The Center for Public History is capturing our region’s past with research-based storytelling for exhibits at local museums and other institutions.

Nurses work a ward of Booth Hospital in the old Shinkle Mansion on East Second Street in Covington. Booth Hospital’s successor institution, St. Luke West in Florence, would eventually come to be owned by St. Elizabeth Healthcare.

Research revives hospital’s history

Sorting through 80 dusty boxes where a local institution’s heritage was stored, three NKU professors worked with students to identify the right combination of documents and photographs to tell St. Elizabeth Medical Center’s story from its humble founding through 150 years of growth to become a healthcare giant in Greater Cincinnati.

By Bob Driehaus

Over the course of 150 years, St. Elizabeth hospitals have weaved more than a few fascinating stories:

- A dying slave secreted into the hospital to pray and be comforted in defiance of the law.
- Nuns in full habit begging door to door for beer to serve convalescing Union soldiers.
- A century later, striking nurses returning to work without a contract to tend to victims of a plane crash.

The challenge was gathering those stories and then fleshing them out to show how St. Elizabeth, founded in Covington in 1861, and the hospitals that have joined its network are woven inextricably into the fabric of Northern Kentucky.

That’s where Northern Kentucky University’s Center for Public History entered. Three professors — Drs. Paul Tenkotte, Brian Hackett and Rebecca Bailey — with a big assist from students Karla Simmons and Sierra Earl, assembled 80 large boxes worth of dusty records and gleaned the most important or interesting ones for an exhibit that tells the hospital’s story. The exhibit debuted at the Behringer Crawford Museum in Covington and then moved to St. Elizabeth in Edgewood. The exhibit was one of the first major projects of the new Center, which got started in 2010 in conjunction with new initiatives to teach public history at NKU. A Master of Public History with a rigorous curriculum was launched in January 2010 and now has more than 40 students enrolled.

The hospital history exhibit has been augmented with “For the
Centuries: St. Elizabeth Healthcare and Northern Kentucky, 1861-2011,” written by Hackett with assistance from Tenkotte and Bailey, published this spring.

“We went looking for good stories, things that could make this 150th anniversary have meaning to people,” Hackett said. “You look for little pieces of information that you can build on, incidents that were part of bigger stories, that really reflected well on the hospital and on the development of Northern Kentucky.”

The team discovered how difficult St. Elizabeth’s early years began, with thinly veiled hostility toward Catholics in what was then a predominantly Protestant region.

The hospital was founded by three German nuns summoned by Bishop George Carrell after a fervent campaign for its creation was launched by Henrietta Cleveland. At 21, she had lost her husband and young son and wanted to dedicate her life to helping others after converting to Catholicism, a vision not universally shared.

When Covington sought to buy a new building to house St. Elizabeth for $5,000, a prominent citizen obtained an injunction through a lawsuit. That man, William Ernst, went on to become mayor of Covington and was a prominent member of the Nativist Know Nothing movement that chafed against the heavy immigration of Germans and Catholics to Northern Kentucky in the late 1800s.

“It’s not too far of a leap that he was doing this because he didn’t like Catholics,” Hackett said.

St. Elizabeth overcame early prejudices and has expanded to include hospitals or medical centers in Covington, Edgewood, Falmouth, Florence, Fort Thomas and Grant County, along with specialized service centers elsewhere.

Its story is of keen interest within Northern Kentucky but lacks the broad appeal that a major museum or publisher would fund, making it a perfect project for the center.

“This is for Northern Kentucky because our premise is that many of us were born at St. Elizabeth or our loved ones have died there. How many babies has the institution delivered? It’s part of the fabric of our lives, and that’s the story we wanted to tell,” Tenkotte said. “That’s what we specialize in at the Center for Public History, helping people celebrate their lives and institutions.”

Tenkotte said the research that the center completed found an uplifting theme running through the hospital’s long history.

“There’s a bigger story of the dedication of people to a cause greater than themselves, and that’s where the story relates to all of us who want to do something for the greater good. The 7,000 associates at St. Elizabeth are carrying on that same sense of mission,” he said.

A sizeable piece of the hospital’s history has been made by Terry M. Foster, a critical-care clinical nurse specialist, who joined the hospital as a volunteer in 1973 and has lectured in all 50 states, becoming an unofficial ambassador for the hospital. He joined a committee of hospital staff that helped NKU’s team gather and sort information.

“They were great,” he said of the professors and students. “We lived some of that history, but we didn’t know how to put it together. They knew how to extrapolate what was real from what was anecdotal. We pored through tons of pictures from the hospital, scrapbooks. You would go in there and four hours would fly by.”

One gem that stands out in his mind was the discovery of a handwritten diary shoved into a non-descript envelope in a box. It turned out to have a nun’s daily log of the hospital’s fight to move patients above the raging Ohio River flood of 1937, the worst in the region’s recorded history.

“A lot of people went through that exhibit,” he said. “The hospital had a strong presence in the area. The plane crashes, the floods, the hospital stood through it all.”

Bailey said working with people and other institutions on local history is gratifying. “It’s easy for academic historians to stand on the side and pontificate, but it’s quite a different thing to partner with people and help them to tell their story,” she said. “It was really amazing to me to see the commitment from the president to the volunteers. You could really tell that healthcare was a passion for them and not just a job.”

The center won’t sit on its laurels, having already launched efforts to tell the stories
"We went looking for good stories, things that could make this 150th anniversary have meaning to people."

— NKU History Professor Brian Hackett

of Fort Mitchell on the occasion of its 100th anniversary and of Cincinnati’s West End, which was once a thriving middle-class and working-class African-American neighborhood that was literally torn apart by the construction of Interstate 75.

"About 80,000 people lived in the West End in an amazingly diverse area," Tenkotte said. "The story is how do you, over the course of many years, literally decimate an area, and what happens to the black doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers and churches and schools when you break up that community from the 1940s through the 1960s?"

These projects aren’t purely academic exercises, he said. Instead, they offer the wisdom of past successes and failures that are applicable today. "I think we feel like we’re a nation in decline, but if you would have polled people from virtually any era, they would have said the same thing. It’s sort of a theme that repeats itself, and I think we’ve also done a very poor job of understanding that," Tenkotte said.

The center is out to change that.

The Center for Public History

• The Center for Public History supports the civic engagement and community outreach activities of the faculty and students of the history and geography department. In the center, students can learn about internship opportunities with community partners and work on projects alongside engaged faculty and public history graduate students.

• This work provides students with an exciting glimpse into the real world of museums and cultural heritage organizations such as local historical societies, archives, and libraries. Students who work on public history sponsored projects are acknowledged contributors and are encouraged to include project products in their employment portfolios.

Paul Tenkotte, director
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Dr. Paul Tenkotte, left, chair of the Department of History and Geography, and history professors Dr. Brian Hackett and Dr. Rebecca Bailey collaborated on the St. Elizabeth exhibit as a project of NKU’s new Center for Public History.

NKU Photo/Aly Durrett

Dr. Paul Tenkotte
Paul Tenkotte is chair of the Department of History, Geography at NKU, which includes black studies and women’s and gender studies. He is the co-editor of The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky (2009). His involvement in regional history ranges from publications to exhibits to public television documentaries, including the Emmy Award-winning “Where the River Bends.” Currently, he is completing a book for the centennial of the City of Fort Mitchell, Kentucky.

Dr. Brian Hackett
After nearly 20 years in the museum business in curatorial and executive director positions, Brian Hackett returned to academia to complete his Ph.D. in public history from Middle Tennessee State University. He joined the public history program at NKU in fall 2010. Brian teaches courses on museum management, material culture, collections management, interpretation, and exhibits. He has recently completed a book commemorating the 150th anniversary of St. Elizabeth Healthcare in Northern Kentucky.

Dr. Rebecca Bailey
Rebecca “Becky” Bailey is the director of the NKU public history program. In addition to coordinating the program, she teaches courses in local & regional research methodology, oral history, Appalachian history, the Gilded Age, and Progressive Era history. A graduate of the College of William & Mary and West Virginia University, she has been a faculty member at NKU since August 2006.

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