Hidden Museum

“When I came for my interview, I got lost,” Shannon O’Dell says.

The curator of the U-M’s Sindecuse Museum of Dentistry is the first to admit that it can be rather hard to find. On that first visit, she recalls, “I was a little frustrated, and that was in the back of my mind: way finding really is an issue for this museum.”

O’Dell had never heard of the Sindecuse before taking a job as its assistant curator in 2003, despite having lived eight years in Ann Arbor at that point. Tucked inside a high-ceilinged sunlit atrium deep inside the School of Dentistry, it is easily the best hidden and least known of U-M’s museums. Opened in 1992, the museum is funded by an endowment from Gordon Sindecuse, an alum of the dental school’s class of 1921. O’Dell, who was promoted to curator in 2004, says that dental museums are few and far between in the first place, but Sindecuse is particularly unusual because it has dedicated financial support. “[Other dental museums] exhibits are often up for decades,” she says. “We have a more active program.”

The museum has become even more active over the past two years. In 2011, U-M permitted the museum to hang lamppost banners outside the dental school (a change that dental school communications director Sharon Grayden calls a “godsend” for increased traffic). The same year, the museum hired a collections coordinator, freeing O’Dell up to improve the museum’s exhibits with more modern, interpretive content. An older display of toothbrushes in a hall adjacent to the main atrium is certainly fascinating; the advertisement for one brush proclaims that it’s “cleaner and stronger than animal bristle.” But it pales in comparison to recently installed exhibits on dental hygiene and female dentists, which feature attractive, high-quality signage that tells a story about the exhibited artifacts.

The items on display represent only about six percent of the museum’s formidable collection of over 18,000 artifacts, most of which are stored on-site. The collection includes dental chairs, toothpaste and tooth powder containers, a bevy of dental tools, and more, with artifacts dating as far back as 1850. Asked if the collection has a “crown jewel,” O’Dell points out an early X-ray unit created by U-M alum William Thwaites around 1922. The wood-paneled, cylindrical machine was touted for its safety because it enclosed the live wires that were often exposed on early X-ray devices. Patients pressed their faces to an aperture on the machine to have an image taken. However, Thwaites got nose cancer from overexposing his own machine and was arrested for malpractice after claiming to treat patients’ skin lesions with it. “In the picture of him at the police station, he’s sixty-three years old,” O’Dell says. “You can see there are wires coming around his face and one over his head, and you can see it must be holding a prosthetic nose.”

O’Dell says the majority of museum visitors are in the dental profession or have family members in the dental school. Nonetheless, the museum aims for a lay audience. “We want to be inclusive of as many people as we can,” O’Dell says. And, she says, the dental neophytes who do stop by are “curious and fascinated.”

Though the university lists the museum’s address as the monolithic main dental building on North University; it’s actually in the smaller Art Deco structure facing Fletcher. Touch screen ways-finding systems also make the search easier. But don’t be afraid to ask for directions.

Shannon O’Dell says dental museums are rare, and those with active exhibit programs are even rarer. An endowment from alum Gordon Sindecuse lets the U-M museum she curates bring the history of the profession to life.