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Libraries Collect COVID-19 Stories in Quaranzines

Gina Murrell

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During COVID-19, Libraries Create, Collect Quaranzines

By Gina Murrell

Across the nation, libraries big and small are embracing the quaranzine. A portmanteau of “quarantine” and “zine,” the quaranzine is a creative outlet that allows individuals and communities to process difficult thoughts and emotions concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Zines, do-it-yourself publications traditionally produced in print for a limited audience, have for decades been a form of esoteric self-expression. However, the quaranzine is widely emerging as an artistic, therapeutic way to cope with this unique and trying time in history.

“When the going gets tough, the tough get arty,” observed Diane Kresh, Library Director, Arlington Public Library, VA, in her introduction to her library’s Quaranzine, an online zine comprised of contributions from the local community and published weekly on the library’s website. Liz Laribee, APL’s Programs and Partnerships Librarian, proposed the idea of Quaranzine. “I had the initial thought, and I developed the structure of the program,” Laribee said. “But the decisions made about it and the actual construction of the publication is a group project through and through.” When presented with the idea of Quaranzine, Kresh said, “The proposal came to me fully baked. I consider myself to be an artsy type and found the idea immensely appealing.”

An editorial board is in charge of APL’s Quaranzine. Laribee: “Once getting the go-ahead to pursue the idea, I reached out to a few staff members for their advice for who on staff might be interested and available to work on Quaranzine, and then I reached out to those individuals. The editorial board consists of Katelyn Attanasio, Brit Austin, Hannah Axt, Ruth Compton, Clea Counts, Deborah Khuanghlawn, Janelle Ortiz, Peg

Owen, Alex Zealand, and me. The editorial board looks at and discusses each submission.”

Ortiz, Library Associate, says: “Criteria were limited due to the format of the zine existing online. Submissions need to exist in a 2D photographic format, have the ability to be scanned or be some sort of Word document or PDF. For this reason, we are a bit picky about image quality. Images need to be clear. We can’t accept audio or video submissions either. This seemed to be a natural decision because it would increase workflow, as well as we wanted a more uniform layout on the zine’s webpage.”

So far, submissions to Quaranzine have ranged from poetry to collages, essays to paintings, photographs to drawings, and comics to postcards. For the inaugural issue of Quaranzine, APL staff created all of the submissions; in subsequent issues of Quaranzine, however, the vast majority of submissions have come from the local communities. “We received over 300 submissions in the first two weeks,” said Laribee, “as well as dozens of comments and emails of support from staff and the larger community.” Submissions are sought through the library’s website and social media. “Additionally, we encourage the editorial board and contributors to share widely within their own networks. The submissions we’ve received are a real snapshot of the diversity in our community,” said Laribee.

According to Laribee, Arlington Public Library will publish Quaranzine for as long as the library’s branches remain physically closed during the pandemic. “Once the project is complete,” said Laribee, “we do have a plan to include the printed versions of each edition in our Center for Local History’s archive. We will also make the digital versions available through PDF so that individuals can print copies for themselves.”

“I think having this will serve as a time capsule in the future,” said Ortiz. “This project is documenting how our community, and even on a larger scale the entire D.C. metropolitan area, has been dealing with the pandemic.” Echoing Ortiz and Larabee’s sentiments, Kresh said, “Quaranzine helps all of come to terms with the times we’re living in. And it complements our work underway to collect objects, diaries, and the like from the community for our Center for Local History. COVID-19 will pass – eventually – yet stories and collected memories will remain.”

At other US libraries, COVID-19-related zines are actively being collected and archived, especially at college and university libraries. One of these libraries is Barnard Zine Library at Barnard College in New York City. Jenna Freedman, Zine Librarian at Barnard, said, “This is such a strange and harrowing time. I think it’s important to document it—and self-document it.” Barnard Zine Library specifically reached out to women and nonbinary creators who made zines documenting COVID-19. “I started off with broad asks on social media and our website, but that passive approach doesn’t find everyone or make people feel invited,” said Freedman. “Therefore, I asked my student workers, Mikako Murphy and Rita Nguyen, to follow hashtags #quaranzines and #quaranzinefest on Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter. They also reached out via Facebook quaranzine groups and pages. They had the most success on Instagram.... It’s the most popular platform for today’s zine makers.” The response has been tremendous (“Most people we reach out to are jazzed to participate,” said Freedman), with over 70 COVID-19-related zines in the collection in under two months after the initial call for submissions. “So far, you can see how a number of the zines discuss anti-Asian racism, information sharing (DIY mask making, urban gardening, and tarot reading, to name a

diverse few), and feelings of fear and loneliness,” said Freedman. “A Barnard student made a zine about the food her family left by the bedroom door of her self-isolating sister, who had returned from study abroad.” These are the stories that often go unheard in the mainstream. Zines have long existed as a medium for non-mainstream voices, and quaranzines are no different in that regard. “People who make zines aren’t the same people as the ones who are reporting on pandemic life on TV, in the newspaper, and in other outlets, and they have different stories to tell.”

Another academic library collecting COVID-19 stories in the form of zines is the Special Collections Library at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA. Rich Dana, Olson Graduate Research Assistant for Special Collections, originated the quaranzine project at the library. “‘Quaranzines’ is a [word] that sprang up simultaneously all over,” said Dana. Through emails and a Facebook Group (“Social Distance Quara-zine! Collective zine-making in the age of COVID-19”) that he started, Dana got the word out about the zine project. The response has “been strong,” said Dana. “A lot of people have sent stuff here to my home, and I’m not even sure how much is waiting for us at the library. People understand that their zines are part of the documentation of life under COVID-19.” Currently, there are 26 collections in the Zine & Amateur Press Collections at the University of Iowa. “The quaranzines will be their own, non-circulating collection,” said Dana. “Like other Special Collections materials, they will be available to all patrons in the reading room.” When expressing his hopes for the new quaranzine collection, Dana said, “I hope my contribution helps people in the future understand who we were as zine makers, as individuals, as society, and helps them avoid some tragedy.”