

Outside the Box: *Creative Partnerships for Archival Work, Exhibitions, and Teaching*

by Carla J. Sofka, Connie Frisbee Houde, and Sudarat Musikawong

Carla J. Sofka is Associate Professor of Social Work at Siena College. She may be contacted at csofka@siena.edu.

Connie Frisbee Houde works in Research and Collections at the New York State Museum. She may be contacted at cfrisbee@mail.nysed.gov.

Sudarat Musikawong is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Siena College. She may be contacted at smusikawong@siena.edu.

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please log on to the NAME listserv at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NAME-AAM/>.

Pesky boxes of minimally-catalogued artifacts tucked away in storage are only one of the constraints that can decrease access to collections and limit the way we approach archival tasks and teaching. In this article we will describe a community-based partnership between the New York State Museum (NYSM) and faculty/students at Siena College in Loudonville, NY that met two important needs: 1) creating access to a collection of 9/11 artifacts for study and exhibition; and 2) creating unique opportunities for community-based service learning that engages students in high impact practices.

World Trade Center (WTC) Collecting— Union Square Scrolls

On October 4, 2001, a consortium of museums gathered in New York City to discuss ways in which they could collaborate in documenting and preserving the material and visual culture, the memories, and the symbols of 9/11. The NYSM assumed a leadership role in the documentation and preservation of artifacts from this tragedy. The collection is wide-ranging and comprehensive, including emergency response vehicles, WTC building components, nearly all that remains of two airliners, and countless sympathy items sent to NYC respite areas and firehouses (see Houde, 2008, and <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/wtc/response/memorials.html> for additional information about the collection and the WTC exhibition).

After 9/11, several New York University (NYU) students felt helpless and were unable to find an opportunity to volunteer. Due to the university's proximity to lower Manhattan, the students placed rolls

of paper and markers on the ground at Union Square, a place for spontaneous gatherings and political activism for more than 200 years. Students invited people who gathered to record their feelings. Notes and drawings captured uncensored reactions. The "Union Square Scrolls" created from September 11 to 13 that survived and were saved by N.Y.U. students provide a unique record of the immediate public response to 9/11 and were donated to the NYSM in 2003.

Making Connections with Siena's Curriculum

In the fall of 2002, following an influx of artifacts, curator Craig Williams contacted the history department at Siena College (a Franciscan, undergraduate liberal arts college) to locate interns to assist with cataloguing. Mr. Williams was encouraged to contact Dr. Carla Sofka (Social Work Department) due to her expertise on grief and loss. Following a visit to the museum's exhibition, *World Trade Center: Rescue Recovery Response*, and an explanation of the artifacts available for her research regarding public responses to tragedy, Dr. Sofka recruited social work majors to complete independent study projects that involved cataloging 9/11 artifacts. In conjunction with Mr. Williams and research and collections staff member Connie Frisbee Houde, Dr. Sofka developed a project for her death and dying class to transcribe scrolls while learning about grief and loss-related reactions after 9/11. After joining Siena's Sociology Department, Dr. Sudarat Musikawong was invited to participate because of her interest in public memorialization.



The creation of Union Square scroll H-2003.43.6 dated September 12, 2001. Courtesy of Michael Lorenzini.

The process of transcribing the scrolls evolved, becoming linked with two academic courses (a social work elective and an introductory sociology course) and an Information Literacy Project through Siena's library. Students have also completed independent study projects to explore aspects of the scrolls, e.g. sentiments about immigrants/immigration; translating inscriptions written in Spanish.

Death —The Final Taboo (Social Work 466)

As a result of Dr. Sofka's involvement with the museum, one unit in her elective focused on the public response to 9/11 and explored how the NYSM serves as a "healing space" for individuals coping with tragedy (Sofka, 2009). Following a visit to the WTC exhibition, students were trained to transcribe the scrolls into an ACCESS database file. While transcribing, students considered the following: 1) What grief and loss-related themes are expressed? 2) If individual victims are noted, is information available from the *Portraits of Grief* index created by *The New York Times* (2001) or other online memorial/tribute sites? When asked to consider the pros and cons of exhibiting the scrolls, students noted that learning about raw, immediate reactions to 9/11 would be a significant benefit. The potential for distressing reactions among visitors was the anticipated concern.

The Sociological Perspective (Sociology 101)

The goals for Dr. Musikawong's students involved providing an opportunity to analyze a contemporary sociological

issue on interpersonal, social group, and structural levels using primary source material. Students conducted quantitative analysis using word count frequencies in the combined database and qualitative analysis of the inscriptions around the following themes: public trauma, religion, racism, hatred toward "others," national healing, and patriotism as a social force that can be unifying or dividing. Most students remarked that they experienced the transcription of others' reactions to the attacks in very emotional ways, empathizing with the pain, loss, and anger of others. Due to their young age on September 11, 2001, (4th grade), many students did not understand the role of intolerance and why the U.S. was attacked until they worked with the 9/11 scrolls.

Information Literacy Project

The goal of the Information Literacy Project was to create an electronic archive that facilitated increased access to this primary source for students and researchers in the college and the museum, and for the public. Collaboration between the museum curatorial staff and two instructional technology specialists resulted in the creation of an online course support site that was used by both classes to archive database files and reaction papers/Powerpoint presentations. Brother Walter Liss created a master database that will be available to researchers following transcription of all scrolls, and a program allowing researchers to link to a scroll's

Most students remarked that they experienced the transcription of others' reactions to the attacks in very emotional ways, empathizing with the pain, loss, and anger of others.



Union Square with two identified scrolls: H-20043.30 and H-2003.43.110. Courtesy of Michael Lorenzini.

(continued from page 79)

jpeg image once an inscription of interest is identified. Collaboration continues with the museum's IT staff to add the database to the museum's website. Conversations with library staff about sharing the results of the information literacy project resulted in plans for a joint exhibition on the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

Union Square Scroll Exhibition

To identify scrolls for exhibition, a committee of students, faculty, and staff from both institutions was formed. Siena's director of the Yates Gallery and a Creative Arts faculty member with exhibition planning experience were invited to participate. After viewing

Are Not Enough," The September 11th Anniversary Exhibit, was displayed in the Yates Gallery September 7–30 and in the atrium of the Sarazen Student Union September 7–18. A small display case in Siena Hall, the main academic building, promoted the exhibition. The gallery setting focused on reproductions from high resolution digital captures of selected segments exemplifying the themes. Due to the open nature of Sarazen, facsimiles of full scrolls were exhibited. The Union Square scrolls provided a unique resource to study the range of reactions that were experienced in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The exhibition on the 10th anniversary provided an opportunity for viewers to learn about the reactions of those who were in NYC at the time of the attacks and to reflect upon the long-term impact of this event.

Tables with blank scrolls and markers allowed visitors to record their thoughts and reactions. The "anniversary scrolls" will provide an opportunity for future students and scholars to compare reactions to and perceptions of these events 10 years later.

There was not sufficient time between the opening of the exhibition and the publication of this article

to access the visitors' responses. The organizers hoped that the blank scrolls would be one outlet for visitors with strong reactions to record their thoughts and feelings. The Editor

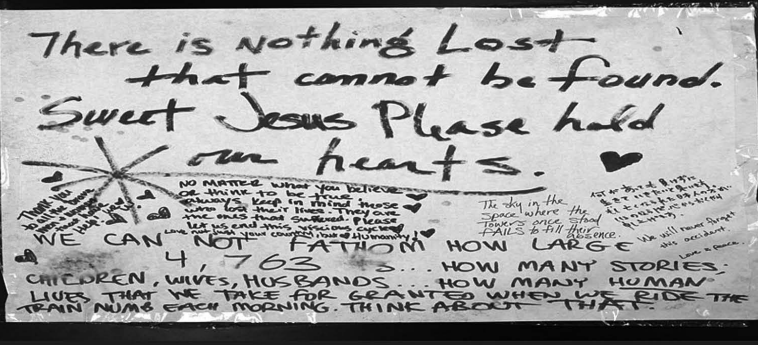
The 9/11 Scrolls

View

Inscription Text
 NO MATTER What you believe OR think to be true, always keep in mind those who lost their lives. They are the ones that suffered. Please let us end this vicious cycle LOVE not just your country, but [heart] Humanity!

Location, Color & Utensil
 center red marker

© Siena College, NY State Museum 2011



Screen capture of the searchable ACCESS database, available to researchers following transcription. Courtesy of Brother Walter Liss (Siena College) and New York State Museum.

the scrolls, the committee members identified the following themes that should be reflected: war and peace; healing; religion/spirituality; patriotism/nationalism; grief and loss; international issues/immigration/diversity; and visually-appealing/artistically interesting images. The exhibition, "Sometimes Words



Exhibit “Sometimes Words Are Not Enough,” The September 11th Anniversary Exhibit held in the Yates Gallery at Siena College.

In conjunction with the exhibition, interdisciplinary programming exploring the diversity-oriented and cross-cultural implications of 9/11 was sponsored by the Damietta Cross-Cultural Center. A memorial service planned by the chaplain’s office commemorated the deaths of those who died on 9/11, including 12 members of the Siena family memorialized in Foy Hall.

Challenges

The biggest challenge to this project involved the technology. The incompatibility of programs across various computer systems made the first semester of transcriptions a real trial. After Siena’s IT staff eliminated some of the initial bugs, we were able to concentrate on the data itself. Unfortunately, detailed instructions were only loosely followed by some students. We then recognized the need for a data coordinator who could check the consistency of the students’ entries. Receiving Siena Summer Scholars funding facilitated completion of the project.

While this process began with collaborative efforts among Mr. Williams, Ms. Frisbee Houde, and Dr. Sofka, the collaboration grew to involve representatives from the NYSM and seven departments at Siena. Creative sharing of resources (mainly technology and time) was a crucial component of this collaboration, with Siena being able to contribute additional technology staff and financial resources for the exhibition.

Conclusion

This collaborative project between Siena and the NYSM recognizes and honors the breadth of connectivity across multiple disciplines of study and artifacts collected

by museums. Rich opportunities for collaboration can occur across multiple components of a college campus that include various academic disciplines, the library, IT staff, and student-life oriented programs. Campus programs designed to foster community engagement or academic service learning initiatives can also serve as a resource.

This partnership was mutually beneficial, facilitating the shared goal of both institutions to form community partnerships. While the project fulfilled the core priorities of the NYSM (the advancement of knowledge through collections-based research, serving the public through the proper stewardship of its collection, and the generation, dissemination and application of knowledge) it also facilitated several components of Siena’s strategic plan to emphasize student-centered education and to promote student engagement and public service.

By thinking outside the box about creative partnerships, the museum gained access to person-power, expertise, and interdisciplinary collaboration, with the end results making the collection more accessible to a wide audience. Our partnership has provided unique opportunities for Siena’s students to gain “real” exposure to information about a historically significant event; for faculty to conduct research on unique primary sources; for visitors to view the scrolls on exhibit; and for those who will now be able to access electronically the collection that is no longer “hidden in boxes.” ☀

References:

- Frisbee Houde, C. (2008, Fall). To preserve and protect. *Legacy*, 4(2),12-16. (Available online at www.nysm.nysed.gov/information/aboutus/legacy/legacyvol4n2.pdf).
- The New York Times*. (2001). Retrieved June 2011 from http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/newyorkandregion/series/portraits_of_grief/index.html).
- Sofka, C.J. (2009). History and healing: Museums as healing spaces. *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 2(4), 79-90.

The biggest challenge to this project involved the technology.