

Activism Exhibit Merges Past and Present

Universities don't exist in a bubble. As students around the world react to social justice movements and engage in activism, so have the students at Grand Valley State University. The "Voices of GVSU: Activism through the Decades" exhibit highlighted examples of sit-ins, protests, and activism by Grand Valley students and prompted visitors to think about their own role in the public sphere.

"The exhibit gives students using the library an opportunity to glimpse into the past to see what students were doing and also for them to think about what activism means to them today," said Kimberly McKee, Director of the Kutsche Office of Local History. The exhibit is part of the Kutsche Office project "Histories of Student Activism at GVSU."

The exhibit was held in the exhibition space of the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons in February of 2017.

Sponsored by the Kutsche Office of Local History, Special Collections and University

Archives, and the Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarship, the exhibit explored the university's archival collections to discover the ways in which Grand Valley students had participated in activism.

In addition to the exhibit, the Kutsche Office of Local History hosted two complementary events to further engage students. The events included a talk by Associate Professor of History Louis Moore about contemporary activism in Grand Rapids and student panelists discussing their experiences in contemporary activism. The events underscored how the content in the exhibit could be applicable today.

"We are living, breathing people who are engaged in history," McKee said. "History happens all around us. It's not in the past. It's happening today."

Student media preserved by University Archives was used as the primary lens for documenting activism, and past issues of the Grand Valley Lanthorn

filled the exhibition space. Kutsche Office undergraduate research assistant Andrew



Collier helped McKee search through all this information.

During the research, it became clear to McKee that these would be great articles to share with the student community. Student publications like the Grand Valley Lanthorn allowed McKee and Collier to show how students specifically understood the time period and how they preserved it.

The exhibition space in the Mary Idema Pew Library is intended to host multidisciplinary visual displays which engage a broad student audience. By using history recorded from a student perspective, "Voices of GVSU: Activism through the Decades" fit perfectly into University Libraries' goal to use the space as a vehicle for planned and serendipitous learning.

Collier, a senior at Grand Valley, said they decided to present their research





***“We are living,
breathing people
who are engaged
in history. History
happens all around us.
It’s not in the past.
It’s happening today.”***

Kimberly McKee

Director of the Kutsche Office of Local History

through the medium of an exhibit to reach and engage students.

“This way, students can really see the history of student activism so they can understand that students have a voice, and can use it,” Collier said. “The library has high foot-traffic, it’s on campus, and the exhibit is free. Students can come to the library, look at the exhibit, and reflect on the history.”

After reflecting on the history, the exhibit asked students to answer the question, “What does activism mean to you?” McKee said she hoped this question would bring students to think about the present and consider the varying definitions of activism.

“When we start thinking about higher education and activism, it’s about empowering students to see themselves

both as knowledge producers and change makers,” McKee said. “Students represent a huge segment of the population nationally, so we’re thinking about how students can become socially engaged and politically engaged around an issue that they’re passionate about.”

PHOTOS: *Grand Valley students demonstrate during the Vietnam War.*