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# Preservation Perspectives: The Magic of Outreach

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# THE MAGIC OF Outreach

## PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVES

BY BILL STOLZ • ARCHIVIST, WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

All of us in the archival world have wonderful collections in our repositories, but often these collections sit on the shelves and are rarely seen. One of the biggest hurdles, alongside preservation and care, is raising awareness of who you are and what you have. Outreach is a wonderful tool to promote, protect, and connect the community to the collections. If you can connect with people, you gain users, advocates, and potential donors. In this age of shrinking budgets, this is also a great way to illustrate why your facility and collections are vital to the specific community you represent.

Outreach can be as simple or complex as you want it to be, but it really only requires creativity and time commitment. We all have an audience, usually just outside the door or down the street, for our materials, and it is only a matter of communication and persistence to connect the user and the collections. Every town, city, or county has a school and there are also after

school and summer programs that are always seeking new and interesting opportunities for their participants. And don't forget adults of all ages. There are civic and fraternal organizations, book discussion groups, local historical societies, and many more. First, think about what you and, if you are lucky, your colleagues feel comfortable doing and, given funding and time, what type of programming will work best for the organization. Do you enjoy public speaking? Historical research? Do you have a background in K-12 education? Use your strengths and knowledge to build and promote outreach activities that will not stretch the budget or clock, but will expand and promote the collections.

Here are some successful ideas/programs that I have implemented and/or used throughout my career.

- Create a local history speaker series, hold a brown bag lunch learning series, or invite local authors to speak. All of us enjoy learning about the communities we live in, and a pres-



Students Viewing Primary Source Material

entation on a specific topic, notorious or glorious, can bring people in the door.

- Collaborate with the local public library to present about your repository or, even better, local history. Partner on the local history speaker series/local author talks. Public libraries are always looking for speakers and will often do the advertising and provide the space.
- Present at a senior center. Senior centers have a need for programs, especially those that are educational and tied to the community. These audiences are keen to learn and share. Last year I worked with a local senior center to present quick, 15-20 minute, local history talks for the center's weekly lunches, and each session was well-attended and sparked great discussion.
- Students, students, students. Work with the local school district, university, or after school program to promote your collections as a resource for the curriculum (Kentucky history), research papers, projects (think National History Day), and so on. For students it can be anything from a formal visit to a historical scavenger hunt about local history (questions can range from identifying the statue in the town square to what year the town or county was founded).
- Take people for a walk. Look around your town or county. Do you have famous or infamous past residents? Do you have a historic district with significant homes, churches, and buildings? And what about the local cemetery? Organize and lead historic walks of your community, neighborhood, or a nearby cemetery. These can be done weekly, monthly, or annually depending on your schedule and staff. Utilize collections to create narratives for walking tours. Cemeteries can be very supportive of walking tours and this is a wonderful way to research and tell the stories of ordinary people who have been forgotten by time.

- Host an open house. Yes, invite the community in for a special showing of your facility, or highlight a specific collection. This takes some planning, some funds for refreshments, and possibly a weekend afternoon, if the library is not open. Publicize the event on social media and in the local press, and then open the doors.
- Utilize social media! Twitter, Facebook, and blogs are great tools to share your message, promote collections, and advertise upcoming events. Think about posting old images on "Throwback Thursday," sharing new discoveries, or writing about a favorite item or story from the stacks. The wonderful thing about social media is that you create the content when you want, or have the time, to create it.

Most of these ideas can be done on a shoestring budget and are a great way to involve and collaborate with staff or volunteers. Each of us has a talent or interest that can be utilized for outreach programming. Maybe you have a talented writer on staff (think blogs) or another that loves to present or perform (think presentations or tours).

Many times, when we speak in the community or to a visiting school group, this is the first introduction to archives and primary source material for most, if not all, in the audience. This is where you see the magic of outreach, the spark of excitement when a student connects with historic documents, or people applauding at the story behind the old house on Main Street. It is these connections that create a potential researcher, donor, volunteer, and/or advocate, and strengthen your mission and purpose.

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Crowd at Open House