

Archivaria

The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

Obituary

Christopher Zaste (1988–2024)

RAYMOND FROGNER

Archivaria 97 (Spring 2024), pp. 226-230

Cite this article:

Frogner, Raymond. "Christopher Zaste, 1988–2024." *Archivaria* 97 (Spring 2024): 226-230.



Courtesy of The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

Christopher Zaste

1988–2024

Colleague, friend, scholar. It is difficult to put into words the profound loss for the archival community of Chris Zaste's passing in February 2024. The hurt is greater because we never had the chance to say goodbye. Chris was raised in Winnipeg, and he embodied his family's ethos of modesty, hard work, and good humour. On his last day of work as a digital archivist at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) at the University of Manitoba, he had his colleagues laughing at a story about his father taking him to a local outdoor rock concert and being shocked at the kind of cigarettes being passed around.

In 2012, Chris entered the archival studies graduate program at the University of Manitoba, where he attended classes taught by professors Tom Nesmith and Greg Bak, who was also his thesis adviser. Nesmith and Bak both remember Chris as a strong and enthusiastic student. Chris served his internship at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives at the Archives of Manitoba. Like those at his other workplaces, his provincial archives colleagues describe him as "incredibly productive" in both processing and describing records. It was here that Chris encountered archival records of Indigenous provenance. As Provincial Archivist Scott Goodine remembers, "He brought a real energy and curiosity to his work and was a positive, bright, and supportive person. Chris was a valued colleague, and his contributions to the Archives will be lasting and significant." Through this internship combined with his volunteer work at several local community archives and the Association for Manitoba Archives, Chris was developing a highly respected reputation across Manitoba archives.

Tom Nesmith remembers Chris's deep interest in history and archival matters. He recalls Chris's ability to effectively bring archival theory and practice into the digital world. Greg Bak has similar memories. One of the most powerful

memories Greg Bak holds of Chris relates to his interest in the relationship between the digital and the human:

I've known Chris Zaste since he enrolled in the archival studies master's program in the fall of 2012. That was my second year of teaching, and I was delighted to have a student who shared my own deep interest in digital culture – not just its technical aspects, but all the messy and creative ways that digital systems could be liberating and allow for new possibilities. For an elective in his second year, Chris took my course on the history of digital culture. It was in that course that I got to know Chris as a gentle leader. When the class broke into small groups, it was like having a second instructor, guiding his peers into a deeper discussion of the readings.

Classmate Natalie Vielfaure, now digital curation archivist at the University of Manitoba, recalls that even amid the intensity of their first year of archival studies, “I can't recall a time where he seemed stressed or frustrated. He always seemed to go with the flow, come into the archives and leave it every day with a chill attitude and approach everything with a positive and flexible attitude.”

Chris wrote his master's thesis on digital preservation, after implementing Archivematica at a local community archives. His highly regarded thesis, “Another Bit Bytes the Dust: The Technological and Human Challenges of Digital Preservation,” was a good prologue to his work preserving the statements of residential school Survivors at the NCTR. By the time he graduated, Chris was known around the Winnipeg archival community as a kind, earnest, and accomplished digital archivist, well respected at the several archives where he had worked or volunteered.

As head of archives at NCTR, I worked closely with Chris for the last six years, and my memories of him are filled with humanity, kindness, and intelligence. I met Chris during the interview to hire a full-time digital archivist at the NCTR in 2018. Chris came highly recommended by Greg Bak, his thesis raised my expectations for the interview, and he did not disappoint. He arrived meticulously well prepared, and this quality became part of his reputation at the NCTR. During the interview, which was a revealing discussion about the value of open-source archival solutions, Chris demonstrated his ability to avoid

dogma, consider all possibilities, and deliver criticism without condescension. It is difficult to read the final line of my recommendation to hire Chris: “He has the potential to become a productive and useful staff member.” It falls so far short of the enormous personal and professional contributions he delivered to the centre, his coworkers, the Elders, and the community representatives he engaged with on a daily basis.

As one of the principal digital archivists at the centre, Chris worked on our most prominent and emotionally challenging digital projects, working closely with staff of the National Film Board to preserve the statements of Survivors. The international organization Digital Preservation Coalition chose to award the NCTR in recognition of how it combines Indigenous community concerns with digital preservation. Chris also worked closely on the Missing Children Project, a direct response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action. He contributed to building the private register to record the identities of children who lost their lives while under the responsibility of residential school authorities, and helped build the NCTR’s National Student Memorial Register and website to commemorate this loss. During all these important digital projects, Chris could be relied on for diligence, knowledge, and determination – but most notably for his kind and friendly demeanour. I always knew that if I went to him with a question about a project or set of records, by the end of the day, he would send me a detailed and well-reasoned response. The emails would often end with humorous ironic twists.

In time, Chris’s role expanded to include the supervision of several of the archival interns who have worked at NCTR. Chris demonstrated a fundamental kindness and humanity as a colleague and supervisor. Robin Neckoway, an archival studies student at the University of Manitoba who worked with Chris during his internship at the NCTR, remembers him as a “gentle giant, an all-around nice guy” who supported him during the technically challenging and emotional experience of working at the NCTR: “Chris was one of those people who was easy to talk to and you could share things with.”

Chris believed in the fundamental principles of the NCTR: the social value of creating a decolonizing archive; the need to support Indigenous people in healing from the residential school experience; the importance of education in addressing the colonial experience; and the right of Indigenous Peoples to freely determine their own destinies as equal rights-bearing peoples, free of colonial

judgment. He displayed an ease and respect for Indigenous Elders that stood out at every gathering. He embodied the potential of settler allies to help construct a decolonized future built on values of love, kindness, and respect.

Jesse Boiteau, senior archivist at the NCTR, knew Chris best. He was not just a colleague at the NCTR but a friend and a former classmate in the archival studies program:

Chris was one of the most dependable and reliable people I have ever had the privilege to work with. He was always the first one in the office, even if I tried to get the jump on him by showing up 30 minutes early. He never shied away from lending a hand in any capacity (even for an impromptu riverbank photoshoot of a stuffed badger . . . long story). This level of reliability and dependability also made Chris one of the biggest creatures of habit I've ever worked with. For years, Chris ate the same lunch: two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and two bottles of water. After we wore him down with bad sandwich jokes, he finally evolved his lunchtime pallet to include deli meats and sauce to keep us on our toes.

Chris's work, much like his wardrobe (Mark's Work Wearhouse exclusive), was not flashy, nor did he seek attention or praise for his contributions. Chris was modest, sensible, and humble, and his work ethic reflected that. His legacy, working at the NCTR among other archival and museum organizations over the years, will be measured by the future generations who benefit from his meticulous attention to detail in the long-term preservation of our documentary heritage.

Chris was loved by many and connected on a personal level to anyone he worked with, whether they were colleagues, classmates, students, or residential school Survivors. We will remember Chris as a tall, gentle, and kind person. His passing will be felt throughout the archival community, and it is a reminder that life is short and precious.

To borrow a phrase that Chris used every day at 4:00 p.m. sharp, as he left our shared workspace, "Have a good night, everyone."

RAYMOND FROGNER

(with input from Greg Bak, Jesse Boiteau, Tom Nesmith, Scott Goodine, Robin Neckoway, and Natalie Vielfaure)