

With extensive study and experience, Cody Firearms Museum Associate Curator Ashley Hlebinsky is comfortable "hitting the deck running" in her new role with firearms.

Hlebinsky hails from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where her mother is a teacher and a professional figure skating coach; meanwhile her father manages a recreational facility and his hobby is golf. "My hobby in high school and college was competitive ballroom dance," Hlebinsky states. Her dancing career was closely linked to her original ambition to be a doctor. At age 11, due to a series of surgeries, Hlebinsky was confined to a wheelchair. As a form of rehabilitation, she started to ballroom dance. She followed that passion for dance throughout college, training in New York City.

Initially attending the University of Delaware as a psychology major, Hlebinsky had hopes of going to medical school. "After a semester in college, I switched my major to history," she explains. "I have always been interested in historic sites, and, in the beginning, I was intrigued by firearms from a medical history point of view. I then began studying them and realized what a rich role they play in America and the stories they have to tell about the people who owned them."

From there, Hlebinsky completed her first internship at the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum in Pittsburgh where, "As the curatorial intern, I had to catalog a large collection of firearms; after that I was hooked," she continues. While earning her Master's degree, she studied at the Smithsonian's National Firearms Collection with Curator David Miller during fall and spring semesters, and then traveled to the Buffalo Bill Center of the West on summer and winter breaks, studying with Curator Warren Newman. As she presented and demonstrated the portrayal and reception of firearms in popular culture, she conveyed her passion and expertise for firearms and their histories.

While continuing those studies, Hlebinsky has also begun research in this diverse history to trace the recent increase in public discussions on women and guns. "I'm just happy I can be a part of a community of strong women in the firearms industry and also a member of the industry as a whole," Hlebinsky reflects. "And now to become a firearms curator is such an honor. I'm grateful that I'm a part of such an extraordinary museum."

Since Hlebinsky began her career as a firearms specialist, she has added pistol shooting to her repertoire of hobbies. As for her future, she plans to continue working with firearms in museums. She states, "Additionally I would like to do freelance work as a consultant for small historical societies that have firearms in their collections, but who do not necessarily know how to store, preserve, or handle them safely."

Hlebinsky's main focus in her new position is the reinstallation of the Firearms Museum, tentatively scheduled for summer 2017. "The Center celebrates its 100th Anniversary in 2017; what better time than that to reinterpret the firearms section?" she asks. "The next two years will be filled with planning, focus groups, surveys, interpretation ideas, and research. Our hope is that our efforts shed new light on the role of firearms in American history for all audiences."

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