Smithsonian Memorabilia Project, 1996 – S. Reinckens

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WEBVTT

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<i>Eduardo Contreras (interviewer)</i>: One, side one of an interview of Sharon Reinckens by Eduardo Contreras in June 27, 1996, at the Smithsonian Memory Stand of the 1996 Festival of American Folklife.

00:00:13.000 --> 00:00:16.000
Start by having you state your name.

00:00:16.000 --> 00:00:17.000
<i>Sharon Reinckens</i>: Sharon Reinckens

00:00:17.000 --> 00:00:20.000
<i>Eduardo Contreras (interviewer)</i>: And when and where were you born?

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<i>Sharon Reinckens</i>: I was born in Washington, D.C. January 1951.

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<i>Eduardo Contreras (interviewer)</i>: Okay and what is your occupation?

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<i>Sharon Reinckens</i>: My job title at the moment is Deputy Director of the Anacostia Museum.

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<i>Eduardo Contreras (interviewer)</i>: Okay and when did you come to work at the Smithsonian?

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<i>Sharon Reinckens</i>: I came to work at the Smithsonian about 1983.

00:00:40.000 --> 00:00:46.000
<i>Eduardo Contreras (interviewer)</i>: And where, what type of work were you doing at that time, or were you somewhere else before?

00:00:46.000 --> 00:00:57.000
<i>Sharon Reinckens</i>: Yeah, I worked at, I was working as a designer at a small aviation museum in Quantico, Virginia, installing an exhibition on [?] aviation in the early years.

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<i>Eduardo Contreras (interviewer)</i>: And that was part of the Smithsonian--no?

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<i>Sharon Reinckens</i>: No.
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): No?
Sharon Reinckens: No, that was like a Defense Department museum that I was working for at the time.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Okay. And where did you start, when you came to the Smithsonian where was your first position or--?
Sharon Reinckens: I came to the Smithsonian to work at the Anacostia Museum.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Oh, at the Anacostia Museum. Okay. As a deputy, or--?
Sharon Reinckens: No, I came as a designer.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Okay.
Sharon Reinckens: And I held a lot of other positions since then.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): And do you have any favorite stories about working at the Smithsonian?
Sharon Reinckens: It's been a lot of work! And it was--I've been working with a lot of people.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Did, since you grew up here in the D.C. area, I assume you came to the Smithsonian Museum as a child?
Sharon Reinckens: Yeah my dad used to bring me to the Smithsonian when I was a kid.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): What were your impressions of the Smithsonian as a child?
Sharon Reinckens: Well, when I was a kid I came to see an Egyptian archaeological installation. I must have been 10 at the time. I took a look at it and wondered who did the installing of the artefacts and how they came to put them in the museums like that.
And I think that was when I decided that I would like museum work; that it was exciting, that you get to work with all sorts of wonderful materials about the lives of people that live here and live every--you know, across the globe. I was always fascinated with it.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Do you remember your first day on the job when you started working for this institution?
Sharon Reinckens: No [[laughter]]
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): No [[laughter]]
Sharon Reinckens: No gray matter for that one.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Describe a typical day at work.
Sharon Reinckens: Today?
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Today, that's it.
Sharon Reinckens: A typical day at work today- I can describe today or yesterday.

A typical day at work is generally- People at work at my museum work on many many many things at once, okay. And since we are a small group of people, everybody, we are working on multiple projects simultaneously and your are looking to document the results of multiple projects simultaneously. So, depending on what the urgent issue is, we go in an tackle to project that's coming up, the project that is behind. I am currently working on looking at what the role of community museums are in the U.S. and [[not auditable]]

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Can you briefly describe your career at the Smithsonian or when you came to where you are now?
Sharon Reinckens: I came as, I though I was coming, as an exhibit designer and after being at the Anacostia Museum about a year I figured out I was a community worker. Which was, never has been, apart of anybody's job title anyway. I've done-
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Um
Sharon Reinckens: work as a videographer documenting African-American artists in Washington, a lot of work that has been done. I worked as the acting director of the museum after the death of the founding director and am – I now am deputy director of the museum.
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): It's a small museum, we do everything

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): How do you think the Smithsonian has changed during the time you have been here? You've been here about 12, 13 years now?
Sharon Reinckens: I've been here since before my son was born and he is 15.
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): 15
Sharon Reinckens: So I've been here about 16 years.

It's bigger, more museums. I see the growth really at my institution and not necessarily at [[not audible]] Smithsonian. But at the institution I work I've seen a recommitment to community-based programming and a re-energizing of people who do that kind of work.
Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Can you explain what—just for anybody who'd have some more questions—about what you mean by community-based work? Let's expand on that a little.

Sharon Reinckens: Okay, the Anacostia Museum is an African American museum and it is a community museum that was founded through the actions of a community advisory board. And the museum has always been responsive and engaged with people that are part of the museum's constituency. And there is a series of constituencies that we work with.

And community-based work means we try to empower the people we work with to actually explore their own culture and the meaning of their culture and the meaning of their history. And that's done in a series of ways, in exhibitions, through publications, through town meetings, through programs in education, workshops, through oral history training, empowering people to document their own cultures and actively working with them to present it at the museum.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): What do you find most challenging about working at Anacostia?

Sharon Reinckens: I think the challenge is—

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer):: What do you find most challenging about working at Anacostia?

Sharon Reinckens: I think the challenge is to be responsive to your constituency and constantly re-identify who those people are and why you are there. We try to, in our work, we try to be responsive also to emerging issues in our community. If it's violence among youth, we try to think about that and understand what our role is in that issue and to be responsive to that. So it is constantly knowing what is important to people and using our role as a cultural institution to respond to that. That's what we are here for.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer):: If somebody asks you what's, you know, what's the difference in working at Anacostia that working at, you know, a museum in New York City or like a museum of art or something like that?

Sharon Reinckens: I would say we are a museum about people we're not a museum about things.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer):: Um-hum

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer):: That's a difference. We are about working with people to inspire them about their own histories and to have them communicate that to their own children to understand the power of culture in that community and to actively use that. A lot of the work in other museums, either there is a curator or somebody who takes this cultural thing and presents it to the public and there is no empowerment to the people that actually produce it. We try to reverse that.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer):: Um [[silence]] What would you say has been the most unusual or memorable thing that has happened to you while working at Anacostia?

Sharon Reinckens: [[silence]] I did some work a while ago. I don't know if it unusual, but we did a project called black mosaic. It was looking at black immigrants in Washington...
Sharon Reinckens: to engage in issues of race in this city of color. Talk about that and be fluid enough to talk to other folks who are directly impacted by those issues. I think it was very inspirational to me to hear people talk about what those issues meant to them and how they negotiated them in their lives and how they are teaching their children to negotiate some of that stuff.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Lets see, a few questions about the festivals in general. Have you visited-
Sharon Reinckens: Oh yes, festivals are great.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Do you have a particular festival memory or an exhibit?
Sharon Reinckens: No, I always love them though, they are great. It is the people who create the culture who are here presenting it and it is always wonderful. People are honored to come and you can feel that in the way they talk to you about whatever their work is or whatever their culture. That's what is really wonderful, the people who come and do the presentations.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Is there anything else you would like to share with me about working here or what it means to you to work here?
Sharon Reinckens: No, it's just- I think it's a privilege that I had an opportunity. And I think a lot of people who work in my museum feel that way. I'm very grateful for it.

Eduardo Contreras (interviewer): Thank you so much, Sharon.
Sharon Reinckens: Okay
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