

Angela Pashia

# Empty Bowls in the library

## Makerspaces meet service

**T**he University of West Georgia (UWG) Ingram Library aims to be a central place for students to congregate, collaborate, study, and relax on campus. Our building was recently renovated with these purposes in mind. It features group spaces, multiuse areas, and comfortable seating areas, along with quiet study areas. The concept of “library as place,” as a third space for social learning, is fairly established.<sup>1</sup> However, developing programming to fit that model can still be a challenge in some academic libraries.

We plan a range of programming to promote the library as the academic nexus of the campus, including many typical library events such as bringing in speakers, hosting exhibits, and hosting an annual showcase of student research projects. In developing new ideas to promote connections between campus and the wider community, we considered trends related to both service learning and makerspaces. A service-learning event would provide an opportunity to collaborate for a good cause and establish the library as a cultural hub on campus, beyond our role as an academic nexus. Makerspaces sound like a fun way to learn, but they can seem intimidating to set up due to the materials and expertise that may be involved.

Partnering with a local community service organization, Carroll County Empty Bowls (CCEB), allowed us to create an event that was both a service learning opportunity and a short-term makerspace, while building connections with the community beyond campus. Community mem-

bers, library faculty and staff, students, and additional campus partners worked together to make these events a success, while having fun making ceramic bowls for a good cause. In fact, these events have been so successful that other entities across campus have sought information on hosting similar events or partnered with us to expand the library workshops.

### Identifying a community partner

Empty Bowls is an international grassroots project to fight hunger in local communities. Members of a community create ceramic bowls to donate to an annual luncheon or dinner event, which the whole community is invited to attend. For a locally determined minimum donation, attendees receive a serving of soup to eat and a bowl to keep to remind them that some members of the community have nothing to fill their own soup bowls—hence the name Empty Bowls. All of the donations go to benefit a local soup kitchen or food pantry.

The grassroots nature of Empty Bowls<sup>2</sup> enables each community to tailor the event to its needs and culture. In some areas, artisan potters create all of the bowls. In western Georgia, CCEB<sup>3</sup> prefers to involve as many members of the community as

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possible at all stages of the fundraising event. Therefore, they encourage community organizations and individuals to host workshops to make and glaze bowls to contribute. This means that there is a huge range of bowls at the auctions—from very simplistic slab-constructed bowls to artisan-crafted wheel-thrown bowls. It also means that a wider range of community members learn about the event, and learn about hunger issues in our community through discussions

during the bowl-making workshops. Carol Boyd, CCEB coordinator of volunteers, describes Empty Bowls as “more than a fundraiser—it brings



Bowls from the bowl-making workshop at the University of West Georgia.

people together and helps to create an awareness of the beauty, the strengths, and the needs in our community.”

This approach works here because of a network of dedicated volunteers who take their time to lead workshops, teaching novices the basics of crafting and decorating slab-constructed bowls. Many of those volunteers have collected an array of tools that they bring for participants to use. In addition, when I first contacted CCEB about hosting a workshop, they had a supply of donated clay to use in community workshops.

### Trying something new

In Fall 2011, I contacted a representative from CCEB asking for information on what is involved in hosting a bowl-making workshop. Boyd responded with a range of options, from simply sending information

and flyers to make the connection with the larger cause if we had the resources to lead the workshop ourselves, to scheduling volunteers to bring supplies and run the workshop for us.

For that first workshop, I had to rely on the expertise and donated materials that CCEB could bring, as the UWG Art department was in the process of moving to a new building and unable to contribute at that time. I provided the space (including purchasing

plastic sheeting to cover the floor and tables) and publicity, while CCEB provided every-

thing else we needed to make the event a success.

We scheduled the event on a Tuesday during the second week of Spring 2012 classes from 1 to 4 p.m. Weekend dates may be preferable at a residential campus, but mid-week seems to be the best time for our student population.

Our first Empty Bowls workshop was a success. Students, faculty, and staff members created 67 bowls to contribute to the CCEB annual luncheon. One professor from the Art department brought two separate classes to participate. Several professors and students came on their own to make bowls. Additionally, a professor from the Mass Communications department brought a class of 17 photojournalism students to observe and document the event. While observing the event, our dean of libraries complimented the event and agreed that

it would be a good idea to host a follow-up workshop so that the students could glaze the bowls they made that day. Since CCEB was low on its supply of glazes at that time, our dean gave us permission for to purchase some glazes to make the follow-up workshop feasible.

We held the workshop to glaze the bowls exactly two weeks later. This was the shortest turn-around CCEB could offer, since the bowls needed to dry, be fired in a kiln, and then cooled before we could glaze them. The annual CCEB luncheon is held on the last Sunday in February, so we were rushing to try to get the bowls completed in time to be included in that event. Since the method of glazing we used (using paint brushes to create colorful designs) usually takes longer than it does to make a bowl, participants glazed only about 50 of the bowls at this event. The remaining bowls went on to be glazed at other events.<sup>4</sup>

The return on investment for this event was very positive. The monetary cost to Ingram Library for the first event was limited to plastic sheeting—two large rolls of thicker plastic sheeting to cover the carpeting and one package of thinner plastic “drop cloths” to cover the tables. The rest of the supplies for the first workshop came from a stock of materials donated for the purpose of getting more members of the community involved in creating bowls to be included at the fundraiser luncheon.

We purchased more than enough glaze for the glazing workshop for around \$100. This limited investment provided three-hour programs on two separate occasions for students to have fun, be creative, interact with faculty members outside of the normal classroom context, contribute some community service, and learn more about issues affecting the local community.

Not all Empty Bowls organizations will have access to donated clay and other supplies. In those cases, it may be possible to get buy-in from other campus entities to contribute. Furthermore, using clay pro-

vided by Empty Bowls is not a sustainable model if the goal is to contribute a meaningful amount to the fundraiser. We want to contribute to serving the community, not drain its resources. It was great for our first set of workshops, which served as the pilot that enabled us to get the buy-in we needed. We leveraged that success to encourage campus entities to provide the supplies for subsequent workshops.

We received positive feedback from a range of stakeholders. The CCEB volunteers repeatedly told me how much they appreciated the opportunity to get UWG students involved, and even just to have the opportunity to spread the word about Empty Bowls. The students who participated thanked us for bringing the event to campus and giving them a chance to play with clay or paint bowls as a study break. Several community members at the annual luncheon commented on how pleased they were to hear that UWG students had made some of the bowls.

### **Building on success**

After hearing about the success we had with the bowl-making and glazing workshops, a new summer bridge program on campus decided to follow our lead in July 2012. They had the funding to purchase clay for the event (instead of relying on donated clay) and were able to get more buy-in from the Art department. CCEB volunteers led the actual workshops, but the Art department agreed to fire the bowls in their kilns and provide the space for the workshops.

I hosted the bowl-making and bowl-glazing series of workshops in the library in fall of both 2012 and 2013, using clay donated by campus entities. Both of these iterations were more successful than the one before.

In Fall 2013, several professors contacted me about bringing their classes to participate. We had higher than expected attendance and exhausted our supply of clay. We increased the number of bowls created slightly with each iteration, but were limited in time, space, and available supplies;

the same is true with the number of bowls glazed each year. There is a wide variation in the amount of time spent on each bowl. A simple bowl can be created in no more than ten minutes, but some participants spend an hour engraving an intricate design into the basic bowl. Likewise, one can paint a very simple design in 10 or 15 minutes, but some participants spend an hour painting an intricate design (whether decorating an intricately carved bowl or using a very basic bowl as a palette for a detailed painting). We could increase the number of bowls created by encouraging simpler designs, but that would detract from this being an opportunity for creativity.

In 2014, I began collaborating with Dustin Killpack, coordinator for Student Volunteer Programs in UWG's Center for Student Involvement. With his connections to student service organizations, attendance at our workshops boomed. In October, we hosted one bowl-making workshop in the library, and he worked with student organizations to organize an additional bowl-making workshop on a Saturday morning.

Combined, these workshops produced about 300 clay bowls, though some broke in the kiln or in transit. We scheduled the library's glazing workshop during a campus Hunger Awareness week in November, but there was no additional student-led glazing workshop due to other events planned for that week. Instead, Killpack helped promote the library event to student organizations.

We had the best attendance yet at this year's glazing workshop and glazed 147 of the bowls. The remaining bowls will go on to be glazed at other workshops. In addition, the Center for Student Involvement is planning to coordinate transportation for students to attend and volunteer at the annual luncheon in February 2015.

## Outcomes

Many students were surprised to see bowl-making and glazing activities in the library. Some students joined in the fun, crafty ac-

tivities as an unexpected study break, while others participated in it as a learning activity associated with their class. They all had an opportunity to interact with members of the community and learn about a community service opportunity that they may not have otherwise learned about, as many students do not have vehicles and have limited interactions with the community beyond walking distance from campus. Students also had a chance to interact with faculty and staff members in a relaxed, informal setting.

These events serve the interests of several groups of stakeholders. CCEB benefits by having more unique bowls to be used at its annual fundraising event while also establishing ties with the university, spreading the word, and getting students, staff, and faculty involved with and vested in the program.

UWG and Ingram Library benefit through the contribution of this event to a vibrant, meaningful campus culture that connects students to the local community, thereby enriching their lives and awareness of the world in which they live. Students further benefit from the opportunity to work with ceramics in a setting that allows creativity and a sense of "play" to flourish in service of a program dedicated to recognizing and helping the less fortunate among us. Finally, as "grown-ups" who had not worked with ceramics since art class in elementary school, we had a lot of fun, and the students seemed to, as well.

## Notes

1. See, for example, B. Fister, "A Third Place for Faculty," on the *Inside Higher Ed* *Inside Higher Ed*. blog "Library Babel Fish," retrieved from <https://www.inside-highered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/third-place-faculty>.
2. [www.emptybowls.net/](http://www.emptybowls.net/).
3. <http://carrollcountyemptybowls.org/>.
4. An alternate method would be to simply dip the piece in a bucket of glaze, so that the entire piece is one color. That is much faster, but much less fun. //