

CASE STUDY: ONE SMALL STEP AT UNITY PUBLIC LIBRARY



Overview

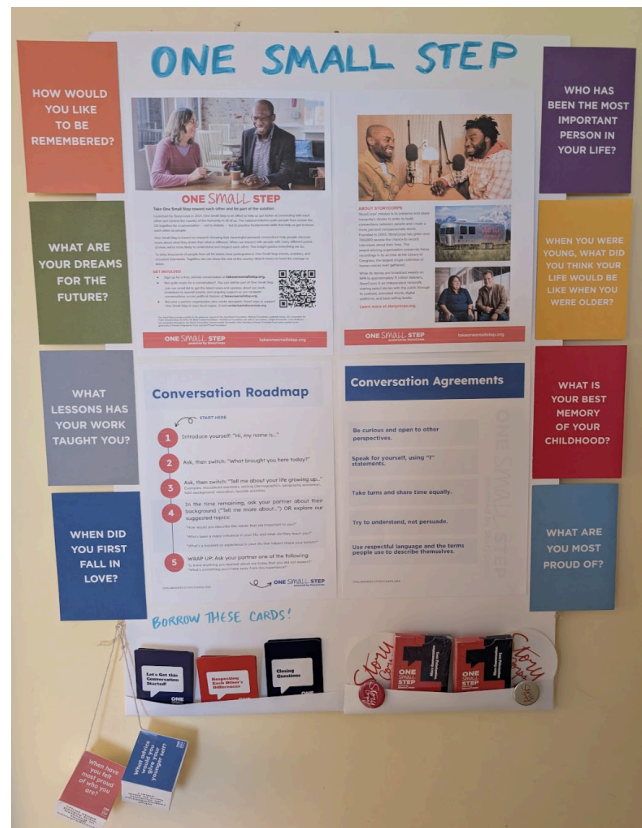
Unity Public Library is a young, volunteer-led library serving a rural region of central Maine. At just four years old, it supports several small towns that share a single community resource. With approximately 1,200 patrons across a service area of about 6,000 residents, the library operates at a scale where relationships are personal and staff capacity is limited. Jean Bourg, the library's Director, joined the One Small Step Libraries Community of Practice after already encountering OSS through a partnership with local community radio station WERU and participating in a recorded One Small Step conversation herself.

Jean came to the cohort with firsthand experience of OSS not as a theory, but as a practice she had already tried. She focused on adapting OSS tools to Unity's existing infrastructure, capacity, and community rhythms.

Approach

Jean began by setting up an information and engagement station inside the library. Inspired by an incoming Library of Things, the station includes a range of OSS materials: conversation card decks, conversation dice, conversation agreements, and the conversation roadmap. The goal was to make the tools visible, usable, and unthreatening for patrons to explore at their own pace.

The station allows the library to introduce OSS without specialized training or extended facilitation, while still modeling how conversation tools could be used in everyday interactions.



From there, Jean began planning a second program that draws directly from Unity's newest asset: a permanent half-mile outdoor story walk trail. Her working program concept, *Five Thousand Small Steps*, adapts OSS questions for the trail by placing them on existing story boards along the path. Participants are invited to walk together and respond to prompts as they move through the landscape, allowing conversation to unfold side by side.

Jean plans to use a mix of open participation and thoughtful pairing. In a small community where people's relationships are often already known, she is able to invite individuals with different perspectives and prepare them in advance using OSS conversation norms. Participants will be invited to share short reflections at the end of the walk through a simple online form, providing light feedback without adding administrative burden to volunteers.

This approach reflects Unity's broader library culture. As Jean puts it, "Make something usable, reusable in many different ways. Make it outside if possible... improve a trail while you're doing it and invite three other organizations to join you in using it. That's our culture."



What Jean Noticed

Jean's own experience as a One Small Step participant shaped how she thought about introducing the work locally. She described her conversation as unexpectedly personal. "It led me to share more things that I don't usually share, like my background or my history." She noted that "when you share origin stories for your beliefs, that gets real interesting."

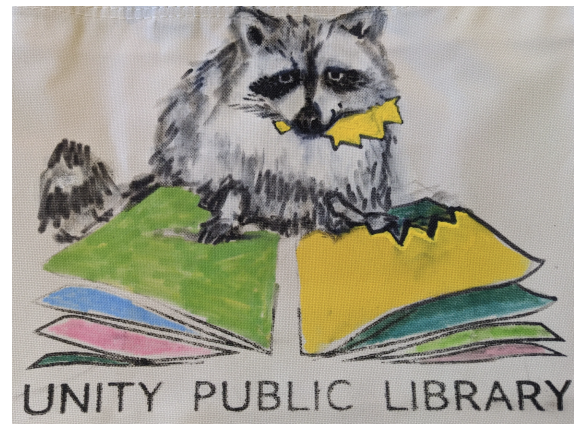
That experience reinforced her interest in creating opportunities for connection that felt human. She described her pairing simply: "It was like making a friend."

At the library, Jean was especially motivated to reach residents who might otherwise avoid library programming. "I'm really interested in programming and planning that invites folks in who don't

normally come to the library,” she said. She spoke candidly about wanting to engage people who may support the library at the ballot box but do not see themselves reflected in its spaces. “They vote to fund us, but they don’t come to the library.”

Community Context and Experimentation

Unity Public Library sits within a tight-knit network of local organizations and informal community spaces. Jean is exploring partnerships with WERU, the Unity Barn Raisers community center, and the Ecology Learning Center as potential collaborators and participants.



Jean valued the national network of practitioners in the Community of Practice for inspiration, while remaining clear about adapting ideas to local realities. “Whatever we do here, we hope to be modeling for others,” she said. “Here’s something else you can do with your story... here’s what we did, and you can do it too.”

Because story walks are common in rural libraries and schools, Jean views the program as something that could be borrowed by other small libraries with minimal additional resources.

One idea she continues to explore is how physical movement might change the tone of dialogue. “I’m curious to see if walking outside has an effect on the talk rather than sitting and looking at the person right across from you,” she said, in reference to the storywalk. For Jean, this is a practical way to think about how OSS tools function in settings that already feel familiar and comfortable.

Key Insights & Lessons Learned

Capacity remains a central constraint. As a new library, any new initiative at Unity Public Library must fit alongside existing responsibilities and remain sustainable. The information station highlighted both the value and limits of passive engagement, while the story walk model reflects Jean’s effort to design programming that works within local conditions.

Participation in the Community of Practice provided inspiration and validation, and Jean remains attentive to what is feasible in Unity’s context, prioritizing approaches that feel realistic.



Looking Ahead

Jean plans to pilot *Five Thousand Small Steps* during the warmer months, when the black flies are out of season and outdoor use of the trail is highest. Success will be measured through participation, informal feedback, and whether the program attracts people who have not previously engaged with library programming.

For Jean, One Small Step offers a flexible set of tools that can live comfortably within her library. The goal is not scale, but continuity: creating small, repeatable opportunities for people to practice listening, curiosity, and connection in a place that already functions as a community gathering point.

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