A DIY Collection

By Jenna Freedman

Chris Dodge, a renowned alternative pressologist and the librarian at Une magazine, has been known to say, "Every library should be a special library." At Barnard College, in order to meet this challenge, we decided in summer 2003 to start a collection of underground publications known as zines (rhymes with spleens). By 2004, we were finally cataloging and shelving them, and two years later we've got 1500-plus unique zine issues in our stacks, archives, or awaiting processing. These independent publications are used by undergraduates for fun and research. The collection's other readers include faculty and doctoral students from other institutions, library school students, authors, and people who just like the things. Here's how we set up our collection at Barnard.

The proposal

Since zines are a nontraditional medium and potentially a little scary to administrators, I recommend a full-on, cover-every-possibility proposal. I presented seven detailed pages to my dean, dealing with the what, why, how, and how much of zine collecting, all within the context of collection development, processing, access, preservation, and budgeting. I also included a literature review, examined the advantages and disadvantages, and came up with an implementation plan. (A revised version of the proposal is available at www.barnard.edu/zines/proposal.htm.)

In addition to selling the concept of zines as the exuberant, unusual, and vital primary source documents that they are, you'll need to explain how they fit in your collection. It's not just why you should collect zines; it's why you should collect these zines. Some libraries don't specify which zines they'll take; they're more interested in cost and volume. That's a perfectly valid approach for a popular collection. However, research collections will serve librarianship better by selecting by topic or genre. Don't start a "local" collection unless you're at a historical society or if local history is already an emphasis at your library. Zines are not easily collected by region: they are not sold that way; they don't contain the bibliographic data that even tells you where they are published; and zinesters move a lot. Do everyone a favor by collecting and preserving by genre (e.g., mamazines, personal zines, DIY zines, teen zines, music fanzines, transgender zines, Christian zines, etc.).

Buying zines

Acquiring zines is a unique experience. There aren't traditional review sources, distributors, or net 30 payment options. There are, however, zines that review zines, also called metazines, such as Broken Pencil (really a full-fledged magazine), Xenography Debt, and Zine World. There are lots of others, but I discourage zine selectors from relying on reviews in the same way they do for other materials. Zine print runs are small, and there aren't enough of us collecting them to justify everyone buying the same items.

Zines also have their own distributors, known in the biz as distros. There's an excellent list of them on the Zine Street site (see Resources, p. 37). Perhaps the biggest distro is Microcosm Publishing. It's one of the few that takes credit cards, along with PayPal (a credit card payment service used by many zine publishers and distributors). Speaking of payment, to purchase zines, you'll need to figure out how to pay someone who lives in another state and doesn't have a bank account. Try to talk accounts payable into being open-minded about sending cash through the mail.

Truly, though, it's best to buy zines in person. Many independent bookstores like Quimby's in Chicago and Reading Frenzy in Portland, OR, and most Infoshops sell them. There are many regional zine festivals that provide excellent opportunities for shopping and learning.

LIBLIT

By Alycia Sellie

Since becoming addicted to zines, I have discovered a subset that has consumed my affections far more than any other: those made by and about library workers. These intriguing publications offer a great look into the lives of working professionals, as well as LIS students. In creating the "Library Workers Zine Collection" at the SLIS library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, I have come across a few of the most recent and most interesting works that others in the field will enjoy. If your favorite zine or the one you created isn't listed, please get in touch. I'd love to add a copy to our SLIS library collection!

CLUTCH is a daily diary in comic form that highlights Clutch McBastard’s experiences working in the zine capital of the world (Portland, OR) at the Independent Publishing Resource Center’s zine library. Highly

Alycia Sellie, Graduate, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, May 2006, and founder of the Madison Zine Fest
The cataloging challenge
Cataloging may well be the biggest dilemma you’ll have with zines. Julie Bartel’s book From A to Zine covers this admirably. The main issue to wrestle with is standalone catalog vs. OPAC. I went for the latter because I desperately want the collection to be viewed as an integral part of our holdings and for zines to become increasingly visible to library users worldwide. Our zines’ presence in WorldCat has already yielded interlibrary loan requests.

Access and preservation
Our zines are assigned a Cutter that results in their being shelved by author and by title if there is no author. Zines tend to be flimsy, so you may wish to consider housing them in comic book or magazine covers. Barnard’s stacks zines are about to move from Princeton files to clear plastic zigzag shelving. They are barcoded (usually covering some art or text), Tattle-Tape™ ed, and spine-labeled (despite their lack of spines). This is fine for the stacks, but what if you want to check one out? Where does the checkout stamp go on an object with no room even for a barcode? Many libraries use the “checking out the for a personal letter. dwanzine@hotmail.com

I dreamed I was assertive discusses everything from infertility to mix tapes and has a great reading list and a tiny yellow envelope glued to its final page filled with "haiku tributes to the things I love and loathe." I DREAMED I WAS ASSERTIVE discusses everything from infertility to mix tapes and has a great reading list and a tiny yellow envelope glued to its final page filled with "haiku tributes to the things I love and loathe." I DREAMED I WAS ASSERTIVE discusses everything from infertility to mix tapes and has a great reading list and a tiny yellow envelope glued to its final page filled with "haiku tributes to the things I love and loathe." I DREAMED I WAS ASSERTIVE discusses everything from infertility to mix tapes and has a great reading list and a tiny yellow envelope glued to its final page filled with "haiku tributes to the things I love and loathe."
envelope or bag” trick. Even more libraries choose not to circulate zines on the grounds that they’re ephemeral or fragile, short enough to read or photocopy on-site, or part of special collections.

You’ll notice I refer to “stacks zines.” Thanks to a suggestion from Jim Danky at the Wisconsin Historical Society, we collect two copies whenever possible. We preserve one in acid-free file folders in our climate-controlled archives and make the second available for photocopying, barcoding, and other abuses—thus, stacks zines and archives zines.

I haven’t addressed what to do with all of the extras that come with zines—free-floating buttons, CDs, condoms, stickers, teabags, etc. That’s because I don’t know. When you get this figured out, please tell me what you did.

Cost it out

Typical zines cost $1–$2. Even if you’re buying two issues of each, as we are, you can establish a respectable starter collection for $500. If you make a request on zineinterest list, you’ll probably receive a few grab bags of largesse that won’t cost you anything but postage. What can be expensive is the furniture to display the zines, so browse a few catalogs to price display shelves before you submit your budget request.

Also consider including travel in the budget. Attending zine events such as the Allied Media Conference in Bowling Green, OH, is invaluable for making connections with zine publishers and for buying zines. Registration and housing will cost you under $100 for the weekend, and you’ll get a tour of the wonderful Pop Culture collection at Bowling Green State University, admission to a punk show, and free bowling (including shoe rental).

The last items to consider are publicity and programming. The people who create zines won’t generally expect to be paid, but they won’t turn down vegan snacks, so budgeting in a few dollars for food is a good idea.

Put it on the table

In addition to extolling zines’ myriad virtues— they get a group of authors into the library who have previously been almost completely unrepresented, they’re valuable primary source documents, they are fun to read, they are beautiful, they’re rare in libraries, college students and young adults love them, librarians who love them won’t want to leave a library that has them, etc.—be honest about the vices. These could include the amount of staff time the zines will take and how those lucky enough to work with them won’t want to do anything else.

Plan in advance what you need to do to develop the collection, when it will happen, and who will be involved. Don’t underestimate how long this will take. The Barnard collection took over a year to go from idea to shelf.

So, that’s how to make your own zine collection. Have fun with it, and your patrons will, too.