

# OBJECTS TELL STORIES

**Meg Tamulonis,  
Archivist  
to the  
Community**

**"I really like to find the stories.  
I got into history in the first place because  
I'm nosy, curious about people's lives."**

By EUAN BEAR

**M**argaret Tamulonis – Meg to the community, Margaret at her Fleming Museum job – has had an extraordinary run of luck in her professional life. When she graduated from William & Mary college with a B.A. in history and anthropology, she went home to New York City, where she landed an internship and then a paying job interpreting at a family home from the early 19th century. In what would become a characteristic emphasis, Meg focused on tracing the Irish servants from arrival to employment.

"I was very lucky to have family in New York where I could live during my internship until I got hired," Tamulonis admits. It was working at that historic home that got her into the museum world. She managed to have fulltime paid work within a few months of her graduation.

So the first thing to know about the R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center Archive is that Meg Tamulonis, a trained historical anthropologist and archivist, is at the helm. And R.U.1.2? has her because she and her partner of then five months decided to pick up and move to Vermont in the summer of 1999.

Tamulonis had been working at the New York Historical Society "for five years, doing 15-hour days. It was an amazing place to be. We were de-accessioning a closed museum," which, she added, "has its challenges." De-accessioning is disposing of part or all of a collection, making difficult decisions about what to keep and why.

When she first arrived in Vermont, she said, "I was burned out. I didn't think that I would get back into the museum world." So she found work at the Onion River Co-op ("a good job to meet people in the community"), and then at Borders Bookstore. "One day I had a really rough day at Borders, and I sat down and wrote to the Fleming."

The Fleming Museum, part of the University of Vermont, hired her, and the rest, as they say (especially in this case), is history. Tamulonis is the museum's registrar, directly responsible for documenting and tracking the museum's collections and providing information on the objects they contain. She's working on creating a searchable database of every painting and artifact in the museum's possession with digital imaging. And she's working with university professors on how to integrate the museum's objects into their classes.

"Objects tell stories. I get to help

people figure out the stories, or at least to make educated guesses."

And so it is with the R.U.1.2? Archive. "I was really excited to see there was an archive. An archive," she continued, "consists of paper and artifacts – mostly paper and ephemera. The queer community generates lots of ephemera, especially around Pride. I really like to find the stories. I got into history in the first place because I'm nosy, curious about people's lives."

Tamulonis was the mover behind the 2002 Archives exhibit at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington. And the 33-year-old archivist is really excited about the community center's new home. "The new building means more space, and the room to do exhibits. We have rescued banners, because they're hard to store, and they make a great exhibition."

The oddest object in the Archive, she said, is a plastic airplane used in a Pride fundraising event at 135 Pearl. The Archive contains dance posters from the 1970s and tapes of oral histories of early Pride marches and rallies. One thing Tamulonis hopes to get from those oral histories is a list of "queer historic sites – in Burlington at first – to publish maps. Wouldn't it be great to have [queer history] walking tours of Burlington and

Vermont?"

The Archives are currently housed in Tamulonis's home. "I dream of gallery space, with full study and storage areas. Now people tell me what they're interested in, and I pull out archival boxes. Everything is stored in acid-free folders. I'd like to get everything in digital format, which would make them accessible. Looking at a digital image is a first step, but yes," she declared, "the *object* is the thing."

Tamulonis is researching drag through the pages of *Out in the Mountains*. "There's not much in the early years, Cherry and Yolanda, and the nineties was the high point. There's more on drag kings now. Our next exhibition will be on drag. It's a neat way to tell another story of queer history."

There's a good reason, she insisted, to donate your complete set of copies of *CommonWoman* or other historical materials to the R.U.1.2? Archives, rather than to, say, the Vermont Historical Society. "The archives and the exhibits we hold validate our existence. We're a resource as well as a repository. And when our materials are donated to larger institutions with a different perspective or agenda, we have to question: will lesbian history disappear into women's history?" ▼