

She Helps Boost The Profile Of The Atwood House Museum

by Susanna Graham-Pye

CHATHAM -- Whether she's behind the scenes helping to set up a big event like the recent "ANight to Remember" gala or taking photographs of speakers for the Constructing Wilderness series, assisting the army of volunteers do what needs doing or sitting at the info desk answering questions for visitors, Joanna Springer is a familiar face at the Atwood House Museum. So familiar it's hard to picture the museum without her.

However, it was only four months ago Springer washed ashore on the Cape and began her work as the museum's administrative and programs assistant.

"It was quite a learning curve for me," Springer said, explaining she'd previously worked for a locally-owned event theater and as the president of the Black Rose Acoustic Society, both in Colorado, from where she and her husband moved. While both were non-profits, they weren't museums, especially historical museums.

An historical museum such as the Atwood House is both an exhibition museum, open to the public, offering education and entertainment, and a resource. It is complex place that meets many different needs.

"We have people who come here searching for something very specific," Springer said.

Some come, she explained, because they're doing research on a family member or a family tree. Some people come because they're looking for more information regarding an artifact about which they'd like more information. And then there are those who simply wander through the museum doors to see the regular standing exhibits or the special rotating ones.

"You never know what someone is looking for when they walk through those doors," Springer said with a smile.

Upon her arrival, in the quieter late spring months, she spent most of her time working on publicity. Springer focused a large part of her energy on building up the museum's presence on the social media scene.

Through Pintrest, Springer has set up a number of online galleries. She's gotten feedback from people she believes might not have otherwise known about the museum. Even those familiar with the place are probably unaware of the "massive collection" the museum has in storage, Springer said.

"I really enjoyed putting those together because it allowed me to take time to get to know about some interesting parts of the museum's collection," she said. "I tried to put them together in a way that left some mystery, intrigued people enough to want to come and see them in person."

In researching what others were doing, Springer said she was also able to build relationships with other small non-profits such as the Sargent House in Gloucester.

"We're able to promote one another and all the similar historical things we do," she said. "This is great, because our audience is smaller than other kinds of museums, and it can be a little harder for us to engage people.

Another project she hopes to bring to the online public is a "behind the scenes" at the museum series.

"You can't believe the amount of work that goes on here behind the scenes," she said. "I couldn't believe it. What it takes to put up one of our exhibits, like the current wedding dress exhibit. It's phenomenal. It takes such commitment and care."

There are volunteer archivists, volunteer tour guides, textile volunteers and gift shop volunteers, book store volunteers, the list goes on and on. Springer said there are currently around 80 docents working at the Atwood

House.

"I think it's a love of the town that brings many of them here to work," she said. "And for others, I think they have a love for a particular subject. It's amazing. We couldn't do what we do without them."

Their work is what Springer said she hopes to feature online, but not until after summer.

"I started in the slower months," she said. "It's amazing how much busier things get this time of year."

Of the collections, Springer said she is particularly fond of the Mural Barn, which holds Alice Stalknecht's paintings of early to mid-twentieth century life in Chatham. She finds the "camp house" exhibit, one of the permanent displays, interesting as well.

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Joanna Springer with her favorite piece from the Atwood House Museum, a large ship figurehead. COURTESY PHOTO

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"I think what I like about the camp room is the way it feels that it was left exactly as it was," she said. "When you walk in there, you feel as if you've been there. I was in there this morning and looked up at the saltine tins on the shelf. My grandparents had the exact ones, they used them to store things. It's just a feeling you get there, of knowing it."

Her "single most favorite" piece in the museum collection is the large ship figurehead hanging in the museum's first gallery. She was donated to the museum by a family that used her as a lawn ornament. She was painted white, Singer said, but was stripped down and left as natural wood.

"I just think she's beautiful," Springer noted.

Springer, who was born in Michigan but moved to Colorado when she was quite young, said she and her husband chose to move to the Cape to be closer to his family. Before the move, they visited, but she'd never spent much time in New England.

A musician -- she plays flute and piano -- Springer said she hasn't yet found her way into the Cape's vibrant music scene, though she hopes to. She, her husband, and their two dogs currently live in Sandwich.