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## Six Word Memoirs Project

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In my undergraduate Public History survey course in the fall 2015 semester, we read Allison Bechdel's graphic novel autobiography, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. In her acknowledgements to *Fun Home*, Bechdel writes: "Thanks to Helen, Christian and John Bechdel for not trying to stop me from writing this book." In class, we discussed what this means. After some discussion, we came to the conclusion that Bechdel was thanking her mother and siblings for not challenging her story of the events that led to her father's death, or of her childhood experiences with her father. This, of course, reveals the fact that perhaps her narrative of the events is not entirely reliable. Perhaps her conclusions about her father are inaccurate? Perhaps she is not a reliable narrator, after all? Perhaps her siblings would tell a different story? And her mother an entirely different one again? This led to a discussion about the nature of memory and autobiography.

In our memories, we are the stars of our own movies. The stories we tell ourselves feature us, in the centre of the narrative. This

is not surprising, of course, as we experience the world from one particular point-of-view: our own. Think of an event you shared with someone: your memories of it will differ, in some cases in minor details, but in others, in major details. Blame or credit will shift. Even the sequence of events may differ between the two of you. But our memories are also carefully curated. We reconstruct and revise our memories all the time. In some cases, this is entirely unconscious, we are not aware of this revision, but it happens as new data emerges, and new experiences happen. In other cases, we carefully revise and reconstruct our memories to make ourselves look better, or even to make ourselves the victim of a sequence of events.

Autobiographies emerge from memory. And not surprisingly, autobiographies are carefully curated stories wherein the author reconstitutes his or her experiences. Or omits some. Or edits out details from an event or memory.

With this in mind, we approached our major project, the Six Word Memoirs. The idea of the Six Word Memoirs comes from [\*Smith Magazine\*](#) in New York City. The idea is based on the first known six word memoir, by Ernest Hemingway: “For sale. Baby shoes. Never used.” From Hemingway’s very sad memoir, the people at *Smith*

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realized that a lot can be said in six words. Six word memoirs can be profound and sad like Hemingway's. Or they can be pithy and fun. Or anything in between.

We created a website for our project. And we fanned out to collect the six word memoirs of the community of the University of North Alabama. We approached my colleagues in various departments for permission to come into their classes to collect memoirs. We approached the deans and senior administration of UNA, up to President Kitts. And we asked support staff and the police to participate. We set up a table in the GUC to collect memoirs in exchange for cookies. People contributed their memoirs on paper in these situations, or they went to our website and left them there. One of my students collected memoirs on YikYak.

In about three weeks, we collected some 600 or so memoirs. We then faced curatorial decisions: What do we do with memoirs that are obscene? Or ones that contain cuss words? Or references to drink and drugs? And so on. What about ones that aren't six words long? We decided, in the end, memoirs that weren't six words were automatically excluded. We decided to leave in cuss words and reference to drinking, at least to an extent. We did not include obvious

references to drugs. Then we had to decide how to and where to display them. Our original ideas for outdoor, multi-locational exhibits had to be reigned in, in part because we could not get permission to use certain parts of campus, but also because the weather turned cold and wet for a few weeks. So, we re-grouped and created one outdoor exhibit outside the new Science and Technology Building on campus. The other was mounted in the Library Commons.

We opened the exhibit right after Thanksgiving as we all limped towards the end of a long semester. Jennifer Edwards of the Florence *Times-Daily* came to see our exhibit and we ended up in the newspaper. This project was a wonderful eye-opener for all of us. We were amazed and overwhelmed by the response from the UNA community. But we were equally overwhelmed by the honesty of our respondents, by what they said in six words. Some were funny. Some were pithy. But many of them were deep and heavy. My students and I were reminded that everyone has their own story, and we are not in a position to judge others. We don't know their stories. We don't know why they're happy or sad. Or why they're rude or polite. We need to respect others.

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I was hoping we would learn something about autobiography and memory in the process. Memory, at both the societal and individual level, is what fascinates me as a scholar. I was also hoping that we could perform a service for the campus community.

University is hard, especially for freshmen. I still remember my first year of university and the alienation and confusion that came with it. I can see my freshman students get overwhelmed at negotiating an entirely new system. I understand how students at all levels of university can get alienated and feel lost. I hoped that by collecting these memoirs and exhibiting them, we could show those who felt a little lost or alienated that they were not alone, that others felt that way. And maybe that would be enough to help them begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I think I speak for my students that this was a transformational experience for us all. We learned a lot about memory and autobiography, which were my pedagogical goals, of course. But, perhaps more importantly, we learned a lot about human nature and about the people we share the UNA community with.

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