Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Reviving an Annual Event: Increasing Community Engagement and Responding to COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Librarians often use creativity to modify existing events or create new ones in response to patron needs. Six months into my first librarian position, I took over a long-standing Poem in Your Pocket library event from a colleague. I began planning the event in January 2020, before the pandemic, and had to pivot several times over the past three years of organizing the event in response to community needs, personal needs, and pandemic related restrictions. I will discuss how I revived the existing Poem in Your Pocket event into a community-authored celebration, and how the feedback I have received from faculty, students, and community members has solidified my drive to continue organizing this event, despite taking on more responsibilities within my job.

KEYWORDS

Academic libraries, library programming, virtual community, innovation, early-career, community engagement

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Libraries have a long history of innovation. We saw a surge in library creativity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the changing needs of patrons (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2022). This column shares my experience reviving a Poem in Your Pocket event as an early-career librarian who received her MSLIS in May 2019 and started a tenure-track position in July 2019.

Background of the Event

I was approached by a colleague in January 2020 about taking over the library's long-standing Poem in Your Pocket event. Historically, the event was held in-person with published poems printed on old catalog cards. When I started my position, I was learning about the reappointment, promotion, and tenure process and I put pressure on myself to take on additional responsibilities to demonstrate my knowledge as a new librarian. I agreed to take over the event, as it connected with my English liaison responsibilities.
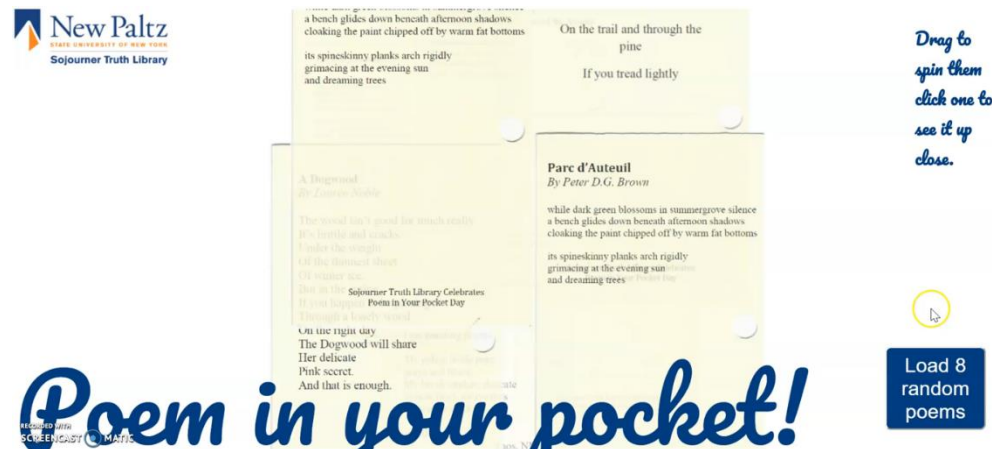
I envisioned making several changes to the event, including diversifying the poems and poets selected, soliciting community-authored poetry, and hosting the event throughout April, which is National Poetry Month. We have a wonderful creative writing program on our campus and a rich artist community in the Hudson Valley. I wanted to showcase the creativity within the community while also creating an opportunity for me to connect with more faculty, staff, students, and community members.

On March 16, 2020, former New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo directed all nonessential employees to work from home. The library closed shortly after, on March 20th. April was less than 2 weeks away, and I had planned and promoted the event since January. I had to pivot.

A Virtual Community Poetry Celebration

When I began the process of pivoting the poetry celebration, I told myself two things: do my best and be creative. I had already received dozens of community-authored poems and I felt it was important to showcase their work, especially during this time of uncertainty.

Our library website had a new book feature that resembled a tornado (see Figure 1). I was looking at it on one of the first days working from home and emailed our library technology team to ask if there was a way to create a spinning tornado of poems. My colleague, Gary Oliver, said it was possible for him to modify the feature. We created a Word document with a catalog card background, and a student employee with experience in design helped me format the poems. We sent Gary the files and he created the spinning pocket poem tornado, equipped with a "random poem" generator button and an option to pop out poems to full screen (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Screenshot of the New Book Tornado

Figure 2

Screenshot of 2020 Poem in Your Pocket Spinning Poem Tornado

The virtual Poem in Your Pocket tornado was shared on our faculty/staff listserv and our campus daily newsletter. I was proud that we were able to work collaboratively to adapt to the changing circumstances.

Feedback and Improving

I received a tremendous amount of feedback from the community, primarily from faculty and staff. Feedback included "This is so wonderful. I really enjoyed clicking through these. Please give my thanks to the creative team," and "Thank you for still putting this event on. It is always one of the highlights of my spring semester." The feedback fueled my desire to keep

organizing the celebration despite the pressure of my first upcoming promotion and reappointment review in 2021.

In 2021, I received feedback from faculty and community members that it was difficult to find their poems within the spinning tornado. In response, we kept the spinning poem tornado, but added a library guide with PDFs of the poems (see Figure 3). Additionally, I asked my colleague who runs the library's social media internship to promote the call for poem submissions on Instagram, which resulted in more student submissions. In total, I received over 80 poems from faculty, staff, students, and community members. I established a quick workflow that allowed me to format the poems without student employee support. Feedback included "Yay, it came out great!!! I had so much enjoyment reading these. Thanks to you and your team for all this work" and "Thank you for coordinating this wonderful virtual exhibit."

Figure 3

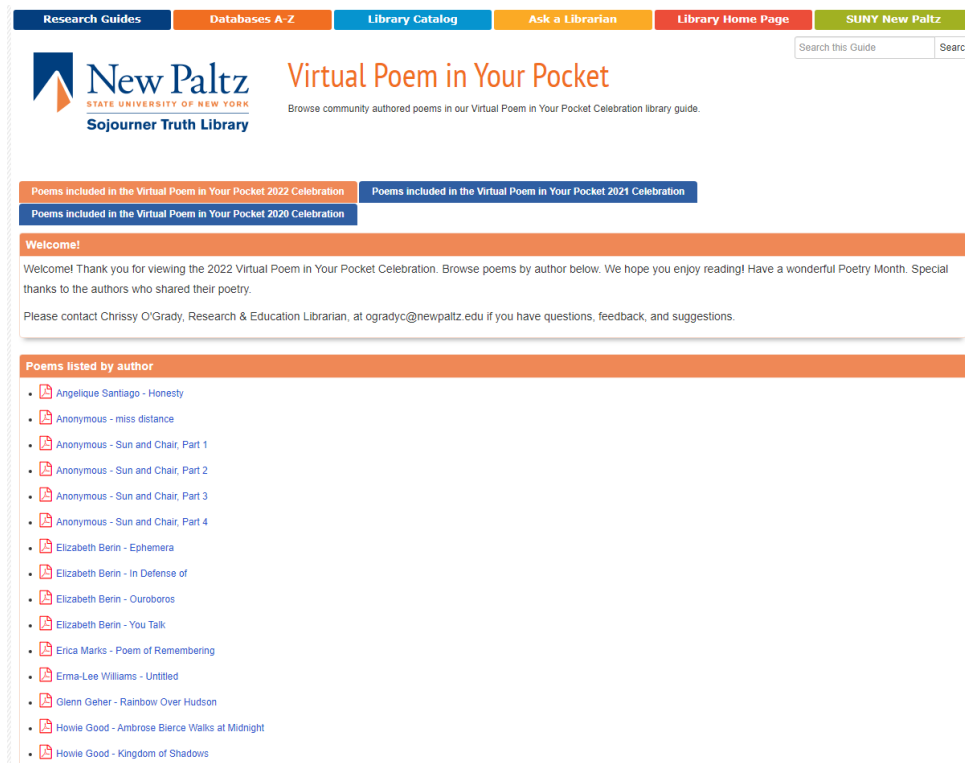*Screenshot of 2021 Poem in Your Pocket Spinning Poem Tornado*

In 2022, I removed the spinning poem tornado and showcased the celebration entirely on the library guide (see Figure 4). I had also just taken on the role of Instruction Program Coordinator at my library and wanted to better balance my responsibilities. Removing the spinning tornado reduced not only my overall workload but also the workload of the library's technology team. I received over 60 poems from faculty, staff, students, and community members. I once again formatted the poems myself using the workflow I created in 2021. Feedback included "LOVE how it all came out—great job with this…and many thanks for this beautiful, community-oriented work!" and "Thank you so much for this wonderful gift! I am sending some of these (and a link to the whole list) out to friends. We need all the poetry we can get in these times!" I was even approached by *The New Paltz Oracle*, the student newspaper, and spoke with one of the reporters about the event. The article included interviews with students who submitted their poetry. They expressed how special it was having their voices

included and the impact of showcasing student authors in the wider community (Nohavicka, 2022).

Figure 4

Screenshot of 2022 Poem in Your Pocket Library Guide

Setting Priorities

This celebration is one of the highlights of my job. No matter what else I add or remove from my plate, I do not plan to stop organizing this event. The impact it has on the community and on myself is paramount. Based on the feedback I received and the continual success of the event, I believe my creative approach to reinvigorating this event has turned it into a valued community celebration that provides a place for students, faculty, staff, and community members to share their passion and creativity.

References

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