



Hannah Driscoll, MA, Hemingway Intern, Summer 2019. Hilary K. Justice took this photo right as Hannah opened her first-ever file in the JFK research room.

Hemingway@the JFK: A Dispatch from the Pandemic

*by Hilary K. Justice, Hemingway Scholar-in-Residence
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Greetings. First: Adding my voice to the chorus of hoping everyone’s managing to stay safe, healthy, and on something resembling an even keel at least some of the time.

Everyone has a pandemic story. Here’s ours.

For those of you who’ve never been to the JFK Library in person, it’s one of three institutions on Columbia Point: us, the Massachusetts State Archives, and UMass Boston. So when the first known positive case in Massachusetts was announced as a UMass Boston student who’d returned from international travel, I exchanged a look with Hemingway Intern Hannah Driscoll that basically said, “Welp. It’s just a matter of time.”

The JFK Library and Foundation somehow were able to source hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes for each of us, and we all immediately wiped down all of our work surfaces. Our amazing and inspiring building services team, Work, Inc. (an organization that provides opportunities for adults with disabilities), stepped up to a higher level of alert, increasing the frequency of their always excellent attention to common areas and shared surfaces. We all practiced elbow-bumps in lieu of handshakes. This felt completely weird, and our laughter was uneasy.

Hannah and I were, at the time, finalizing a small temporary display on Hemingway and World War I, which we were aiming to launch in early April

as part of the PEN/Hemingway award festivities. We’d met with Janice Hodson, the new Museum Curator, to discuss how to convert a very bright space to one that would be safe for artifacts. Hannah had sourced a period map of the Veneto to use as our backdrop, and we’d just gotten authorization to order a custom-sized print. We’d met with Stephen Plotkin, whose archival responsibilities include all the books, to select a variety of translations of *A Farewell to Arms*. I’d hit eBay to source original 78 rpms of Enrico Caruso and “The Retreat from Caporetto” and a WWI Red Cross nurse’s pin so we could leave Agnes von Kurowsky’s safe in the vault (cf. above, lighting issues). Hannah, as part of her internship, had drafted the “exhibit script” outline (a spreadsheet listing all items on display and all relevant metadata), and we were working on the interpretive language and discussing best practices in museum item labeling with Janice and with Stacey Chandler, whom many of you know from the Archives department, who loves Hemingway and has a great eye for aesthetics.

Meanwhile, as is usual early in a calendar year, the team that puts on the PEN/Hemingway award celebration and luncheon were deep in discussion with PEN America and the Hemingway family about the usual annual decisions and logistics. Under the leadership of Nancy McCoy and with Forums Producer Liz Murphy taking point, the Education and Public Programs department presents the public awards ceremony. Foundation-side, VP Maura Hammer’s Development department arranges the VIP luncheon, hosted by Seán and Colette Hemingway. This year, we were celebrating the promotion of our colleague Lindsey Havincek to a new role organizing all the details of the luncheon. The PEN/Hemingway team at the JFK straddles three departments and two institutions, and with our partners at the Hemingway Foundation, PEN America, UCross, and the Hemingway family, it’s always a wild adrenaline rush to get all the details perfect. (After which, our internal “Team PEN/Hemingway”—Liz, Lindsey, and I—celebrate with a glass of bubbly something.)

But on March 10, just after Hannah and I finished taking final measurements for the WWI map order, I received an email from Rachel Day Flor, the new Executive Director of the JFK Library Foundation, saying, “All Foundation

staff must prepare immediately to work indefinitely from home, starting tomorrow.” I turned to Hannah and said, “Okay, here goes.”

The next day, we got word that two of our colleagues had been potentially exposed at a conference, and the NARA and JFK pandemic plans went into effect in high gear. (The NARA pandemic plan document—because yes, they’ve had a plan for years—was a huge confidence boost to read. Surreal in spots, and not fun reading, but one does take comfort from a good plan.) Giving Federal staff (which includes all the archivists) a crucial few hours to gather what they needed, Jamie Roth, Deputy Director, and Norm Beland, Facilities Manager, closed the building and activated all the protocols and gathered the materials for a top-to-bottom deep clean. (The deep-clean did not affect items in archives storage; there is, I’ve learned, a higher-level decontamination plan in which every paper must be taken out of every folder and handled individually... I shudder at that thought, as do archivists the world over... but such a plan does exist. We did not have to go there this time. Small blessings.)

We’ve been working at home ever since.

What this means to you all:

Research:

The JFK’s reference emails are still actively staffed and that our archivists are doing absolutely everything they can (and are allowed to)* to assist researchers from home.

Textual reference:

kennedy.library@nara.gov

Audiovisual Reference:

JFK.AVArchives@nara.gov

*Copyright is still copyright, which has huge impact on archival work in Hemingway studies, but asking “I don’t know if you can access this, but I have a question about X; can you help me? If not, I understand” is always an option! If they can help, they will.

They live for this stuff. Our archivists would much rather be in the building with access to our incredibly rich and precious holdings.

Also, please understand that their response time is unlikely to be immediate. Research inquiries go into a queue, and the JFK research queue covers multiple American icons, any one of whom can randomly become newsworthy on no notice. So I beg your patience, especially now. If you don’t hear from them in about ten business days, ping them again? I know we’ve all appreciated an email bump when we get buried and our inboxes are swamped.

If there’s anything I can help you with, reach out. My email is hilary.justice@nara.gov. The (newly reorganized) Hemingway North annex here in New Hampshire is at your service.

Caveat: If your inquiry is really one for the archivists, I’ll forward it to the research email address, so just skip the middle-person. Their statistics are in part what drives federal funding, and I know we’d all love it if the JFK could have more full-time archivists! (Hey, a scholar can dream...)

Regarding the PEN/Hemingway award ceremony:

We don’t have the Magic 8-ball on this. We’re in conversation with PEN America and the Hemingway family regarding viable alternatives regarding how and when to publicly celebrate this year’s winner and honorees. I’ll keep you all posted (by reaching out to the Hemingway Society social media magnate) as soon as I have anything official.

Regarding Hemingway website content (Note: this does not and will not include archival holdings):

I’ve had to pivot on some of this and delay most of the rest; all Foundation-funded programs gave back huge percentages of our 2020 budgets as part of our determination to see this through with all of our colleagues’ positions secure. So the planned spiffy tech part of it is delayed;

in the meantime, I’m reinventing the wheel. Expect something a bit more lo-fi, initially. More on that soon.

One silver lining:

The JFK Foundation has partnered with Google Arts & Culture, and I’ve received a fast-tracked green light to convert a modified version of my permanent exhibit *Hemingway: A Life Inspired* for hosting on that platform. (More tech to learn, more often!)

And another:

Congratulations to Hannah Driscoll on her successful defense of her thesis, “An Archival Interpretation of Hemingway’s ‘A Very Short Story,’ *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell to Arms*” and earning her Masters in Literature at UMass Boston. (She’s the one who found the picture for this year’s sadly canceled conference poster, so her impact on Hemingway Studies is already profound! She’s doing a concurrent Masters in Pedagogy, so if there’s any way for me to hire her back, I will.)

Regarding when we might be open again to researchers and the general public:

We don’t know for sure. I can say that everyone has a four-phase plan right now, and that the JFK Library is at the epicenter of three of them: NARA’s, Boston’s, and the State plan. Alan Price, the new Director of the Library, conveys that NARA’s is careful and thoughtful, and that we’re not even in Phase 1 of it yet. I’ll keep you all posted on that, as well.

Finally, this. Two of my colleagues at the JFK have lost family members to Covid-19 (a cousin, and a father). Please keep them (and everyone in the hotspot that is Boston) in your thoughts. ■

Miss y’all,

Hilary