
BACK BAY , BEACON HILL , DOWNTOWN

With rain coming, makeshift Boston Marathon memorials at Copley Plaza are archived by city

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John McColgan, Boston's city archivist, carefully peeled back the tape on a poster board this morning at Copley Square where hundreds of visitors had written messages of hope and love for the Boston Marathon bombing victims. He marveled at the number of notes and how they came from all over the world.

"Layers, layers," he murmured under his breath. "People have written on both sides."

He and a team of four other city workers and archivists were working this morning to preserve those messages before rain arrives later this week. While the memorial is a testament to the city's strength, it is also largely composed of paper.

"The city and the mayor are very concerned about the preservation of this material. It's a heartfelt outpouring on the part of the people, the city, everywhere," McColgan said.

His team worked carefully but quickly to preserve history, starting around 6:30 a.m. They unstuck posters and disentangled paper chains from the fences, laid them in boxes and a big black portfolio. Sturdier, three-dimensional items – scores of pairs of running shoes, stuffed animals, hundreds of baseball hats – will be left in Copley Square for some time.

The fragile keepsakes will be moved to the city archives in West Roxbury, where they will be catalogued, photographed and shelved in special acid-free folders and boxes.

The impromptu memorial – which also includes flowers, crosses, candles, and photographs – has grown steadily for the past two weeks, after city workers consolidated the shrines that had sprung up across the city in the wake of the bombing.

It is a place for people to heal, but it has also become a living historical document.

"I am an archivist, and I went to school to learn how to document all sorts of history, and one of the things we learned about was how you document tragedies and disasters," said archivist Marta Crilly, standing by a pile of posters. "And I never thought I'd be doing it in my own town."

As the team worked, visitors wove their way through the memorial, some checking with workers to make sure they were not dismantling the whole memorial.

Sarah Risko, 28, of Jamaica Plain came to pick up an unfinished painting she had left at the memorial: a unicorn rearing up with a prosthetic leg in honor of the victims of the bombing.

"I started thinking, there's nothing here for the survivors of the attacks, so I wanted to do something for them," she said.

She said she plans to finish the painting, and bring it back after the rain clears.

Others crouched to sign the posterboards left out by the city, moments before workers collected them.

The city has not yet formulated a plan for a permanent memorial, and there is no timetable on when the temporary memorial at Copley Square will come down. Workers periodically clear out dead flowers, and today's paper cull was not the first time the city moved to collect artifacts.

The collected pieces are available at the archive if anyone wants to view them, said Crilly.

The 10,000-square foot archive houses an array of city records, including Boston's original town books from 1634 and 1660, in which people recorded property, taxes, and details of colonial life.

It includes mostly records and, until now, had very few artifacts – except for some fabric samples used as part of the city's inquest into the deadly Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire on Nov. 28, 1942, which that killed 492 people, and some artifacts from the administration of Mayor Raymond L. Flynn.

Visitors to the memorial this morning said they hoped the city did something to display or otherwise honor the artifacts workers were collecting – suggestions ranged from a permanent display at the MFA or the Boston Public Library, to donating the running shoes to the less fortunate to pass along the goodwill.

By 9 a.m., the team had mostly finished their work.

“It's been really touching to see the way the world has come out to support our city. A lot of these signs are in different languages, that's a really beautiful thing,” said Crilly. “So I'm really happy that these things are going to be preserved, and that this part of Boston's beautiful history, this outpouring of love, is going to be documented for people to see.”

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