

Charlotte Museum: Light at the end of the rainbow

Faced with an elderly workforce of volunteers over 60, the world's only queer lesbian museum in the Southern Hemisphere, the Charlotte Museum was facing an uncertain future in the face of Covid. Thanks to a community-driven vision however it has come out stronger.

Staffed largely by a small group of older queer and lesbian volunteers – many of whom live alone – the museum was at risk of economic and social collapse as this group was disproportionately impacted by economic hardship and isolation.

The museum itself was a lifeline for this community, though as Covid case numbers spiked in March and April of 2020, many of its volunteers and benefactors discovered that their ability to work at the museum and support it financially had been compromised greatly.

Stretching the pink dollar

“The museum itself is well-run, volunteer group – though they are all in their 60 and 70s, some of whom lived in retirement villages,” says Sarah Buxton who

TOP: Museum and Cultural Heritage Intern Elizabeth Simpson sorts through the museum's publications archive for cataloguing and rehousing into archive boxes.

Photo: Mandy Herrick

BOTTOM: Museum and Cultural Heritage Intern Yiqing Wang puts together an archive box which was funded as part of the Museum Hardship Fund. Photo: Mandy Herrick





joined the Charlotte Museum at the end of 2020 after the first round of Covid struck.

Buxton says she was first engaged by the museum's Director, Miriam Saphira, to do Te Papa's review of policies and procedures, though when Covid hit she was asked to play a central role in keeping the lights on.

“We were in a tight position because when you have a vulnerable community – some of whom were spending extended periods in lockdown, you quickly realise they are no longer able to carry out their usual tasks of collection care and running events because of the risks to their health.”

“Typically queer and lesbian women, over 65 or 60, are often living alone, and they have more financial pressures than heterosexual women. After Covid made its way here, there were fewer donations, so we found we had a funding shortfall for those essential operational costs such as our rent.”

A few months into the pandemic, the economic winds of change were increasingly becoming evident with donations almost halved. In light of this drastic change in circumstances, Sarah went about applying for a number of funds including the Museum Hardship Fund for rent relief, archival boxes and collection care support.

Three months after their application was submitted for the Museum Hardship Fund, they received \$25,000 to compensate for operational shortfalls over this period and support in collection care.

ABOVE: Museum Co-ordinator, Sarah Buxton says that the crisis funding received by the Museum Hardship Fund has allowed the museum to rehouse their collections and forge ahead with digitisation. Photo: Mandy Herrick

“That fund was quite the lifeline. Funding is often project based so to have a fund that covers the basics like rent and operations was critical at a time like this. Overnight, we moved from a volunteer based organisation to one that was staffed by two part-time roles.”

Pandemic shake-up

Now the Charlotte Museum has two part-timers and a museum host – which includes Sarah – and adequate funds to undertake tasks ranging from collection care to social media management.

Buxton says that now she is working in a fixed term role as a co-ordinator, she can start to put more attention into foundational areas to ensure the museum is in a position to thrive.

Over the past few months, she has worked on rehousing their 11,000 strong collection into archival boxes purchased as part of the [Museum Hardship Fund](#) under the supervision of a professional archivist. In addition, she has fitted out the collection store with new shelving to ensure the collection is easily accessible, safe and dry.

“We have a diverse collection – everything from crockery to t-shirts to journals - so I needed to draw on the expertise of someone who had a good understanding of the care of a broad range of objects. To this end, I hired a consultant who I had worked for at the King’s College archive as a professional archivist and she reviewed the collection and gave me advice on how it should be stored. Now everything is getting catalogued and safely tucked away in proper shelving. For me it is all about accessibility. When I first came into the research room it was hard to locate what I needed because there wasn’t a complete system behind it, now that’s getting sorted.”

Whilst Sarah worked on getting the collection into ship-shape, her new colleague – Max Glass – worked as a front of house visitor host, and in her

downtime concentrated on online cataloguing and critical technical infrastructure – such as networking computers.

New digital beginnings

Prior to the advent of Covid, the Charlotte Museum wasn’t engaged deeply with their online audiences, though in a world where lockdown and social restrictions were quickly becoming the new normal, Sarah says it was important to move into this digital space.

Although the museum had a Facebook page and website, these channels were often an afterthought rather than a central part of their strategy, so filling that void was important to support their community and bring others into the fold.

Thanks to greater capacity in the team, Buxton has been able to vastly improve their digital offering to allow greater access to the museum’s online collection.

“As the only museum of this kind outside Europe, it is important for us to have a greater online presence especially during times like this when everyone is tuning in online. Currently we have a number of students from the Auckland University’s Museum and Culture Heritage course, so they have been fantastic at doing collection care and writing stories for the website.”

“Now we have a blog that is alive with new voices and we’re working across new channels like Instagram, the place feels so much more vibrant, both at the museum and online.”

Buxton says now running online events is becoming an important part of their public programming offer which re-connects them with older women who have health concerns and creates a dialogue with different parts of the community, namely younger women who are exploring their sexual identity.

“It is the 50th anniversary for Pride next year and typically we might do a history tour and a pop up exhibition, though given it was cancelled last year,



we're looking at ways we can run this online by having a pre-recorded virtual tour of Karangahape road, it amazing how disruptions like this can lead you to think outside the box and explore other opportunities.”

By continuing the community-led vision established by a strong volunteer base, Sarah says that in recent months all number of opportunities have landed on their lap. Professionals and volunteers working at heritage organisations, libraries and museums have begun to offer their help, support and expertise.

“We've enabled a strong social connection with a number of groups who feel like our museum gives voice to their lived experience. Through this, we're starting to open doors. Last week, a friend of mine who is involved at MOTAT said that there was a queer staff group, so after a zoom meeting, they offered their professional support and asked how they could help us.”

The dollar that goes the distance

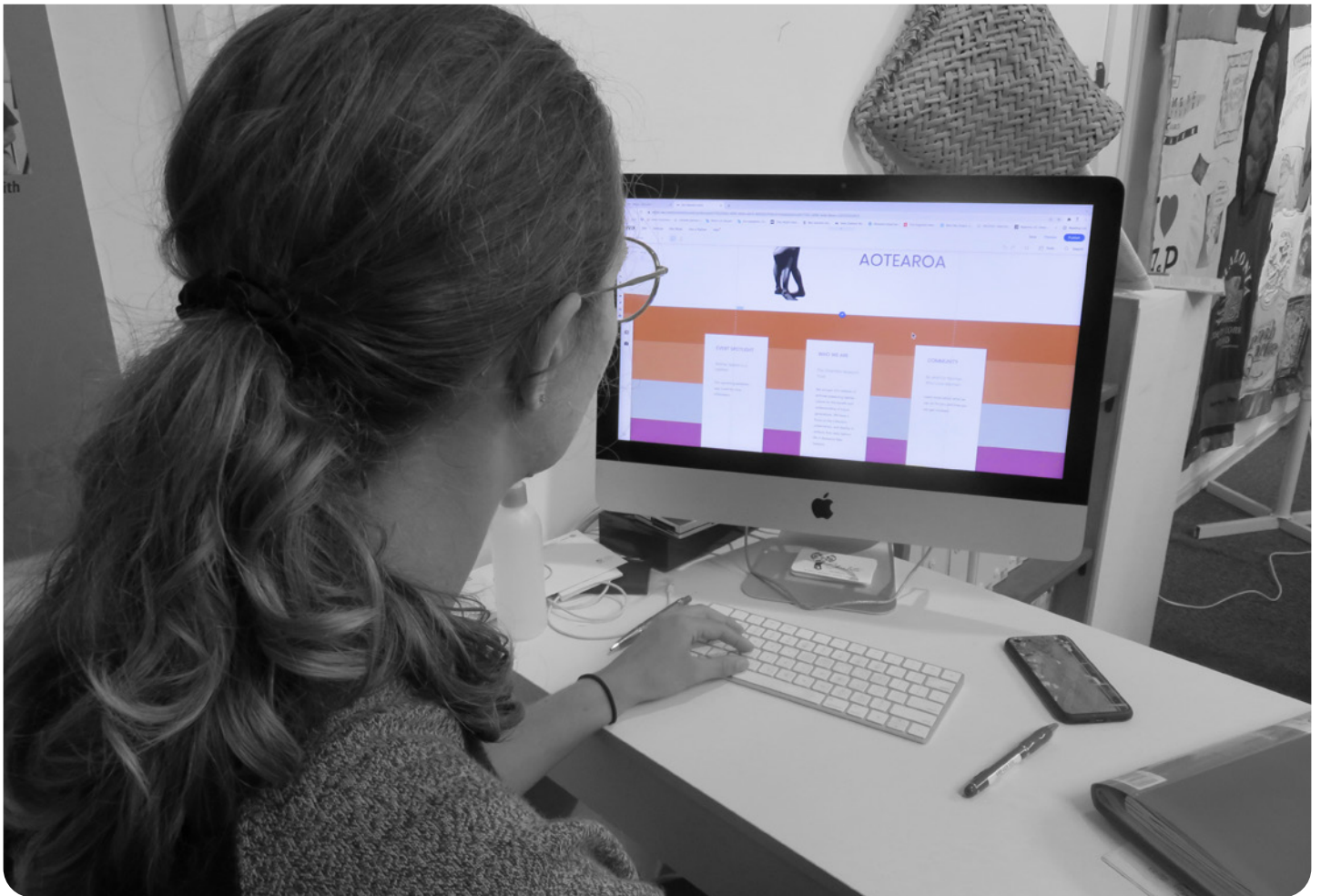
As well as creating these vital connections and developing sustainable practises, Buxton feels like her role is to create a funding system that allows the governance board to create a long term vision with projects and events that align with their strategy.

ABOVE: Museum and Cultural Heritage Intern Starr Ratapu re-houses a t-shirt that is part of the museum's extensive textile collection. Photo: Mandy Herrick

“For a small organisations like this you have to be constantly applying for funding, you're lurching along from month to month unsure if your whole model is sustainable. In this role, a significant amount of my time is doing funding applications which is quite repetitive and you have to try to fit your needs into what they want.”

Although funding has become more challenging under Covid the team at the Charlotte Museum were not unfamiliar with a funding system that maintains the status quo by making it hard to tap into large traditional funding sources.

“Often we are applying to funders who just don't have a connection with us. We are a marginalised community and that's all reflected back to us in these situations, many funders are faith based and normally funders don't have a connection to a lesbian museum, so it's been fantastic to have the support of funders who get us and get our work within the community.”



Despite moving from a volunteer organisation to a professional museum, Buxton says, their ambitions often aren't matched by funding to do simple things, like pay for the rent.

“We've managed to secure funding for an oral history and digitisation projects, though we're finding that it is very well to apply for project funding, but if the rent money runs out, then how will we manage that?”

As part of this sustainable vision, Buxton says they would like to find a permanent home in the heart of the rainbow community, though given rent has increased this year, this seems like a reality that is far away.

“We need to be closer into central Auckland where the gay community is congregating. Currently our site isn't easily accessible by public transport which means a large proportion of our community would struggle to visit us. In Melbourne they have just

opened a 50-million-dollar Pride Hub in St Kilda where multiple community organisations are able to work together. That is our dream. At the moment, we are looking at Auckland Council community spaces, so we can become much better supported and connected.”

“Our vision as a museum is to collect, preserve and exhibit the herstory of lesbians and their diverse communities in Aotearoa. However, Covid has highlighted the vulnerability of our rainbow communities so we hope to continue our work in bringing communities together and providing outreach for isolated, vulnerable populations.”

ABOVE: Staff member Max Glass looks over the website which is now filled with stories produced by interns from Auckland University's Museum and Culture Heritage course who have worked on caring for the collection. Photo: Mandy Herrick



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Ministry for Culture & Heritage