

Meredith Arms Bzdak on SOS!

[Excerpted from a conversation with Rebecca Rushfield on October 4, 2021]

I had been working for several years as a historic preservation consultant and found out about the project I believe through the State Historic Preservation Office. I had worked for them earlier in my career and they were aware that no one had yet taken on the project in New Jersey-- that New Jersey was one of the states that didn't have a sponsor. Someone else suggested the Montclair Art Museum to me. And so I worked to make the marriage, putting SOS! together with the Montclair Art Museum. The museum ended up sponsoring the program, and I became the Project Manager. So technically I was working for the Montclair Art Museum. I was used to working as a consultant at that point and this was really my biggest consulting job. I worked on it a couple of days a week. I felt like it was a really incredible opportunity—especially since our scope encompassed the entire state. Other states were broken up in various ways depending on how it worked best for them, but I had the responsibility for the whole state.

I was hired in 1993 close to the beginning of the project. I remember that it seemed like a number of the other states already had their sponsors in place and they were thinking about getting started and how they were going to manage the survey. It felt like New Jersey was a little bit late to start, but we were pretty much in line with everybody else once we got going.

I was told that I would be responsible for coordinating the volunteer efforts and also figuring out how the program would work on a statewide level. So, mostly organizing and training. We kept the budget pretty frugal. There was not a lot of waste there. We did what we needed to do, but a lot of it was volunteer effort and volunteers contributed some of their time and expenses as well.

By my own analysis I believe we had probably somewhere between one hundred and two hundred volunteers. We tried to get students as involved as much as possible. I worked with educators at various universities to engage their students. I had a relationship with Rutgers University, so I got some student interns through Rutgers. The bulk of the survey work was done through college students. I had a couple of interns who really needed some sort of art historical experience, so it was a very professional internship for them. They would take the list of outstanding pieces we needed to survey and they would go out and fill out forms and conduct research. One faculty member in particular in Southern New Jersey did a whole project with her class and they all filled out forms. Documenting one area at a time through students was very effective.

I had other people who would come to a training workshop and wanted to participate only in their town. If their town had one or two pieces, they would go and do the research and fill out the survey forms. They were very helpful, but they were only doing one or two pieces out of 700, so.... There was still a lot to do. The list of 700 was developed mostly through research on my part, pulling together whatever material already existed. Combing through library materials. People reporting them. People actually turning in their lists from their communities. Going out and finding them. It happened numerous different ways. I also had one really active retired gentleman who did thousands of hours of volunteer work. It just became a passion project for him and I would not have finished it without him. He was local to Montclair. He absolutely loved doing the work and he generously donated his time.

In New Jersey, one of the first things I did was to set up an Advisory Board for the program. Those people were all volunteers but they represented some of the state's most important and potentially powerful arts and history organizations. So, for instance, I had a few people who were university faculty who were art historians. I had people from the New Jersey Historical Commission and somebody from the Union County Cultural and Heritage Commission. And I tried to look for some geographic distribution in terms of who served on that advisory board. I had a couple [Janis Conner and Joel Rosenkranz] who specialized in American sculpture and who still run a gallery in New York. They were great resources in terms of finding information on unknown work. It was a way to not only get some professional expertise and support, but to generate enthusiasm in all of those people who served on the Advisory Board-- people who knew people who knew people who helped me get volunteers and who sponsored the training workshops that we set up. They were an invaluable resource. We ran a design competition for a statewide logo and they all participated. That was fun. We created letterhead and had rubber stamps made so everything got stamped with our statewide logo.

The basic rule for a sculpture was it had to be a work of art created as a work of art and it had to be publically accessible. So if it was, say, in a private collection in someone's backyard and you couldn't see it from the street, we weren't interested in trying to get to it. If it was on someone's front lawn, that was publically accessible and it could be considered public sculpture. It just needed to be created as an artistic piece for publically accessible viewing. It could range from being a commemorative work to being simply decorative.

Sculptures in cemeteries had to be works of art.. We didn't see them frequently, but there were a few cemetery pieces that were actual sculptural works that people had commissioned for tombstones. In general, headstones were not considered because most were created by a mortuary company which mass produced them. We were more interested in unique pieces of art-- although sometimes we included pieces that were mass produced. There was a World War I doughboy that was a mass produced piece. They're not necessarily cemetery pieces. These sculptures appear around the country. We did survey all of them. They stand in various locations. They're in front of schools. They're in front of municipal buildings etc.

We had a lot of communities where there was no sculpture. The number of works that would be in a town was pretty predictable. The more urban an area, the more chance of finding sculpture there. And university towns too. We did survey work on university campuses. Some have more than others, but they're good repositories for public art.

The whole mission for the project was to locate and document these pieces because there was a growing awareness they weren't being taken care of. The end goal for the project was to set up some kind of system going forward where there would be more attention paid to the care and maintenance of these pieces.

There was a follow up project to SOS! that New Jersey participated in-- the Conservation Treatment Awards. In this project a professional conservator, working with me as the Project Manager, would train a group of volunteers to clean a sculpture. The simpler pieces were chosen-- not the complicated ones that did require the attention of a trained conservator. For instance, we did a project in Bayonne, New Jersey in which we trained the local maintenance staff to clean several pieces that could be cleaned on an annual basis. We focused on Hudson County—Bayonne and Jersey City. It was a handful of pieces, but it was meant to be a pilot program that could be replicated elsewhere. I don't believe any other town followed in those footsteps. I do believe overall there was a lot of awareness created as a result of

SOS! not just through the follow up project, but through the first phase-- the education and the training and the looking and the volunteers who suddenly became aware of public sculpture and what it meant.

I worked on SOS! for about three years-- 1993 to 1996. The program was pretty much winding down in 1996 as I recall. That's when we were doing the pilot conservation project. I subsequently wrote a book on New Jersey's public sculpture that was published in 1999. It included about a hundred pieces of the approximately 700 that we documented through the project. New Jersey now has more public art because of certain events like 9/11 that happened after SOS! was finished and resulted in a number of additional memorial works.

I feel the collective sense of what public art is and the meaning of public art has only been enhanced in the last two years by people really taking a serious look at what sculpture is out there and what it represents. I feel that public sculpture and public art in general has been in the eye of the people now for quite a while. There are a lot more people who are aware of it, who study it, and who think about it.

There was a significant amount of press generated by SOS! nationally as well as locally. There were a lot of newspaper articles that came out at the time talking about public sculpture and the history of pieces. They said that these pieces are here to teach us something about the past and need to be respected, so if you make changes that aren't appropriate to the piece, you're changing the artist's original intention.

I think it was an amazing project and it was incredible that it was carried out on such a large scale. It seems unbelievable to me that Heritage Preservation is not in existence any longer. I still am involved with similar work; I am a partner in an architectural firm that works nationally on preservation projects. It's a fascinating field and I try to stay interested and engaged. SOS! was such a terrific project for so many reasons. Personally, I learned an incredible amount about project management and local history, but also made life-long friends.