

PLANT A SEED FOR THE LOVE OF READING: PUBLIC ART AT OUR LIBRARY

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What comes to mind when one thinks of public art? Museums and university campuses, certainly. Perhaps large metropolitan libraries with the resources to house and care for artwork are considered as well. The idea of a small library commissioning an outdoor bronze sculpture might seem impractical or frivolous, but our library's experience was quite the opposite. Our main library entrance has recently become a "garden" centered around a unique visual testimony to the joys of reading. It all started, like most gardens, with a small patch of dirt.

When I first met with Jim in the fall of 2005 to ask rather naively about the basic price range for commissioning a project, I was somewhat encouraged by the dollar figure we discussed, despite the fact that our modest library budget had no category for such an expense. We set a few basic parameters for what the library would want in an original bronze artwork:

- Based on the number of small children who come to the library every day, the sculpture should be interactive in nature and invite exploration.
- The piece should specifically "belong" in a library setting and should celebrate books and reading.
- It should be original, unique, and have undisputed artistic merit.

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After that initial conversation, I began looking for other examples of library art but saw little that intrigued me. We explored a number of thematic ideas but nothing seemed to really come to life. The dirt circle remained unchanged for months.

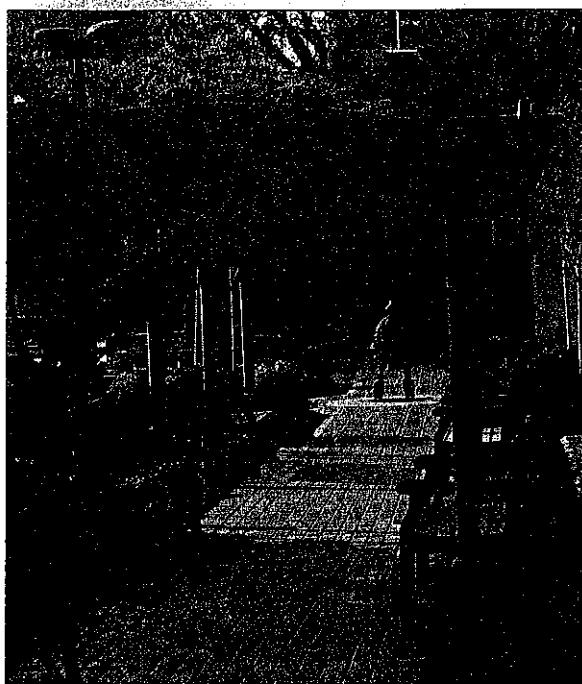
In May 2006, a former chairman of our library board passed away quite unexpectedly. Ferris Van Meter was an active member of the neighboring church, a beloved member of our com-

When our library expanded the main branch parking lot several years ago, we gained 26 parking spaces, three new book drops, and a central island with a crosswalk whose four sections converged somewhat hopefully upon a 36-inch circle of unpaved dirt. The "something" that would be the focal point of this spot was undetermined, initially not an issue since the construction period of our parking lot dovetailed with a major building project at the Episcopal church next door.

However, as the neighboring building and landscap-

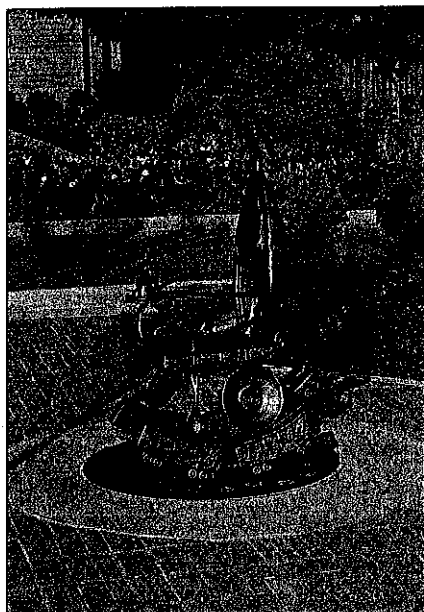
ing reached completion, our long unfinished island remained an eyesore with its leftover hackberry trees, unpaved midsection, and dirt centerpiece.

A staff member suggested I contact the associate rector next door about a possible commissioned piece for the circle. An artist by profes-



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munity, and a long time library benefactor and advocate. Our current board chair asked us to explore ideas for a memorial project in Ferris' honor. The bronze artwork now had a focus: to commemorate a library friend whose wisdom, humor, and voracious appetite for reading were remembered by all who knew her.



An initial concept of a "reading chair" became a chair about reading experiences, specifically our earliest shared memories of children's books. Different parts of the chair reference different children's classics, from the Little Engine That Could rockers to the Yellow Brick Road armrest to James' Giant Peach pit which forms the back. To the thematic threads of journey, growth, giving and learning, add a bit of whimsy and humor, and *Ferris' Chair* became real.

We embarked on a fundraising campaign. A board member who had not even known Ferris stepped up to the plate when she heard the story of the *Chair*, organizing lunch meetings at the library with groups of potential donors. Jim Quigley made a brief but eloquent presentation about the story behind the rendering for those attending, who were mostly close friends of Ferris. What was most impressive about these gatherings was the cathartic nature of the conversations. People were touched by the story of the *Chair*; connections were made between Ferris and the *Chair* that perhaps had not been part of the original concept but were meaningful to those present who were still mourning.



By the end of the summer we had reached our financial goal for the artwork itself. Much like buying a new sofa prompts you to redecorate the whole room, our site preparation for the installation grew. The forlorn hackberry trees were removed. The crosswalk was extended to reach the length of the island. The book drops were replaced with an interior drive-up slot. Through the generous support of our Friends group, a pergola was added over the new sidewalk.

Jim Quigley spent a month's sabbatical in January creating the *Chair*. As progress reports and pictures filtered back to us, we began the daunting task of planning an unveiling. In the hope that our newly improved landscaping

would be firmly established in late spring, we set a May celebration date. We scheduled a stone carving workshop and a presentation on local public art in the weeks prior to the unveiling. We planned for a formal morning unveiling, with a block party that evening. We mailed formal invitations to donors and local dignitaries, as well as postcards to our FOL membership.

The appointed day was, fortunately, a perfect spring day. Our theme for the event was "Plant a Seed for the Love of Reading" and we distributed seed packets that featured Ferris' picture and a view of the transformed "garden." The ceremony was purposefully short: "Christopher Robin" played on tin whistle by local musicians, remarks from guest children's author Charles Ghigna, and a brief speech by one of Ferris' fellow library board members. We heard Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* read aloud by artist Jim Quigley. Then one of our youngest library patrons came forward to pull the red satin drape, revealing *Ferris' Chair* for the very first time.

A brief reception inside the library featured punch, cookies, and a first look at our new READ poster display with local celebrities pictured with their favorite children's book. We returned that evening for a block party for the public with free hot dogs, popcorn, ice cream, and music by Kentucky author Silas House and the Doolittles.

The commissioning of *Ferris' Chair*, the fundraising campaign that followed, and the unveiling celebration were all very different ventures for us and stretched our imagination, creativity, and resources. The reward has been the good will and interest which this project has brought our library, the knowledge that we did indeed honor a dear friend, and the ongoing enthusiasm and fascination that *Ferris' Chair* elicits from our patrons, young and old alike, every day. It is common now to see children climbing into the chair on their way to and from the library, exploring its detail and color and eager to tell about what they see. Adults, too, stop to study the *Chair*, circle slowly around it, and, always, reach out to touch it. *Ferris' Chair* came about through gifts from private donors, but ultimately it has become the library's gift to our community.

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