



CHRISTINA TKACIK/BALTIMORE SUN

Siobhan Hagan is going through WJZ television's archive, which includes more than 25,000 tapes and hundreds of film reels, trying to save video and images of the city's past.

Much of Baltimore's television history is on film that is crumbling away. One woman is leading the effort to save and digitize those pieces of our past.

# 'We're running out of time'

BY CHRISTINA TKACIK | The Baltimore Sun

**I**nside the Baltimore City Archives warehouse, Siobhan Hagan sorts through a wooden crate filled with old film canisters.

It's a small part of the archives of WJZ television — thousands of reels of film and videotapes from broadcasts dating back decades.

Somewhere in these reels, Ella Fitzgerald enthuses over her creative partnership with Baltimore band leader Chick Webb. Hundreds of hours of tape show a young Oprah Winfrey finding her television feet as a local news anchor.

There are investigative reports on blockbusting, footage of the 1968 riots, copies of "The Buddy Deane Show," and

scores of interviews with everyday Baltimoreans — slices of life from an era of Charm City that's rapidly fading from memory.

Hagan picks up a canister, a relic from more than 60 years ago, and pries off the lid. A yellowing shard of tape sticks up from the tightly wound coil of celluloid.

"Oh my goodness," she says. "That looks like masking tape."

Someone, perhaps decades ago, spliced the film together with a makeshift bond. It will need to be repaired. Carefully. And soon.

"We're running out of time," she says.

Hagan, a 32-year-old archivist, is tackling **FILM**, page 2



# She's working to save some television history

**FILM**, From page 1

ling a challenge confronting media organizations across the country: The steady, inexorable deterioration of the film and magnetic tapes that hold history. In 10 to 15 years, preservationists say, some of the oldest videotape will no longer be playable.

Digitizing the footage is a relatively simple process. But at present, there's much more material to preserve than there are technicians and money to preserve it.

Epochal national events and programs — the moon landing, the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, "I Love Lucy" — are already well preserved in multiple formats. But literally millions of hours of local footage, on which Americans captured the sights and sounds of everyday life as it was lived in the 20th century, are turning to dust.

The Association of Moving Image Archivists — Hagan is a board member — has declared a "magnetic media crisis."

"Within our organization there're people hard at work trying to figure out how to manage it," said association President Andrea Kalas, the head of archives at Paramount Pictures.

If magnetic tape isn't properly stored, the oxide can fall off. What's more, the broadcast engineers who know how to use and repair the players needed to view the materials are retiring and dying out.

Historians have spoken of a need to preserve film and tape for decades.

Initially, much of broadcast television was recorded on film — when it was recorded at all. In the early days, some shows were live and no recordings were made. The industry moved from film to cheaper — and lower-quality — tape in the 1970s. Both media eventually degrade.

The Librarian of Congress was lamenting the loss of early TV entertainment and news programming in 1997.

Walter Forsberg, an archivist with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, is a vocal advocate for digitizing the materials before they decompose.

"When playback becomes no longer possible for these ... formats, the important histories they contain will vanish," he said. "To digitize tape is to write history."

By that assessment, Hagan is poised to write some serious Baltimore history.

Hagan, founder of the nonprofit Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archive, has acquired the entirety of the WJZ archives, including more than 25,000 tapes and hundreds of film reels. She is taking inventory of the collection and prioritizing items that need to be digitized soon before they're lost forever. She has launched a crowdfunding campaign to pay for the long process of preservation.

"It sounds like an impossible job," says Richard Sher, the former longtime WJZ news anchor who co-hosted "People are Talking" with Winfrey.

Sher began working at WJZ in 1975, around the time the station transitioned from film to tape.

The WJZ archives contain "amazing stuff," he says. "But I don't know who's gonna have the time or patience to go through it."

Hagan appears to be up to the challenge. Energetic and knowledgeable, she's as comfortable talking about vinegar syndrome — a chemical reaction that degrades old film — as she is about television history.

At home, she has an old Stenbeck table, an antique device used decades ago in the film industry to view and edit footage. She can't currently digitize film, but hopes to acquire the equipment to do so.

Hagan has worked with the collection for years; it was the focus of her master's thesis



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Siobhan Hagan has a daunting task ahead of her. She is working to save the archives of television station WJZ. Time takes its toll on old film and tape, and Hagan is hoping to digitize the station's footage.



WJZ ARCHIVE

Early in her career, Oprah Winfrey worked at WJZ television in Baltimore. Saving such footage from the region's past is part of Hagan's effort.

at New York University. Her excitement is palpable as she goes through old boxes containing everything from rare recordings of the dance program "Shakedown" to raw news footage from the field.

Until recently, WJZ's collection was housed at the library of the University of Baltimore, where Hagan worked as an audio visual archivist.

The university maintains a similar archive from WMAR. It has received some grants to digitize a portion of those. But officials realized they lacked the resources to properly store and digitize the WJZ collection as well, library dean Lucy Holman said.

"We didn't feel like we were the best steward" for the collection, she said. "The clock was ticking."

So the university turned it back to WJZ, and last November Hagan made the station a pitch: She would take over the archiving

through her new nonprofit — if WJZ granted her the rights to license the footage.

WJZ officials agreed. A spokeswoman said they were "pleased" to donate the archives to Hagan, given her knowledge and expertise working with the collection.

Hagan has arranged with the Maryland State Archives to store the WJZ collection at a warehouse in Better Waverly. In exchange, she is assisting the state archives with preservation of its own moving image collection.

Robert Schoeberlein, Baltimore's acting archivist, emphasized the cultural importance of Hagan's work.

"Here you have citizens talking about their own experiences," he said of the WJZ footage. "It captures aspects of Baltimore's social history that don't normally get ... captured in traditional archives."

Though WJZ's collection consists largely of local news, Hagan says much of the work

has national significance.

Footage from the collection was used in the recent Netflix series, "The Keepers," about allegations of abuse at Archbishop Keough High School in the late 1960s and early '70s and the unsolved death of Sister Catherine Cesnik.

Hagan says she will use any money she makes licensing WJZ footage to preserve the archive.

But she insists MARMIA will always make archived footage available to view online for free. "That's a core part of our mission."

Hagan has found another ally in the Smithsonian Institution. Archivists with the National Museum of African American History and Culture have helped digitize some news broadcasts and episodes of "People are Talking" for possible use in an exhibition on Winfrey. And Hagan has arranged with the museum to help digitize additional tapes.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture recently launched an initiative called "Great Migration," which allows members of the public to bring in their personal footage in obsolete formats for free digitization.

Forsberg said the museum will support Hagan as best as it can.

Winfrey recently began appearing on "60 Minutes," a show she says she has admired since her days as a young journalist. Those curious about Winfrey's early days need look no further than a 1978 episode of Eyewitness News, in which she visits a country store and post office in Howard County.

The camera pans across the little log country store on Triadelphia Road. Tin buckets hang from the ceiling. The shelves are stocked with red and white packages of Beech-nut gum.

"There aren't many things that can withstand the test of time," she tells viewers. "Standing inside this old store built around 1850, you're reminded of a precious part of the past that is often lost in today's rush world."

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