce it?

Joseph Suster: SUS-ter.

Daria: SUS-ter. And today is February 24, 2021. Good morning. Why don't we just start by, why don't you get us back to the beginning, when you started at the National Archives? What was your background before that?

Joe: Well, before that, I was a history graduate from Loyola University, and I was between jobs, and in the summer of 1968, I had a number of financial obligations. Some of my friends were getting married, and the like, and I was in need of a job, immediately. And the records center was hiring at the time, which was about a mile—which *is* about a mile from the family residence.

Daria: Oh, wow.

Joe: And I'd gotten word of mouth that some of my friends, some of my neighbors had been hired at the Chicago Federal Records Center. So I went over there and applied. And the manager at the time, David Kuehl, hired me. And that's how I got started.

I was, as I mentioned in my background information I sent to you, I started as a GS-2 "intermittent," an archives aid, and was responsible mostly for moving boxes around the

records center, that was my initial job. The Intermittent Program, we just worked for wages. We were not full civil service employees. We were brought in—the purpose of the program was to bring people in to do jobs that had to be done immediately, special projects and like. And so I worked 79 hours every pay period, so I was not considered a full-time employee. And there was also a wage limit and an hourly limit on how long my appointment could be.

So in the interim, I took the civil service test—which was necessary at the time, in the late 1970s, to become a full-time civil service employee—passed it, and then shortly thereafter, there were some job vacancies at the records center, and I was then able to become a GS-3, GS-4, etc., etc., and proceed with my career. So it started very early.

Daria: Was it, was the records center the same records center as now? Has it been, is it renovated since then?

Joe: It is exactly the same building that I started at in 1978. In fact, I remember seeing it being constructed in the early 1970s, and I always wondered what that building was. And then I found out, when I applied for a job there, that it was in fact a federal facility, a National Archives facility. I didn't know what the National Archives was at the time. But it's relatively unchanged, it's the same facility. The archives unit that's stationed there, is colocated there, is a little different now. But essentially, the facility is the same as when I first started in 1978.

Daria: Do you remember how much you made?

Joe: It was about three dollars an hour, I think—as a GS-2 archives aid, I think at the time, in 1978, it was about three dollars, maybe three dollars and twenty cents or so. Yeah. [Laughs] But it was a lot of money, particularly for somebody who needed some fast cash.

Daria: What was the civil service test like? Do you remember?

Joe: You know, I barely remember it. I think it was about an hour and a half in length or so. I remember having to go to downtown Chicago to take it at a federal building. But I don't remember a whole lot more about it, other than I passed it, got the word. And then I believe it

was in January, late January 1979, I became a full-time civil service employee with full benefits, you know, leave, insurance, etc.

Daria: And so then you got into the CIDS [Career Intern Development System] program.

Joe: Yes. Somebody saw some potential in me, and I was recruited into the Career Intern Development program in the summer of 1979, and was given a variety of different job assignments and training over that two years, special projects to do—including putting up the catwalking in one portion of the records center, I was responsible for that—which has subsequently been taken down.

And so I had a variety of projects during that time, and then I graduated in the summer of 1981. I had to sign a mobility agreement in order to become part of the CIDS program, and after I graduated, I was told there was an opening at the Washington National Records Center in Suitland for me, and I subsequently transferred there in September of 1981 and worked there for about, just short of two years there.

Daria: OK, how was that different from the Chicago records center?

Joe: Oh, much larger facility, it's about five times the size of our facility in Chicago. A little different work environment. I worked on a quality control team with some very good people, several of which advanced very far in their NARA careers. But it was a little different. It was my first time outside of Chicago, living in suburban Washington, D.C. I lived in Alexandria, Virginia, and then I would make the drive over to Suitland every morning over—I believe it's the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, over the Potomac. And that was about a 45-minute drive. But it was much larger, much larger workforce, but I made some longtime friends there. I'm still friends with one of my coworkers there that I started with in 1981, very good friends with. So it was a different experience for me.

Daria: So you got onto the records management track rather than an archives track. Was that sort of a natural fit for you? How did you fit in with that?

Joe: Yes, I did do some work in an archives, a small amount, when I was a CIDS trainee, but most of my track, at least in the first half of the career, was in the records center—working with customer agencies, getting their boxes of records to the records center, helping them with records management training, and the like. Over the first 21 years that I was in NARA, it was all in the records center program.

Daria: Is records management something you'd recommend to people who are looking to pursue a career?

Joe: Yes. It was a very good career for me. I did records management while I was in the federal records center, I did records management training, and the like, but I didn't do it full time, because I had other administrative responsibilities that dealt with getting records in and out of the records center, and reference, and all that, over my time in the federal records center program. But I'm a member of ARMA [Association of Records Managers and Administrators], the ARMA chapter here in Chicago.

So, yes, I think there are a lot of opportunities, particularly now with the transition from hard copy to electronic records. There certainly is a need for people to be able to provide guidance, because dealing with electronic records is so much different than hard copy, in terms of—there are some basics that are the same, but still, in terms of their longevity, how they can be managed over time, it's a very challenging environment. And I think it is a profession that people who are interested in records and recordkeeping, whether it's just dealing with administrative records or with records that have long-term marketable value, would find very rewarding, because it overlaps both into nuts and bolts records management—storing records, referencing records, keeping them over their defined retention period—but then also taking care of archival records, too.

So if you're interested in archives, I mean, that falls under the umbrella of records management—or information governance, which is now the more prevailing term, it seems to be. There's certainly a need for that. And I think people, particularly people who are interested in library science and the like, could also find a career in records management or information governance.

Daria: OK, so you got back to Chicago, and that was a promotion when you went back there?

Joe: Yes, in 1983, I became the reference branch chief, which was responsible for servicing the records that were stored in the federal records center, and then also for overseeing the destruction of temporary records that would be destroyed after the retention period expired, and then also transferring permanent records that we received from our customer agencies over to the archives branch that was colocated in Chicago—it *is* colocated in Chicago.

And that was my primary position. Then a GS-12 position, appraisal and disposition, which oversaw the paperwork process, and which is also responsible for providing training to agencies on how to get records to the federal records center, and then also other records management concepts. That opened up in 1985, and I pursued that job until the Records Management Division essentially was created by Archivist John Carlin in the late 1990s.

So the Appraisal and Disposition Branch involved also making sure the paperwork is right, in order to get records over into the records center, making sure that the retention periods were properly calculated, the disposal—the disposition authorities were properly cited. It was mainly administrative tasks. And then you also oversaw, you did quality control work over records that were being dispositioned, to make sure no records were being thrown out before they were supposed to be, if they were temporary, and making sure the permanent records were getting over to the archives on a timely basis.

Daria: And you had to do some auditing with that, too, right?

Joe: That was at Suitland. We did the—that was my primary job at Suitland, was as quality control auditor, where we would actually go out to the stack areas, and audit the records being pulled for reference and returned to the customer agencies, make sure that was accurately done, make sure that disposal was being properly pulled and accurately pulled from the shelves, and things like that, that was the type of quality work. We also did some small project work, but mostly it was just reviewing the records products that were being pulled by the staff there and then being returned to the agency for their reference—boxes of records, folders of records, individual documents, etc.

Daria: What were some of the—what are some of the collections that you dealt with at Chicago?

Joe: In Chicago? Our biggest customers are the courts system. We also service a small federal agency that is unique to Chicago, called the Railroad Retirement Board, which gives out pensions to retired railroad workers. And actually, there's a large volume of those claims files at the Atlanta Archives that were moved from Chicago when we ran out of space and were subsequently moved. I think there's a—before I left, I think there was some rumbling that they were going to be returned to Chicago. I don't know what the status of that is now.

But it's a small agency, it's only about a thousand FTE [full-time employees], maybe less than that. But it is a main customer of the Chicago Federal Records Center. So we serviced their claims files and other types of records—court records, U.S. Attorney was a very big customer of ours, EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], which has a regional office in Chicago, Region Five, is a big customer of ours. The VA [Veterans Administration], of course. So there was a wide variety of records, both long term and short term, claims files, bankruptcy case files, criminal case files, etc., etc.

We did some tax return work, storage of tax returns in Chicago for a little while, but that was not one of our primary customers. Most of that stuff, most of those records, usually went to Dayton for storage. But we had, literally, hundreds of different types of records series that we would service and have to oversee while we stored them.

Daria: So was your records management training mostly on the job?

Joe: Yes. Unlike most of my colleagues that came on after Archivist Carlin created the records management program in 1997 or 1998, who majored in either information science or library science, or the like, all my early records management experience and knowledge came from hands-on working with records, working with records retention schedules, learning procedures, learning policies. It was all hands-on, on-the-job training. Yes.

So that made me a little different than many of my colleagues who had advanced degrees in information management and library science, and the like. But it benefited me well, because I

really learned, with the hands-on, I really learned. When I was an A&D branch chief, I dealt with records retention schedules and recordkeeping policies exclusively. I was always going into agency retention schedules and reading their policies on managing records. So it was a very good experience for me, a good background.

So when I would go to agencies to provide technical assistance, in the latter part of my career, after 1998, you know, I could talk to them in depth, usually, about their record schedules, about their policies, because I was very experienced then by working with them, working with the records in the record center.

Daria: So you had to do a lot of onsite visits?

Joe: When I got into records management as the Director of the Great Lakes Region and had a staff, yes, we would do, we had what we called a “targeted assistance program,” where we’d provide free technical assistance to agencies on various records management projects, whether it would be helping them interpret their records schedule, provide training, helping them with their records management, files management, and things like that. So it was primarily project work, once I got into AC [Office of the Chief Records Officer], as it's known currently in NARA. It was a lot of project work, helping agencies. So that was different. It was less hands-on going into boxes of records, and more helping the staff, essentially, work with their records. So it was more working with staff, rather than in the records center. I'm actually working with the records themselves, to some extent.

Daria: So you were, you were there when they switched to the ERA [Electronic Records Archives] as a management—?

Joe: Oh, yes, yes, yes. That was also during Archivist Carlin's tenure, when ERA was first thought of, and then in its development stages. And I would have to say, that was one of the landmark events in my career. There's several of them, but I certainly consider—when the decision was made to develop the Electronic Records Archives, that was certainly a very important—And actually, it marked, I think it was a pivotal turning point, as we were seeing the agencies were starting to get away from the creation and lifecycle of textual records, and were now moving into the electronic age with digital records. And I think that was a turning point.

It was also at that time that we changed our curriculum, our records management curriculum, and made it much more uniform, and made sure it included electronic records. Where our previous curriculum, which was actually not uniform from region to region, everybody was kind of—the basic principles were the same, but everyone was teaching things just a little differently.

Finally, coincidental with the development of the Electronic Records Archives, we developed a uniform curriculum for our agencies, to be able to present to our agencies, so everybody was teaching the same thing in the same way and providing the same information, more or less. So those two things were linked, both the development of ERA and then also the way we changed records management training—and archival training to some extent, because taking care of archival records was also part of that training. That was all kind of linked together in the mid-2000s to around 2003, 2004, 2005.

Daria: So you actually worked on setting up, creating the training?

Joe: There was a whole group of us who created what we call the knowledge areas. I don't know if you've heard of those, the knowledge areas, the six knowledge areas? There were probably, there were multiple teams of archivists and records management analysts who worked on the individual knowledge areas. The six of them had different responsibilities. I believe I was on—Knowledge Area Four, I worked on a lot. But there were probably, I would have to say—besides contractors, also, who helped us—were probably 40 to 60 people who were working on the various teams to develop and then, ultimately, finish the knowledge areas and then be able to start presenting them.

Daria: So what were some of the landmarks—you said that that was one of the landmarks—in your career, things that really stand out?

Joe: I thought you might ask me that question, Daria. I thought of three things. Number one, the independence of NARA in 1985, when we became an independent agency. Rather than the National Archives and Records Service as part of GSA, we became the National Archives and

Records Administration, which I believe was April—I should have this memorized, but I think it's April 1st, 1985, if I'm not mistaken.

That was one. ERA, which we just discussed. Excuse me—before that, when the records center program went totally reimbursable in Fiscal Year 2000. Prior to that, most of the services the records centers provided to federal agencies—there were a couple of exceptions for some major federal agencies, but for the most part, the services that the records center program provided to federal agencies were free. We stored the records for free. We did the reference service on the records for free. We disposed of the temporary records when their retention period expired, we disposed of those for free, and then we transferred the permanent records that the agencies had created and sent to the records center for storage, when they were eligible to come to the archives unit, we moved those records over for no charge.

So almost all—with the exception of the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration, and probably a couple of other agencies, all those services were provided for no charge to our customer constituency in the federal government. And that changed in FY 2000, where we began charging agencies for every time we touched a record, essentially, whether we took the records in, the boxes and folders in, whether we did reference service on them, whether we refiled records, whether we disposed of the records, whether we transferred the permanent records to archives, all that, we charged agencies for that.

So the records center program, because of its different financial funding, actually became a little separate from the rest of NARA, simply because it wasn't dependent on direct funding. So when we would have government shutdowns, the records centers would still operate, where the rest of us would be sent home. So that was the second thing. And then the third thing, as we just discussed, was the Electronic Records Archives. I think those were the three major events that I remember, that I will always remember in my career at NARA.

Daria: When you dealt with agencies, with their records, did you run into some that just had a lot of problems?

Joe: Yes, yes. There were agencies that would do a very good job with their records. United States Air Force, for example. I'm not going to mention the ones that didn't do so well, but

there were agencies that had very good programs—EPA, Environmental Protection Agency, had a good program, the Railroad Retirement Board, very good records management program. But I would have to say that the majority of agencies, records management was not a priority with them. It was an administrative task akin to buying supplies, renting office space, that sort of thing. And it was not a high priority with them. And so there was always a challenge in getting agencies to do the right thing with their records, whether it be just the nuts and bolts of sending them correctly to a records center for storage, or whether it was making sure they were managing the records they were keeping in-house properly and following proper lifecycle guidance concerning creation, maintenance, and disposition of their records.

Daria: Seems like there's a little bit of, kind of, babysitting or hand holding of certain agencies?

Joe: There were agencies that required a lot of help—put it that way—that required a lot of help and used our services extensively, sent people to training on a regular basis. But it was to NARA's benefit, also, that agencies do the right thing. So we would get the records in a way that the records could be used in the future. So it was not just “file it and forget it, send it to the records center and forget about the records, we don't need 'em anymore” or “they're just not important to us anymore.” And we knew, of course, working for NARA, we know better than that. Records are going to be used again in the future, whether it's just for strictly administrative purposes, or, if they have informational and evidential value, will be used for archival purposes in the future, for people to research for various reasons.

So it was important for us to make sure that agencies were doing the right thing. It was a mutual accommodation. It was in the agency's benefit to maintain—create, maintain, and disposition the records appropriately, whether temporary or permanent. And it was certainly to NARA's benefit as the federal government's recordkeeper, the nation's recordkeeper, to make sure that the records came to us in a way that they could be usable in the future, whether we're talking about paper records or the issue of sustainability for digital records over the long term.

Daria: So did you start doing training on electronic records? Is that something that you were able to do?

Joe: Yes. The first training was developed in the early 1990s by a couple of staff members in Central Office. I remember first being presented, I was down in St. Louis for a conference in the early 1990s—it wasn't at the [National] Personnel Records Center but was nearby. And we were first presented the—and it was very rudimentary, essentially definitions, some basic stuff like that. What's data? What's a bit, what's a byte, that sort of thing, you know, hardware, software dependency. You know, “show and tell” with 5¼-inch floppies, and that sort of thing. [Laughs]

But it was a beginning. And we used that course extensively, that was the course we had. And we used it until we developed more refined training in the 2000s—in conjunction with the knowledge areas, we also updated the electronic records management courses. And we still had a separate course—even with the knowledge areas, we still had a separate course for electronic records, always. Up until when I retired, we were still teaching that course. And we had updated it, of course, to reflect the advances in digital records over time. But we had been doing it for about a—since the early 1990s.

Daria: Did you enjoy being a manager?

Joe: It has its ups and downs, as any manager will tell you. I don't know if you have management experience. Personnel issues are very challenging, can be very challenging, at times. That was probably the biggest challenge for me, dealing with the day-to-day issues of personnel management—not that I had a lot of them, I didn't, but sometimes they would come up, and they would be challenging, and they were the less desirable aspects of my job. But in terms of directing the program and being able to schedule the training at various locations in the Midwest, which was my responsibility, and mentoring my staff, I enjoyed doing that. In general, it was a good experience. But the personnel issues—and I think most managers will tell you that—those are the ones that wear on you the most, and those were the ones I found most challenging.

Daria: How many people did you have, at most, that were working for you?

Joe: In the reference branch in Chicago, I think I had about—between managers and staff, probably about, at that time in the early 1980s, I would say probably 60 to 70. Now, I did have line managers below me that would handle a lot of the issues, but in terms of my ultimate

responsibility, I would say about 60 to 70, somewhere around there. When I went to the— became an A&D appraisal branch chief, I essentially had two people that I supervised besides myself. And then when I went into records management, when we had our individual records management units created in the late 1990s, staff size was usually between four and six. And these were professional positions, high-graded positions that I was managing. In the records center. I would be responsible for a lot of lower-graded positions. And that's why there were so many of them, because they were larger staffs.

Daria: You mentioned in your bio that you had a temporary position as assistant regional administrator.

Joe: Yes.

Daria: Tell us about that.

Joe: Yes, our regional administrator at the time of 9/11 was in the Naval Reserves, Denis Paskauskas. And after 9/11, he was called up to active duty. And so the assistant regional administrator position came up, and it was a temporary position, it would go from year to year. And so I applied for that, and I received that. And then for the—I don't know, about 20 months or so that Denis Paskauskas was on active duty at Central Command during the aftermath of 9/11, and then also for Operation Desert Storm, I served as the assistant regional administrator. And I had responsibility primarily for the Chicago Federal Records Center. We had two records centers, two archives programs that we were responsible for, and then one RM program. And I still remained the RM director, also, for our records management program.

So we had five programs essentially—four, I should say, because Dayton didn't have an archives, doesn't have an archives. There were four programs that the regional administrator and myself oversaw. And I was responsible mostly for the operation of the Chicago side of the region. And Dave would take care of the Dayton side of the region. Dave Kuehl was the regional administrator. So I did that for about 20 months, in addition to my records management director duties. And that was a fun time, went by very fast, because there was always a lot to do. [Laughs] And so, yeah, that was an interesting part of my career, too. But Dennis came back

from Reserves in August of 2003, and then I got reverted back to my records management director position.

Daria: Was that one—what were some of the highlights? Would you consider that sort of a highlight of your career?

Joe: [Thinking] No, I think being the records management program director was actually the highlight. I mean, it was an interesting period, because we were building an additional record storage area—records storage center—in the Dayton region, in the Dayton metropolitan area. Kingsridge [Federal Records Center], as it became known. And that was constructed while I was the acting ARA. And that was interesting, watching that building being built. And it's still in operation today in Dayton. But that was sort of the highlight of that. And as I say, I still also had my records management duties, so there were a lot of different things going on while I had both duties.

But I still think of the records management directorship in the region, being regional records management director, as probably being the so-called highlight of my career, because it was the longest part of my career doing one thing, essentially.

Daria: You mentioned the flattening of the records [program]—could you discuss that a little?

Joe: Yes. When Archivist Ferriero came on board in, my recollection was November of 2010, I believe he was confirmed. He said—I remember we were having a records management conference in College Park at the time, at the Marriott hotel, over by the University of Maryland—and he came and addressed us. Paul Wester, who was our director at the time for the RM operation, brought the Archivist over. And he said, “Well, I'm new here. I have a little records management experience, when I worked at the library”—was it Duke or North Carolina? And of course, he was also affiliated with the library in New York City.

Well, anyway, he said, “Well, I'm going to take a look at the agency, and spend probably the first year of my tenure just looking around, seeing what's going on with the agency. How does the agency operate? What does it do well? What it doesn't do so well.”

And he did spend a year doing that. And then he decided—actually was 2009, I believe, November 2009, that the Archivist came on board, not 2010. And then a year later he came out—after consulting—and he also had a team that he worked with, a reorganization team—they came out with a reorganization structure that, for all intents and purposes, ended the regional structure. One of the tenets of the reorganization was, “One NARA.” I think there was a perception—and this is just my opinion, there was a perception that there were two NARAs, there was one within the Beltway, and then there was a second one outside the Beltway that operated a little bit differently. Whether that was true or not, I don't know.

But anyway, the regions—even though we still have field facilities, such as the one you work at, and our facility in Chicago—the regions were dissolved, and everything was reorganized. That's what I meant by flattening. In my particular case, the regional records management programs were eliminated, in all the regions, and the staff was dispersed among a new organization of records managers that were tasked according to function.

So previous to that, my records management program—not my, *the* records management program in Chicago—we would deal with everything. We would do training, we would do agency inspections, we would help with records appraisal, we did everything. It was all the records management functions. In Archivist Ferriero's reorganization, as far as records management was concerned, now we were reorganized according to function. So we had a team now to do records appraisal. We had a team now to do training. We had a team now to do agency appraisals. We had a special projects team, etc. I think they're—when I left, I think there were still four or five separate functional teams, something like that.

So that's what I meant by flattening the regional—essentially, the regional structure was disbanded. And had been disbanded in the past, also, but this time it looks like So there was no more Great Lakes Region, for example. And I think it was—I'm trying to think what the Atlanta region was, I don't know if it was the Southeast Region or what its name was. But all those were gone.

And now we have the Atlanta facility, you have the Chicago facility, etc., etc., but there's no more references to any kind of regional things. So that's what I meant by the flattening.

And so I lost my position in management because of the flattening. And I decided at that time, “Well, I really like doing training, that was something.” So we were allowed to apply to which function that we thought we'd best fit into, in this new functional arrangement, rather than organizational arrangement. And so I always liked training, always enjoyed it. Probably should have been a teacher in another life, another career. So I went with the training team, and then from November 2011 until my retirement in September 2019, I was with the training team and provided records management training, and also developed records management educational products.

Daria: But you were doing that out of—you were still in Chicago? Were you still in the records center?

Joe: Right. Yes, I had an office in the records center, and—it was my old office [laughs], it was the office I always had. And many of us who are colocated—are still colocated—most everybody is working at home right now, at their residence—we were all still colocated at the facilities that we were originally at, whether it be Atlanta—I don't know how well you know the staff at the Atlanta facility, Gina Williams.

Daria: I know Gina, yeah.

Joe: Gina started in Chicago, as a matter of fact, she was a CIDS trainee. I helped her with that when she was in Chicago. And then she moved on in her career. Yeah. Gina Williams, Rich Rayburn. I don't know who else is still there. They were—before the pandemic, of course, they had offices at the Atlanta facility, and that was the same with me.

Daria: So was most of your training in person? Or, when did it start to switch to online training?

Joe: We did not—it was all face-to-face training. We still did a lot—the majority of training was still face to face up until my retirement. We were starting to do, I would say probably from about 2015 on, we started to convert some of our face-to-face courses to online training, at least some of our basic courses, like, we had a records disposition course, which just taught the basics of how to get records out of the agency office and get them to a NARA facility. You know, how to fill out the paperwork, some basic stuff about what the records lifecycle meant, and

what the definition of a record was, etc., etc. And we did convert a couple of those courses to online modules.

But what we were primarily working on during my last couple of years with the agency was, we had an edict come down from the Archivist's office that we were going to end face-to-face training. And essentially, face-to-face training ended shortly after I retired, and we were going to go to completely digital training. So our team spent most of the last, I would say, two years or so, developing replacements for the knowledge areas. The knowledge areas were essentially retired in October of 2019, the month after I retired. That was the last time the face-to-face classes were given.

And in its place, we provided these digital classes, these digital courses for a—it's not a certificate program, I forgot what they call—a credential program. It's called a credential program. And it's still mandatory for an agency records officer to take those courses. So you essentially replace the KA's with digital courses that can be taken online. So there are no more face-to-face classes. Those have ended.

And now, if somebody wants to take NARA records management training, they do it digitally. They can access NARA's site and take the courses there. And also utilize the materials, they can take the materials and tailor them to their own agency's needs, if they wish to, they can customize the training. It's all there and available to them now, at no charge. In face-to-face training, we were still charging people to attend. There was still a tuition fee for them to attend, but that all ended. But we had started doing, as I said, some rudimentary digital courses a couple of years earlier, before we actually ended the KA courses. But we went full digital in FY 2020.

Daria: Well, as you mentioned earlier, making that available is to NARA's benefit, as well, because you're teaching them.

Joe: Yes. I believe that was the Archivist's Office—[their] position was, number one, it would save the agencies money, it would cut down on travel. That's the way people are learning now. The days of people coming and spending a week in a class with a three-inch-thick binder, that's not the way people learn anymore. I think that's recognized. So clearly, people are now

usually—at least adults are. I know that, you know, there's issues with younger people in schools, grade schools, particularly. But that's the way young adults, and adults in general, learn now, is online, at least for many things, for most things.

And then again, between budget constraints for travel and having money available to pay for your training. I mean, if you took the full knowledge area curriculum, I believe was something like \$1,250. And that doesn't count sending somebody to College Park, or to Chicago, or to Atlanta for two weeks to sit for the training, paying for their hotel, their per diem, travel, etc., etc. It would be a big expense. So to pare expense and then also to recognize that the way people are learning now is through online training, for the most part. The decision was made to essentially end face-to-face training, once the digital courses were ready to be presented.

Daria: Do you have any stories or anecdotes that you'd like to share about your work with NARA?

Joe: Oh. [Thinks] No, not that I can share. [Laughs] Not that I could share for an oral history. [Laughs again]

Daria: I understand that.

Joe: Some good times, though, let me put it that way. We had some good times. Some good times.

Daria: OK, well, what have you been doing during your retirement?

Joe: During my retirement, I still stay active with our ARMA Chicago chapter. I'm still an elected board member. And just enjoying life for the most part. You know, with the pandemic, and I'm sure you're experiencing the same thing, there's only so much you can do. Travel has been cut down. It was my intent to do a lot of traveling once I retired. There's some cities that I've never visited before in the United States. And I was planning on doing that and seeing my colleagues, my still active colleagues in places like Seattle and Boston, visiting them. Two cities—I've never been to Boston. I have been to Seattle, but never been in Boston. And I was planning on doing that.

And, of course, the pandemic, you know, put an end to that, for the time being, at least, and so couldn't do that. But I do play golf. I have been able, I was able to play golf, that's one of my hobbies. So I've been able to play golf, even during the pandemic, you've been able to play golf. You've got protocols that allow you to play. So I was able to do that. So I joined a golfing league last year, I was able to play golf. But essentially doing reading and just trying to stay healthy, too, during these unique times.

So I haven't done as much as I planned. Let me put it this way. I haven't done as much as I planned on doing since I left last—actually, two Septembers ago. Yeah. So hopefully now, with the vaccine coming out and hopefully some return to normality in the next six to eight months or so, I'll be able to do some traveling and some of the things I planned on doing once I left NARA.

Daria: Well, it really hasn't been that long.

Joe: No, 18 months. It goes by pretty fast. It will be 18 months at the end of March. So it does go fast, as people say. Hard to believe, actually, I've been away 18 months, almost 18 months. But it was good, it was a good 41 years, I was glad to be part of NARA, and be able to work for the National Archives. It's an important agency. It's an agency most people don't know about—what it is we do, why we do it. But it's important. When you do mention the National Archives, you can tell them what it is, the mission activity, and, “Oh, yeah. Yeah.” But it was good, and I met a lot of good people.

You know, I don't know what your experience is. Mine is, the majority of my friends are in the private sector, and don't have a high opinion of the way the federal government operates. I don't know if that's your experience, but that's my experience. Most of my friends are in the private sector. And, I get a lot of flak for being a long-time government employee. And I realize how misguided that is, knowing that the quality of the people who work in the National Archives—I mean, the agency, and the government in general, couldn't function unless we had very competent, capable people in it. And I was able to recognize that and be lucky enough to work with some of those people during my tenure there over the 41 years.

Daria: That sounds great. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?

Joe: No, other than, again, I thought it was—the luckiest opportunity I ever had was when somebody told me, “Hey, they need some laborers over at the Chicago Federal Records Center to move some boxes around,” you know, “It only pays a couple bucks an hour, but” And I looked at that, and I said, “Hey, OK.” I never expected—

One story. When I went there in July of—I never expected to last more than a few months, once I had earned whatever the salary cap was—I think it was about, salary cap was, like, \$4,000, or something like that. And the hourly cap was under a thousand hours. I said, “Well, I'll be around for five, six months, and I'll go on, I'll move on and find something full time.”

And making that decision to take that intermittent, part-time, non-civil-service job actually turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. Because, luckily, the records center had some vacancies at the time, some civil service vacancies. And I was able to move up. Somebody, you know, took a chance on me, Dave Kuehl—who I still play golf with. He retired as the regional administrator in 2012, but I still talk with him—he hired me and had some faith in me. And from then on, everything just, just moved along. And I was very fortunate that way. I was fortunate enough that somebody took a chance on me, and that I was able to take advantage of the opportunity when it was presented to me and make the most of it. So.

Daria: That's great. I mean, it's—you never know, like, what is going to change your life.

Joe: No, you don't. You don't know, and you have to start somewhere, too. I always tell, I tell my nieces and nephews, you've got to start somewhere. And it may not be very glamorous where you start, but it's not necessarily going to be where you finish. And I can speak from experience on that, so, yes.

Daria: OK, I'm going to shut off the recording. Thank you very much.

Joe: Well, thank you, Daria. Thank you.

[STOP RECORDING]

[START RECORDING]

Daria: OK, we're recording.

Joe: All right, Daria, you asked me about a story during my career, and one just came to mind. After President Obama left office, his materials were moved from Washington, D.C., to Chicago, at a temporary facility that we have in a northwest suburb called Hoffman Estates. Well, while those records were being moved, the skeletal staff that was in place there needed assistance from staff at the Chicago facility, both in the records center side and also on the archives staff, to be able to observe the materials as they were being offloaded from the semitrailers coming directly from Washington, D.C., to this temporary facility in Hoffman Estates. Because there was a NARA requirement that these materials had to be actually watched over until they were actually shelved.

So they didn't have enough of their own staff to do that, to watch the records and artifacts, as they were being offloaded from the trucks into the facility. So they asked NARA staffers to come out to help with this witnessing responsibility. So I was asked to come up there to be a witness and watch. And what they had, they had sailors from Great Lakes Naval Base help offload the trucks. So they would do the offloading, and we would be positioned at various places within the facility to watch them offload the trucks. And we would watch the materials [makes watching movement with head], make sure nobody was looking at them who shouldn't be, or touching them, or whatever, acting inappropriately with them, with the materials.

And so, I was positioned just outside the loading dock. And this blue chair comes by on—they're carrying it on a forklift—a handjack, actually. And so I went to the administrative officer who was there, and I said, "This blue chair, what exactly is this blue chair?" And it was all wrapped in plastic and everything. And the person told me, "That is the chair that President Obama sat in when he was observing the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan." There's that iconic shot of him in that room with Secretary of State Clinton, and the vice president, and all sorts of other officials there. And he's sitting there, and he's watching it, watching the video feed. And he's in that chair. And that blue chair was the chair he sat in while watching the raid.

So that's my story. [Laughs] I watched that chair being delivered to the presidential materials facility in suburban Chicago.

Daria: That is very cool. And this is sort of changing the subject, but it reminded me. So one of the things I was interested in, I didn't know about until I did records management training, was that there are these other facilities that are federal records centers where records can be held.

Joe: Yes.

Daria: Can you talk a little about that, explain that?

Joe: And the facility in Hoffman Estates is one of them. Yeah. NARA will lease facilities to store records, but they have to ensure that they meet certain structural standards and security standards. In the case of this facility, where President Obama's materials are currently being held, that was a former warehouse facility where they stored furniture. And they couldn't find a facility to store his records in downtown Chicago or outside downtown Chicago, couldn't find a facility that met their space needs and the like. But they found this furniture warehouse in suburban northwest Chicago, and it fit their needs. It had large open space. It could be shelved out, for example. It had rooms that could be used for processing materials. Also, a SCIF [Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility] could be put in place there for your secure materials, to have secure conversations. But it had to be retrofitted to meet NARA's facility standards in terms of fire protection, security, things of that nature, very technical things that an engineer would appreciate.

So NARA has some of these facilities going, Chicago being the most prominent, where they convert these former warehouses into NARA storage areas, but they have to meet certain facility standards, have to be retrofitted so that they can securely store government records.

Daria: How many of those do you think there are around the country?

Joe: I'm only aware of, right now, the presidential material, Obama presidential materials facility in Hoffman Estates. There may be one or two others, though. That's the only one I'm aware of right now.

Daria: OK, thanks. I'm going to shut off the recording.

[STOP RECORDING]



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

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Daria Labinsky
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