

# From Paper to Panel:

by Clare Coleman and  
Megan Thomas

## Turning an Idea into a Traveling Exhibit

When asked if they would be interested in partnering with a local non-profit to create an exhibit for a festival, Clare Coleman and Megan Thomas of Calcasieu Parish Public Library were hesitant. They had never undertaken a project like this before and would have less than three months to complete it, not to mention other projects and renovations they were working on. But in true librarian fashion, they agreed to take on the project. In a span of three months, *Tablet to Tablet: A History of the Written Word* evolved from an abstract idea to a museum quality traveling exhibit that has been featured at three festivals, ten locations, and is booked for eleven more.

The project's concept came from Common Ground, a Lake Charles non-profit that celebrates the diversity and multiculturalism of Southwest Louisiana. They host Culture Fest,

a yearly festival in October that features booths, performances, and food from around the world. In 2015, Common Ground decided they wanted an educational element to Culture Fest, hence reaching out to the library. They wanted to educate the public about the history of the written word and to celebrate books from around the world.

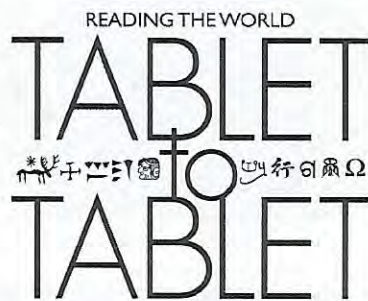
Enter Clare and Megan, SLIS grads from LSU with undergrads in History and ZERO experience in creating exhibits. "To be honest, I don't think Megan or I envisioned such a large exhibit at the beginning. We were just thinking about info placards on a table next to objects and images," said Clare. The Common Ground committee, however, dreamed big and promised to finance whatever we could design so the team got to work.

This team included seven people (three of which were born in other countries: India, Pakistan, and Tanzania). With the concept of "history of books" as their goal, Clare and Megan began to research and soon a structure for the exhibit began to evolve. Two "lightbulb" moments pushed the project forward: when Clare discovered an archived *"History of the Book"* exhibit at St. Thomas University (Florida) which chronicled different formats and when Megan came up with the title *Tablet to Tablet*. "We decided to focus on the format itself, hoping this

would allow us more flexibility in showing how different cultures throughout history have found ways to communicate," said Megan "and we liked being able to connect the past with the present."

From the beginning, they knew they wanted something that would have a life past the event, so a portable exhibit was definitely needed. The library had worked with local artist Erik Jessen on a previous project, so he was happy to join the team when asked. He would be responsible for the graphic design as long as Clare and Megan provided the content and structure. This presented the first hurdle to Clare and Megan: how to gather multi-media information, sort through it, and arrange it in a way where the team could work on the project at any time and anywhere. "We realized that with so little time, we needed to be able to work on the project almost daily. We both had vacations scheduled during the time and we needed a way to keep going even when we weren't at work," said Megan. Google was the obvious choice for the librarians, and so they created shared folders in Google Drive, which provided everything they needed to successfully collaborate with a busy, inter-agency team.

They divided the exhibit into ten panels, the first being an introduction and the remaining nine comprising the following categories: stone tablets, early mediums, papyrus, codex, printing, children's books, audiobooks and ebooks. Clare and Megan created folders for each category and members



Inaugural exhibit at Culture Fest 2015



uploaded their research. Once they had enough content, Clare and Megan began the painstaking process of selecting the best content, editing it, and writing text to correspond with the images. They used Google Slides to share the final content with the artist, who then took their content and designed the final panels. “As Erik was designing the panels, he would share his work via Google Drive and it was exciting to see his process! I found myself checking my phone late at night to see if he’d added anything new that day,” said Clare.

Seeing the content in Google Slides gave Clare and Megan the idea of creating a digital exhibit, and so they did. The digital version made everyone in the team happy because it allowed them to share all the information they had collected, even the content that didn’t fit on the final exhibit panels. This “supplemental material” also found its way into the inaugural exhibit, which included posters, loaned objects, and interactive activities. “The first time we displayed the exhibit at Culture Fest, it was HUGE! It was in a 4,600 square foot space with 13 foot ceilings and we used every bit of that room,” said Clare. [The *digital exhibit* is still available from the Calcasieu Parish Public Library website.]

Another challenge was getting community involvement. The team wanted to create a “World of Books” that displayed books from around the world that had an impact on community members’ lives. Clare and Megan used different ventures to garner community participation. Ranging from television appearances to social media requests for community suggestions, the ideas were pitched to a wide audience for two months. The efforts fell flat. “We were surprised by the lack of response,” said Megan, “We have an actively involved community yet no one seemed to bite the bait!” The team was committed, however, so they researched and reached out to others to create a list of 100 books that they felt had the most impact on humanity. They printed full cover book jackets of each title with brief text about why it was chosen, divided them into global regions, and displayed them on tables decorated to represent each region. Volunteers were available in this section of the exhibit to encourage dialog, asking attendees what titles they thought should be on the tables. At later exhibitions, a poster was displayed near a wall of these titles that asked people to write their suggestions.

Once the exhibit debuted, the community responded. Clare and Megan struggled to field all the questions and feedback. People approached them with ideas, anecdotes, and personal items that related to the topic. “One of the local radio station owners came to us with an exact mini replica of the original Gutenberg press. He offered to loan it to us for the next exhibit



World of Books exhibit at Culture Fest 2015



World of Books exhibit at Lake Charles Historic City Hall



Gutenberg press replica at Lake Charles Historic City Hall

location, where it became a big hit with people who visited that location,” said Megan. Personal books were also brought to the librarians; community members wanted to talk about how their personal item had an impact on their love of reading. “Even though this part of the exhibit hasn’t traveled, it was the most rewarding part for me because I loved seeing people respond to what books were important to them and why,” said Clare, “and it was a pivotal learning point for us. The community needed to visualize the concept before they could fully embrace the exhibit and give their input. We’ve used this knowledge in the community-centered exhibits that we’ve created since.”

After a session at LLA 2016, the librarians started booking it for exhibitions outside the parish. Three





Supplemental posters and loaned objects displayed with exhibit at Sulphur Library

parishes booked from the LLA session: St. Tammany Parish, Allen Parish, and Tangipahoa Parish and they were critical to the start of *Tablet to Tablet's* life as a traveling exhibit. Clare and Megan perfected the skills needed to schedule, support, and transport the exhibit. By 2018, they were able to dedicate more time and energy towards garnering interest and encouraging bookings rather than working out logistics. They took the full exhibit to LLA 2018 with an empty calendar and returned with nine months worth of bookings. "We knew that displaying the entire exhibit at LLA would garner a lot of attention and interest, but we did not expect the high praise or the exclamations of disbelief that two librarians had created such a museum quality exhibit without

any previous experience. Our peers' reactions made every hectic moment worth it," Megan said.

*Tablet to Tablet: A History of the Written Word* is available for free to any library or organization in Louisiana and there are currently openings for 2019. Contact Megan Thomas ([mthomas@calcasieulibrary.org](mailto:mthomas@calcasieulibrary.org)) if you are interested in scheduling this exhibit.

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Calcasieu Parish Public Library

