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A Hospital No Longer Afloat, but Buoyant With Memories

By JAMES BARRON APRIL 28, 2017

Jeffrey Delgado, an aspiring archivist from Queens College, has been telling friends that he went through yellowing documents and old photographs for an exhibit showcasing the history of the Floating Hospital. They all asked the same question: “Is it still on a boat?”

The answer, as he learned from some of the newest records he examined, is no. The Floating Hospital kept its name when it decommissioned its last vessel 15 years ago. But the material Mr. Delgado went through was high and dry in Long Island City, Queens, the Floating Hospital’s base since it moved to a permanent home on land.

Now the finds from the Floating Hospital’s archives can be seen in an exhibition that he and two other archivists-in-training assembled under the supervision of full-fledged archivists at Citibank and the Queens Library.

For generations, the Floating Hospital made medical care as carefree as a day at the beach by giving children a boat ride that included a checkup. It traced its origins to 1866, with rented barges, and its getaway mission to 1872, when The New York Times reported on newsboys playing in a park and observed that they would do well to get some fresh-air relief from the crowded, fetid city that they plied every day.

Sean T. Granahan, the president and general counsel of the Floating Hospital, said it had 100,000 photographs and other evidence “of our epic 150-year journey through health care” that needed to be reviewed, assessed and preserved.

The archive project came about when officials at Citibank put the Floating Hospital in touch with the Queens Library, which works with community-based organizations in Queens “that have amazing material but don’t have archivists to make them available to the public,” said Natalie Milbrodt, the library’s director of metadata services and the director of its Queens Memory program. The library also maintains the Citi Center for Culture Queens Library Fellowship for graduate students like Mr. Delgado.

So the Floating Hospital became an assignment for the three recipients of this year’s fellowships. In addition to Mr. Delgado, they are Regina Carra, who like Mr. Delgado is working on dual master’s degrees, one in history, the other in library science, and Pamela Griffin-Hansen, a candidate for a master’s degree in library science and archives at St. John’s University. Each received a stipend of \$1,000.

Kerri Anne Burke, the global curator of Citigroup’s Citi Heritage Collection, said the students made recommendations on how to take care of the Floating Hospital’s files and artifacts, and then went to work designing the exhibit. Mr. Delgado and Ms. Carra worked on the layout, while Ms. Griffin-Hansen prepared labels to go with the photographs and the items they had chosen. The exhibition fills six display cases near the food court in the Citigroup building at One Court Square in Long Island City.

Among the items is a bell from the Helen C. Juilliard II, the second of the Floating Hospital’s five vessels. Seeing it in the display case prompted a question: Did they ring it?

No, Mr. Delgado said: “We’re archivists.”

Another find was a guest log from 1899, with the names of everyone who boarded the ship. Mr. Delgado remembered what flashed through his mind as he picked up the log: “I have to be careful with this book right now — it’s really fragile.”

“We were jumping for joy because we didn’t think we’d find anything so well preserved,” he said. “I checked for water damage, like a good archivist should.”

But there was not much. “They didn’t find any mold or the kinds of things you often find when you’re looking at a collection for the first time,” said Ms. Milbrodt of the Queens Library. She said that the Floating Hospital had “kept their materials in really good condition.”

They also caught up on the organization’s recent past. Terrorism doomed the floating part of the Floating Hospital. The organization abandoned ship after the 9/11 attacks. It turned its last vessel, anchored off Lower Manhattan, into an emergency clinic as the twin towers fell. In time, the vessel was moved to Brooklyn, where it was used as offices; the medical care was provided at clinics around the city that the Floating Hospital had opened in the 1990s.

The Floating Hospital was also struggling financially, with \$6 million in debt, according to Mr. Granahan.

The group sold the ship, actually a barge, and refocused on land-based ways to provide care that would generate sufficient reimbursements. It now describes itself as the largest charity health care provider for families in the city’s homeless shelters and domestic-violence centers.

Not everything the archivists-in-training turned up went into the exhibit. “I found a lot of blueprints of Seaside Hospital before it was a thing,” Mr. Delgado said, referring to a nursery and medical care facility in New Dorp, Staten Island, that the Floating Hospital ran from 1881 until the mid-1960s.

“I wanted to incorporate them,” he said, but they were too big to digitize and too fragile to mount in the display cases.

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