



HISTORIC SYRACUSE SERIES (/PULP/SLICE-OF-LIFE)

Onondaga Historical Association embraces past, present and future as leaders apply new twist to nonprofits



Lydia Niles | Assistant Feature Editor

One of the Onondaga Historical Association's volunteers search through files in their research center.

By [Lydia Niles \(/writers/lydia-niles/\)](/writers/lydia-niles/) ASST. FEATURE EDITOR

1 day ago

Tucked away in a side street in the heart of downtown Syracuse, 12 employees and a handful of volunteers work to preserve and uncover the history of central New York.

The Onondaga Historical Association is a private nonprofit organization that devotes its efforts toward an all-encompassing approach to education. More than 150 years ago, the organization started as a traditional museum but has since grown into an adaptable service of temporary, permanent, traveling and company exhibits, educational

programming, publishing, digital video productions, event coordination and hosting, historical consulting and research in addition to all that its museum location has to offer.

At the head of the organization is Gregg Tripoli, who, over the last decade, has applied a multifaceted business model, pushing it to the forefront of the future for nonprofits. When Tripoli retired to Onondaga County after decades of international business, traveling and a career-driven life, he took an interest in the mission of the OHA.

After arriving right around the time of the housing market crash in 2008, the director was forced to adjust to declining traditional sources of funding. He then decided that the future of the organization would focus on earned revenue outside its museum location's four walls.

"It's about how we can use the historic perspective to develop our own neighborhood, our city and the community at large," Tripoli said. "So that's been a major change in focus from trying to kind of push over the threshold attendance."

This restructuring has led to the organization being anything but traditional. Today, the board director considers the OHA to be more of a, "media company with a few museums," and the people working within the organization as storytellers.

His visions are executed by employees like research specialist Sarah Kozma and education specialist Scott Peal. Both Kozma and Peal run their departments and are heavily involved with administrative, development and specialist tasks.

On any given day, Kozma can be found updating and rifling through the OHA's extensive records, answering genealogy or architecture questions, assisting volunteers or conducting research projects. Peal focuses heavily on the OHA's popular Historic Ghostwalks which include presentations by guides and actors who portray historical figures within the community in various locations around Onondaga.

Both specialists have been involved with the nonprofit since before 2003, so they have witnessed the transition the organization has undergone.

"I think it's much more focused on, I mean we've always had projects that have been outside of our own building, but that's much more of a push now," Kozma said. "It's not just bringing people in, it's also going out into the community."



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Their love of history is shared among the other employees, volunteers and board members. Jon Zella, the development officer and digital content manager, has a master's in history from State University of New York at Oswego and started out at the OHA as an intern.

Zella works closely with Tripoli and his efforts toward strategizing and developing the nonprofit. Together, they reach out to different communities, businesses, foundations and individuals seeking financial support. But the hardest part, Zella says, is raising money for the “nonsexy” things like upkeep and maintenance.

But Zella, who considers himself a historian, and Tripoli, who is not, are able to connect with each other and potential donors through storytelling. Even when fundraising for money to keep the lights on, the pair are able to build that bridge for those they're speaking to.

“Our history, regardless of where you ended up, is very similar,” said Zella, who is originally from Long Island. “Everyone has their own connection,” and seeks to find that common ground.

Even employees and volunteers at the OHA find their common ground through history. Every person has their niche interests: Some are invested in the history of post-Civil War in the United States and others hockey, immigration, 19th century Europe and others.

Onondaga County alone has played a role in shaping the present, Zella said.

“How two brothers from Syracuse built Broadway ... how when you listen to certain Frank Sinatra songs there's a guy behind that from Syracuse who wrote and composed that stuff, how a woman from Syracuse went from homeless to a world-renowned philanthropist leading Red Cross efforts in World War I,” the development officer said.

But the OHA is not restricted to only embracing the past. In recent years, Syracuse has served as a hub for immigrants and refugees seeking asylum, opportunity and a better life. Tripoli and Zella have recognized the diversifying community and have adapted certain aspects of the OHA to fit Onondaga’s melting pot.

“We are a community that has a history of accepting people from different cultures and that is what made our community,” Tripoli said. “(Immigrants and refugees) have real things to contribute to our community, to make it richer and better place, just like your ancestors did.”

While everyone involved with the organization is passionate about their mission, Tripoli lives and breathes the OHA. “I don’t know that there’s anybody I’ve met that loves their job more,” Zella said.

“When you have pride and place, and you have a determination to improve the present...you can’t help but have a more optimistic perspective of your future,” Tripoli said.

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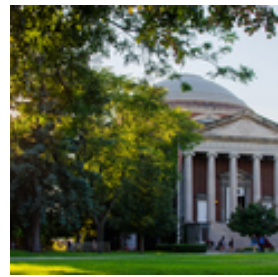
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By The Daily Orange Sports Staff | November 29, 2017

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