



LISTENING FIRST: ONE SMALL STEP “PHONE A STORY” AT SALT LAKE CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY



Overview

At Salt Lake City Public Library, Amy Whiting was looking for a way to invite people into dialogue without putting them on the spot. As a librarian working in a large urban system serving tens of thousands of residents, she was interested in how libraries could foster empathy and connection in a moment when meeting strangers often feels charged or risky. At the same time, Amy was feeling the weight of larger threats facing libraries, particularly in Utah.

“I would come to [our Community of Practice meetings] feeling really discouraged by the various threats to libraries going on right now,” she said. “And I would feel like, what is this job that I’m doing? And is there any hope in it?”

Participating in the One Small Step Libraries Community of Practice helped shift that feeling. Meeting regularly with librarians from across the country, Amy was reminded that she was not alone in trying to create shared civic space through

libraries. “I would go to these meetings and I would meet with other librarians who were from completely different places and completely different perspectives, but also were working towards the same goal,” she said. “It



**dial a
number
to hear
a story**

just meant so much and made me feel so much more optimistic about the state of the world after our meetings.”



Approach

Amy decided to focus on listening as the foundation of her programming. Rather than hosting facilitated conversations, she designed an interactive phone based listening exhibit that allowed visitors to engage privately and at their own pace. Inspired by One Small Step conversations and by other phone based storytelling projects, she created an exhibit where patrons could pick up a phone, dial a number, and hear a short story or conversation drawn from the One Small Step archive.

The exhibit relied on novelty and accessibility rather than instruction.

Vintage and playful phones were intentionally chosen to draw people in and lower their guard. Visitors could explore freely, without having to sign up, speak, or explain themselves. Over the course of July and August 2025, an estimated five hundred plus people engaged with the exhibit.

What Emerged

As the exhibit unfolded, Amy noticed patterns in how people engaged. Some visitors lingered far longer than she expected. “I would walk around the library and see the same person standing there, trying out every single phone and listening to every single story,” she said.





Moments of recognition stood out most. Amy watched people light up when they encountered a story that reflected their own experiences. “I really enjoyed the moments where people would get excited because they heard a story that they felt represented by,” she said. “People would be like, oh my gosh, there are stories about this. Ah, like, this is so great. It was like, oh my gosh, there’s me.”



Those reactions reinforced for Amy the importance of feeling represented and careful curation. Stories about queerness and gender identity, in particular, sparked visible excitement and connection among listeners.

Key Insights & Lessons Learned

Through both the Community of Practice and the exhibit itself, Amy deepened her understanding of listening as a skill rather than a passive state. “There’s no way to have those conversations and have them turn out good unless you’re willing to listen,” she said. “People think of conversation as blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But there’s a whole fifty percent of that, which is just you sitting in it.”

On a practical level, Amy learned that editing audio was the most time consuming part of the project and that accessibility considerations like volume consistency mattered more than she initially anticipated. She also realized the value of selecting fewer, stronger excerpts rather than trying to include everything. To future “Phone a Story” hosts, she recommends keeping a couple of backup phones, for replacement in case of breaks caused by user error.

Notable Outcomes

The phone exhibit helped reframe what passive programming could look like inside the library. Colleagues responded positively, noting that visitors were making active choices about how to engage and spending meaningful time with the material. The success of the exhibit encouraged Amy to think more creatively about future programming and to feel less hesitant about experimenting.



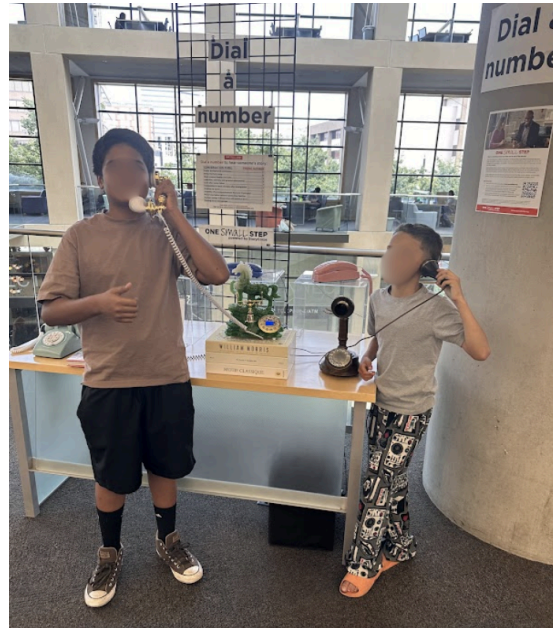
“It will definitely impact my future career,” she said, “because it’s given me a little bit more courage and a little bit more confidence to kind of step outside the typical realm of programming into a little bit more of a creative space.”

Key Takeaways and Looking Ahead

Looking forward, Amy is interested in continuing conversation-based programming while remaining attentive to what fits her community best. She is curious about potential partnerships, including with the Great Salt Lake Hopeline, and about collaborating with the library’s social worker, who already facilitates a weekly Coffee and Conversations program.

Her advice to other librarians centers on intentional curation and collaboration.

“Absolutely listen to these conversations, edit them down, tailor it to your community,” she said. “What voices aren’t being heard in my community right now, and how can I provide that?”



She also emphasized the importance of not doing this work alone. “If you are not doing it in a community of practice, try to find maybe a few partners to discuss the stuff with,” she said. “This whole thing is about community.”

Project Links:

- [Amy’s Project Overview](#)
- [Edited MP3 Files](#)

This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit diy.takeonesmallstep.org to explore the tools.