

The House that Book Arts Built
 The Windgate Art & Design Building, University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

MEMBER EXPERIENCE

by Katie Harper

When I joined the graphic design faculty at UAFS in August of 2008, the graphic design program had just moved from the College of Applied Technology to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. This meant a different dean, and since we were now part of the art department, this meant a different department chair as well. It also signaled a philosophical shift from vocational training to a more comprehensive professional degree program. There had always been a strong association between graphic design and the art department—even in the old program, graphic design students had taken foundation courses, such as drawing, 2-D design, color, as well as art electives, such as printmaking. Our philosophical union was not physical, however. The art and design classes were mostly housed in two different buildings at opposite ends of a growing campus. The printmaking shop and other studio art classes were taught in the Ballman-Speer Art Building, one of the oldest buildings on campus, while the graphic design courses were taught in the Baldor Technology Building. There were no letterpress or book arts facilities in either location, but ironically, there was a course in the catalog: a graphic design course called “Fine Printing & Bookmaking” which had been written years ago in the hopes of someday having facilities and equipment to run the class.

There was a lot of enthusiasm among the art and design faculty for letterpress, along with a conviction that if we grew such a program, we’d be better able to distinguish ourselves from other art and design programs in the region. My background in running letterpress shops and teaching facilities in Cincinnati and other cities made me the catalyst to get this program started.

Perhaps my most important qualification was not necessarily the fact that I had an MFA in Book Arts/Printmaking from the University of the Arts in



The 2010 letterpress shop, which was dubbed Underground Ink.

Philadelphia, but that I actually owned several presses, operated under my studio name, *Ars Brevis Press*. When I moved to Fort Smith from the Boston area, I brought along my last remaining press, a Vandercook 215. The Vandercook is a flat-bed cylinder press that is a favorite among teachers because it is relatively easy to use and strong enough to withstand the rigors of student handling. I agreed to loan it to the school if we could find a place to house it.

A press is a good start, of course, but more was needed. My goal was to see what else we could obtain with limited funds. In my first semester at UAFS, I drove around to various print shops in town, asking if they had any old letterpress equipment lying around that they

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might want to donate to the school. Most shops had long ago sold or scrapped any letterpress equipment, but there was one print shop, Calvert McBride, whose owner, Bill Calvert, had kept many cabinets of metal type in storage at the plant, just hoping that someday someone would want to put them to use. I don't know who was more surprised on the day I dropped by, Bill Calvert—because someone had actually come around asking for the treasures he had hoarded so long—or me, upon hearing his answer to my query about letterpress equipment lying around: “Why yes, as a matter of fact, I do.” With my press and the donated type, we had what we needed to make a start, and the dean, department head and I decided to put the Fine Printing course on the schedule for the Spring of 2009. A small office in the Art Building became our shop. The operative word is “small.” It was actually about 10 x 14 feet. At least it was clean, dry and climate controlled, with just enough room to house the press and the type cabinets. It was also close to the printmaking room, a much larger space with large tables where we could spread out “clean” work for binding and finishing. Because the shop size was so limited, the placement of all this heavy stuff—type cabinets and presses—had

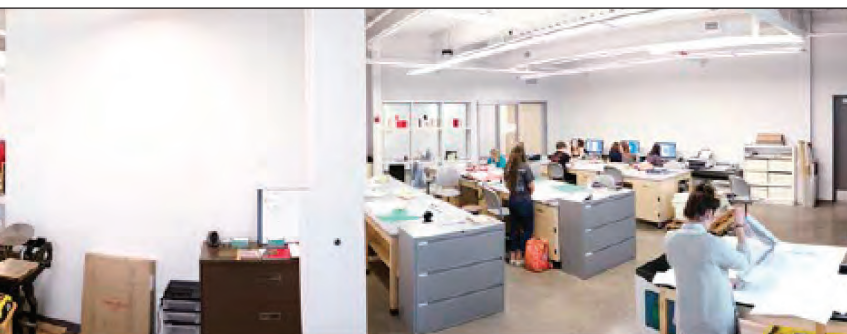
to be carefully planned; once in place, they could not easily be moved. The weeks of planning on paper paid off; everything fit (just barely), and all was in place by the start of the spring semester in time for the students in the Fine Printing & Bookmaking class to use the new print shop.

John Horn, of Shooting Star Press in Little Rock, Arkansas, was one of our most generous and helpful supporters. John donated many crucial items from his extensive collection, and even travelled to Fort Smith to deliver equipment and give a short workshop to the students in the class. John continues to be an important partner in our letterpress endeavors at UAFS.

We housed the first Fine Printing and Bookmaking class in two rooms: the letterpress was in the small shop we had just set up, and the non-printing part of the class was in the printmaking shop, where students had access to traditional printmaking production facilities and large work tables for finishing and binding. Our work began to raise awareness on campus, and I was approached by other faculty about publishing books, such as *The House of Broken Deer*, a small chapbook of poetry that

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*Left: the fully outfitted space, with visiting artist Amos Paul Kennedy, March 2013;
Right: the new Underground Ink space (no longer underground!), 2016*



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had been written by students in the Imaginative Writing class at UAFS. This book contained 16 student poems, and was typeset and printed by the Fine Printing and Bookmaking Class of 2009.

Another immediate goal was to obtain grant funding to purchase more type, presses and supplies. I began to work on writing that grant, with a budget list that also included funding for visiting artists. This grant, from the Windgate Foundation, was awarded in the Fall of 2009.

One of the provisions of the grant was that the University provide a larger, more suitable space for the letterpress shop, and a suitable location was found: a large, open basement that housed machine shop classes. An area of approximately 526 square feet was portioned off for our shop, and we moved into that space in the Summer of 2010. The location of the space gave rise to the students' naming the studio "Underground Ink."

The rather long space gave us a way to separate the work areas, with the composition and type area at the north end; the presses in the middle, and the "clean" finishing and binding area at the south end. This space housed 13 cabinets of type; two Vandercook SP-15 presses; one 8 x 12 C&P Platen press; two iMacs; a chemical cabinet; bookcases for supplies and books, and cubes for student storage. The space, while narrow, turned out to be quite flexible, as we found out when we added additional presses and type. The studio was utilized not only by art and design students, but also by history and English classes. It was home to many workshops by visiting artists, such as Paul Moxon, Steve Miller, and Amos Paul Kennedy. The first grant, along with subsequent grants, has also enabled us to host free workshops to the public with each of our visiting artists. It was a small but energetic space, with some very impressive work being produced. Collaborations with other departments have also led to visits by well known writers who are brought to campus for a program called "Read This" wherein



Top: students in Intro to Book Arts, spring 2016
Bottom: N. Scott Mommoday observes the printing of the broadside "House Made of Dawn," March 2016

all departments participate in reading one novel for several weeks. This event usually culminates with a visit to the UAFS campus by the author, and for the last few

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The new Windgate Art & Design Building,
which opened in August 2015

years, the Underground Ink press has had the honor of handsetting and printing a broadside to be signed by the author, some of whom, such as Amy Tan and N. Scott Momaday, have actually visited the press to watch the printing or even to print their own copy.

The growing reputation and generous support of various benefactors boosted not only letterpress and book arts, but also the other studio art areas as well. Additional grants brought new equipment, additional scholarships, faculty development funding, and outreach programs. Perhaps most important, our stewardship of these funds and the positive effect on our students (especially considering the less than ideal facilities) led directly to the donation of a completely new, 58,000 square-foot art building. This building, which opened in August of 2015, houses all classes in photography, printing, sculpture, and art history, as well as freshmen programs in drawing, 2-D design, 3-D design, typography and digital imaging. There are also large, spacious gallery spaces, art history classrooms, huge new letterpress and printmaking studios, graphic design laboratories and a 150-seat film theater.

Fine Printing & Bookmaking, along with all the other art, design, and art history classes, is now running in this completely new home. Because we now have all the various programs and students housed under one roof instead of scattered all over campus, the positive impact on our students has been beyond our wildest dreams. They work and collaborate together, now more as teams than separate entities. Our new home has attracted more students from other majors as well. The Underground Ink (ok, it's not underground anymore) facilities now are housed in over 3500 square feet in a space shaped like a U: one side houses letterpress (presses, type, etc.) and the other houses the "clean work": book arts, binding and finishing. Our equipment list now boasts 3 Vandercook presses (two SP-15s, and a Universal III), as well as the venerable Chandler & Price 8x12, along with two imposing tables, 12 cabinets of metal and wood type, an Andersen-Vreeland Platemaker, and a Jacques board shear. The finishing area can accommodate up to 12 students, each with an individual work desk and storage space.

The Windgate Art & Design Building can trace its origins to the appealing power of letterpress and book arts. We hope to ring true the quote "If you build it, they will come."

Katie Harper joined the faculty of the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith in 2008, specializing in graphic design, letterpress and book arts. She holds a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, as well as an MFA from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Her background includes award-winning letterpress and book arts, with works represented in public and private collections around the country. As a designer, she also has extensive experience in commercial print and editorial design. In addition to teaching graphic design, Harper is also director of Underground Ink, the letterpress/book arts studio at the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith.