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SECAC Stories: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way

I've often wondered what else I would have done in life if I hadn't become an art historian and professor. The truth is, I don't know. More recently in my employment as a college professor, I've been held responsible for talking about career choices with our students. Coupled with the fact that many people I know are beginning to look forward to their second careers, I've thought more about the possibilities of what I might do after teaching is done with me. Quite frankly, it bothered me at first that I didn't know. It didn't seem like I had any particular skill sets. One day I had a revelation, I finally knew what I wanted to be: secretly, I long to be John Stewart or Stephen Colbert. The problem is, of course, that I haven't been planning much for this supposed second career other than the one-liners I might deliver *sotto voce* in yet another campus meeting on yet another initiative proposed by Administration. And then Bill Levin offered up a session asking for "general observations on the history of SECAC" that invited "both serious and humorous musings." All I can guess is that late one evening, spurred by a glass of wine, I decided to indulge my secret longing to follow in the footsteps of Stewart and Colbert.

This paper will be comprised of "short stories" about things I've experienced or seen between 1996 and 2013 as a presenter, an officer, and a conference director. During these past many years I have witnessed tremendous growth in the organization. I have been part of the switch from hand-written registrations to online (impulse) purchasing of membership, registration, and tours. I also have seen a lot of behind-the-scenes hard work that occurs in an organization that has been "hands-on" from its early days until right up until the moment we walked into this session. I have had a role in conferences where we helped to keep costs low by cutting up our own cheese cubes and setting up slide projectors, hauling cases of beer and wine up a hill to the reception, or twisting arms of colleagues and friends to accept a small honorarium or pat on the back in lieu of a paycheck. Along the way, there have been stories of great fun, friendship, and absurdity, and I hope my recollections will provide some entertainment along the way. So, please forgive me. I'll try to keep it short!

I think 1998 in Miami was my third SECAC conference. Miami was great. Barbara Watts, the conference chair, probably did not have as great a time as her attendees did. She had gone all out and I remember the food was spectacular, particularly one outdoor venue that seemed to have South Florida ethnic cuisine. In fact, the food was so good and so unexpected (Barbara set a new paradigm for conference chairs) that the crowd began expecting great food and descending as ravenous hordes that scarfed up everything. I don't recall in any of the conferences before this one much more than the requisite cheese cubes at the receptions. In Miami, it seemed that if you stayed in a session until its conclusion, you missed the food. My roommate and I kept showing up to tables that bore only traces of the feast. After a few missed meals, it became a running joke, aided by the alcohol that did not run out. One of the funnier moments in Miami, and hysterical laughter may have been helped by the lack of meals, was at a Saturday morning session. I remember it was quite a large gathering in a theater-style room. My roommate and I had circled that session with the thought that mid-morning refreshment would be right outside in the hallway after the session. The session chair began an introduction. That introduction itself became a paper that did not stop. I recall that Arthur Marks, who was sitting near me, began making noises typical of Arthur (if you know him, you know what I mean). Pam Simpson was down front, and periodically she would pop out of her seat and hand the chair a note. He would glance at it and keep talking. The session had begun at 10:30 and

was scheduled to end at 1:30. In my memory, which is perhaps faulty, no other speaker was allowed to take the podium, although there were five speakers in the program. Attendees began to trickle out. I think Pam Simpson stood up at least three times, urging the chair to relinquish the podium. I don't remember that happening. I left the session at 12:30 since I was scheduled to meet with some friends. Thankfully, they had saved me half of a bran muffin, because the table once again had been decimated. I think Pam's experience in that session resulted in her authorship of the salient and sage "Crimes and Misdemeanors" white sheet that all session chairs and presenters now are given upon acceptance of their proposals.

Another sweet moment occurred later that afternoon when a group of us, all current or recent graduates of the UNC Art History program, left to go on the scheduled walking tour of Miami's Art Deco district. Some of us still wore nametags. A friend from grad school whispered to me, "Look that's Eugene Kleinbauer wearing shorts!" It seemed so incongruous to see this "giant" figure of art history decked out in a ball cap, shorts, and sneakers. He was delightful on the tour.

Not to dwell on the Miami conference, but it was a memorable one. It was great fun, and Barbara Watts really set a high bar for anyone coming after her. I remember the bus ride to hear the keynote lecture, probably during rush hour. After boarding, horrendous traffic coupled with a driver who seemed to go astray meant that we arrived at our destination an hour and a half or two hours later. Later than intended anyway! The food was gone. I went straight to the keynote lecture. The speech by Paul Barolosky was memorable, too. His address was titled "A Brief History of Erotic Art, Starring the Goddess of Love Herself." I remember wondering what he was going to say. By the end of the second sentence there was an audible murmur of dissent. While he was going for the humorous, he succeeded in making a large portion of the audience uncomfortable with sexist one-liners. Aside from that, if you didn't listen too closely, the whole situation was kind of funny. A tall, skinny guy with glasses sliding down his nose, Barolosky sort of resembled an Ichabod Crane-like figure, stooping over the lectern because the microphone wouldn't stay upright. I remember a young man jumping up and trying to fix it, only to have it slowly lower itself. It seemed like a Woody Allen movie, with Woody himself trying to make jokes about well-endowed women, while the audience already knew about his erectile dysfunction. That keynote was a surreal experience.

On the way back, I jumped off the bus with an adventurous group of people, led, of course by the ever-ebullient Joe Seipel, who was looking for a particular bar. I remember young women dressed in leotards dancing on the bar. Oiled-up bodybuilders guarded the front door. It was a weird and wonderful evening.

It was at Miami that Charles Joyner and Lope Max Diaz first talked to me about bringing SECAC to Raleigh. Given the background of the 1998 conference, it made perfect sense to me. Noting Barbara's presence here, I want her to know that "her" conference always remained a benchmark for us. We had to do something as well as she had done in Miami.

I think once you have hosted a conference, it's never the same. You can never go back to those naïve times where you have the level of fun I experienced at Miami. You carry this burden of needing to help that poor, unfortunate conference director who has succeeded you. In 2006 Michael Aurbach and Vanderbilt hosted the conference. Michael, you may remember, also was president of CAA, and he had a wide reach to pull in people. Michael's promotion of the conference was responsible for the initial surge in SECAC's recent numbers. We thought it

might only have been a one-time boost for the conference in Nashville, but that initial boost exposed a lot of first-time attendees to SECAC, and many have continued to return and urged others to come as well. At any rate, Michael's a worrier. And as a conference director, it was easy to find lots of things to worry about. Two years before, in 2004, Debra Murphy and the University of North Florida had hosted the conference. It was going to be spectacular ... except for the four hurricanes that struck Florida before the conference, leaving most of the Florida schools, and the state itself, in disaster. What would have been a large conference shrank considerably, and costs exceeded the attendance. With that recent difficulty in mind, Michael approached the Nashville conference with a frugality and conservatism worthy of a Depression-era survivor. He decided to do everything he could himself. I want to underscore "himself." Rachel Frew flew in early on a Monday; I arrived on Tuesday afternoon to help. You know how it is when you're really busy and haven't had time to do anything beyond getting your paper ready and purchasing a plane ticket? I flew into Nashville with no thought about where I was going other than the conference. I really had not thought anything about what it might be like to be in Nashville. I tried to find Rachel and Michael so I could assist them in the last day of preparations. They weren't picking up their phones; as I found out later, they were in a giant Costco buying large hunks and wheels of cheese so they could cut them into the ubiquitous cheese cubes we all know and love. I thought I might as well wait for them in the bar even though they don't drink; it made sense at that moment. During my first glass of wine I worried about catching up with them. During the second glass, I started to notice the people around me and hear the live music. It was getting louder and louder. Eventually, I asked the bartender what kind of music it was. When he replied "country-western," he was a little incredulous. That night I found out country-western music was okay—and that particular songwriters' showcase was spectacular. Eventually, I did walk away from the bar and found Michael and Rachel. They had been cutting up cheese cubes, and I started working on stuffing the bags that are given out at the registration desk. At some point we sent Rachel off to bed. The next task that Michael had posed for himself was to set up the slide projectors he had borrowed and bought via e-bay. That was quite a job. I remember doing this until 2:00 a.m., which was 3:00 a.m. on my time, but Michael had been living on a steady diet of no sleep. The good news was that the conference went off mostly without a hitch.

If only I'd had the hindsight of today, I would have photographed some of these moments. At times they were high-stress, but we also knew that we were working with people who felt at least as strongly as we did about making the conference succeed. Some of these moments seemed like real crises at the time, but later, once solved, we did look back and laugh. A particular moment that I wish I had photographed was the first morning of the conference in Charleston, West Virginia. In 2007, Don Van Horn did the impossible: he hosted a conference as SECAC president, and he did it at a location an hour or more away from his own campus. Early on the first morning of the conference, before the first session at 8:00 a.m., we discovered that the hotel had not fully understood that we needed *real* screens for projection. Instead, they had used duct tape to secure four foam-core boards onto the walls of the breakout rooms. I remember walking into a room and seeing one of the four boards taped to the wall already dangling precariously by a thread of tape. Don was apoplectic. I really thought he was going to have a stroke. It was only later, once the crisis was resolved as the hotel put real projection screens in there, that we could laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

Every conference has its moments: conference directors have a roller-coaster ride with peaks and plummets. Usually, although it's a lot of work, it feels worthwhile. Occasionally there is an attendee you'd like to strangle, but fortunately people like that usually represent a tiny fraction

of the interactions. Of course, when you are the conference director, it's hard to get enough distance to appreciate the bizarre, absurd, and funny things that happen. As I draw this paper to a close, I'll turn to the last conference I hosted, in 2012. And indeed, I think I haven't yet put enough distance between me and it to fully appreciate the many funny stories that occurred there.

In 2012 Meredith College sponsored the conference in the neighboring city of Durham. We had co-hosted with NC State back in 2003 in Raleigh, and it had been a lot of fun and a lot of work. We stepped up to bring the conference to Durham when the director in another city had to withdraw. Unfortunately, with the economic retrenchment that was hitting most colleges at that point, we didn't have any institutional support, and in addition, few Meredith faculty members participated. Luckily, Dana Gay, my graphic design colleague, is an enthusiastic SECAC member and a workaholic. She immediately jumped at the chance to design the program and all collateral printed materials. I also had one adjunct faculty member who agreed to organize the hanging of the juried exhibition. Jokingly (but seriously), my husband, Steve Gaddis, became my unpaid staffer. It really was a conference built on the backs of a very few people, which meant that Rachel Frew got drafted for a number of jobs that are not a part of her regular repertoire. Perhaps one of the biggest was the hanging of the aforementioned juried exhibition. The Durham Arts Council had graciously lent SECAC its entire building. We arrived on a weekend to hang the show only to find that the space, which properly belonged to the Durham Arts Guild, had not been painted recently, and entire thirty-foot walls were a pastiche of several different shades of paint. In effect, the walls had a coat of leopard spots. The fellow faculty member who had agreed to organize the hanging of the show was a step away from tears. We decided the gallery had to be painted. We spent a few hours uncrating the works, tentatively laid them out, and made plans to return that Monday morning to paint. I arrived with rollers and extension poles. The young women who worked for the Durham Arts Guild were of course embarrassed and appeared in the gallery with tiny paint brushes offering to help. We sent them back into their office and got to work. I'm a fast painter, and I knocked out the worst walls with a couple coats of paint. By afternoon, we were hanging artwork. There were a few pictures taken; the one I recall vividly showed Rachel with her head in her hands surrounded by some of the more surreal works that had been juried into the show. Her gesture had nothing to do with the works of art; it was entirely the bizarre situation. At that point we thought maybe we'd encountered the worst of what could go wrong.

Meanwhile, a member of my family had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and we brought him to live with us. I think we were already over the tipping point for having our hands full, so what was one more thing? It just became part of the surreal world in which we now lived. I remember standing in the hospital parking garage trying to finish a phone interview with a newspaper reporter about the juried show while dodging cars. In a way, I suppose, that family member's illness really helped put the conference into perspective. Thankfully, my unpaid staffer, Steve, was always ready for the next dirty job. Because we had no institutional support, we did a lot ourselves—with the help of Trader Joe's. One of Steve's most vivid recollections was getting all the cases of beer and wine from the hotel to the Durham Arts Council. It was a *lot* of beer and wine. He borrowed a catering cart and managed to push it up the hill. As I was writing this paper I realized that the fact that this detail is one that he returns to as a particularly memorable moment tells me there must have been a point where he almost didn't crest that hill.

In preparing this talk, of course, it has become abundantly clear to me that I need to hang onto my day job. But I do think one reason why I did step forward to submit an abstract to Bill Levin was because I wanted to say something about how SECAC each year creates wonderful stories that enrich all our lives. My first SECAC was in Charleston, SC, in 1996. I was nervous, I really didn't know anyone, and I'm not particularly outgoing. When I came into the session room that year for my paper, immediately Barbara Watts and Bill Levin turned around and welcomed me to SECAC. That kind of generosity and collegiality is what makes SECAC special. Also, every time you come to the conference, and especially if you serve the organization in some kind of way, you get way more out of it than you put into it. The friendships are special, even when you only get to see these people once a year. Sometimes the circumstances are humorous or bizarre. Who doesn't love to hang out at Veet's in Mobile, Alabama, and experience its special weirdness? Those are memories I'll carry for a lifetime. Funny and wonderful things happen on the way to SECAC, and I think those are what keeps us all coming back.