

Doing History

With New AASLH Council Members

Jennifer Ortiz of Salt Lake City, Utah, and Trevor Jones of Lincoln, Nebraska, are two of AASLH's newest Council representatives elected in 2019 by our membership. To learn more about our Council and its work, visit aaslh.org/about/council.

Tell us about your current job and what sparked your interest in history.

Jennifer: I serve as the Museum Services Manager for the Office of Museum Services at the Utah Division of Arts & Museums. In my role, I provide consultation to museums, provide oversight to the re-granting of museum grants from the state of Utah, and facilitate training and workshops that assist in helping museums achieve best practices.



I always loved history in school but never thought I could actually do “history work” for a living: it was not something that was presented to me as an option until I was an adult in college. As an undergraduate, I took a public history course and wound up in an archeology lab in San Francisco. I've been doing history work ever since in some capacity, whether it's been in a museum setting or helping other museums achieve better practices.



Trevor: I work as the Director and CEO of History Nebraska. We are the state historical society, and we operate historic sites, the State Archives, State Historical Library, State Historic Preservation Office, the Nebraska History Museum, the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center, and more. If you can think of anything related to Nebraska's history, we probably have a program or a resource covering it. One of our organizational values is “we are curious” and I'm glad to have so much to be curious about!

I have always been interested in history, but it was not until I started working with collections that I knew this would be my vocation. An internship at the State Historical Society of Iowa put authentic artifacts in my hands and connected me directly with the past, and I've spent much of my career working to improve how museums use artifacts to engage the public (see activecollections.org).

What advice do you have for those starting out in public history careers?

Jennifer: Be flexible, seek out opportunities, and try to say yes when

you can. Networking has been critical to my career and to growing professionally. Conferences such as AASLH, the Western Museums Association, and my state museum association have been amazing spaces to meet folks and make connections. You never really know what opportunities are out there until you start talking to people.

I also highly suggest thinking outside the box when it comes to what “public history” careers are; we are all stewards of our own history, whether it's family, local, or community based. A lot of job opportunities may not present themselves as public history focused but can dovetail into that work seamlessly when approached creatively. Public history careers do not all start out with history degrees or working at a historical society; there are other avenues and you should seek them out to gain the experience needed to pivot in your career.

Trevor: Be curious. Join AASLH and read a lot, but not just about public history. Knowledge of personnel management, customer behaviors, and how to read a spreadsheet will serve you well. Do not be in a hurry to specialize. Part of the joy of public history is the chance to learn a little about a lot.

Do you recall a specific experience or moment in your career when you thought “This is why I do what I do”?

Jennifer: I feel very fortunate to be able to have these “aha” moments in my job regularly. Helping other museums tackle their problems head-on through things like better board management or getting their collections in order is a



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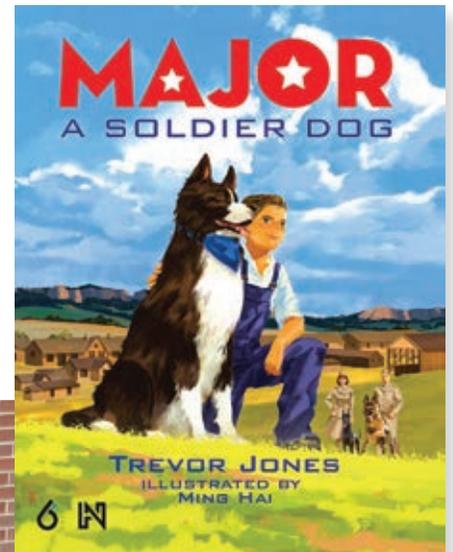
Jennifer and a colleague show a workshop audience how to examine a framed painting's condition.

really rewarding position to be in. I get to see other museum professionals gain the knowledge they need in order to make their organizations stronger and more sustainable over time.

Most recently, my office ran a pilot of a state-wide social impact study on museums and the results are truly incredible. We measured museum audiences to see if visitation to a museum over time could result in things like increased educational attainment, increased cultural competency, and better family/friend relationships. Our study revealed a statistically significant positive change in 96 percent of all of the indicators. Essentially, our pilot showed what many of us already knew about cultural organizations: that they have a positive social impact on their communities and audiences and are critical to overall health and well-being. To be able to quantify the work that these organizations have been doing is really wonderful and makes me so thrilled and grateful to do what I do.

Trevor: I believe that we study the past to improve the present and plan for a better future. I recently wrote a children's picture book called *Major: A Soldier Dog*, a true story about a boy named Sid who gave his dog to the Army in WWII to serve his country. The real Sid is now eighty-two years old and has

been reading my book to kids at schools and libraries. He recently called to tell me how the story helps children understand complex concepts of patriotism and sacrifice through the experiences of one dog. Before he hung up, he said that sharing this story has given him renewed purpose and a reason to keep living. Is there any better reminder that our work matters? ●



Reading events share the story of Major and the Fort Robinson War Dogs Training Center in western Nebraska with young audiences (and their furry friends).

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