

Job *of a* Lifetime

Danielle Mizzy

Bringing history to life

If bringing history to life and reaching a wider audience using cutting-edge technology sounds right up your alley, then working for the Virginia Center for Digital History (VCDH) might be your job of a lifetime. Founded five years ago, the VCDH is an independent center within the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia (UVA). Its mission is "to develop high-quality, well-researched, and reliable history resources in digital format and deliver them to schools, colleges, libraries, historical societies, and the general public via the Internet." Kim Tryka has been associate director for the last two and a half years.

All about metadata

First, I asked Kim to fill me in on the work of the VCDH and on her role. She explained that the VCDH has projects extending from colonial times (Virtual Jamestown) to slavery and the Civil War (the Virginia Runaways Project, the Valley of the Shadow) up to the present (Modern Virginia History).

"I work on the technical end; I'm responsible for overseeing the technology in the VCDH. Luckily, we share our infrastructure with another organization, so I don't have to do systems administration. We work with all types of data formats, but my particular interest is XML, and the delivery of XML marked-up documents. I also do a lot of work with metadata. It's one thing to attach metadata to a book or an image and treat those as individual entities, but we don't have individual things, we have projects that are large collections of those individual things."

Soft and hard skills required

Tryka pointed out a popular misconception. "Although I'm the technical person and I do sit in front of the computer all day, everything I do is not about fixing an HTML page or writing a piece of code. There is a great deal of thinking that goes into these projects before you get to apply the technology. The conceptualization of information, the information architecture, picking out the right arrangement for a particular project, is very complex. The projects are not all the same and there is no single template."

She went on to talk about the process. "It is like

being a consultant. There is a lot of communication and collaboration. You can't make the proper technical decisions without interacting very closely with your principal investigator. It is an extremely iterative process.

"Create something and then show it to the principal investigator. See if they like it and find out if it is what they were thinking of. Sometimes, even if it is what they thought of, they realize it's not the right thing once they

see the product. If they have a clear vision of what they want to do, that is wonderful. But if they don't, it's my job to try to tease out what they are hoping to be able to do, so that we can help them realize their project."

Finding your "Inner Geek"

Tryka might have taken a very different professional path if it weren't for a job she took during the second term of her MLS program. She came to the library field after completing a doctorate in Planetary Science and working as an astronomer.



Kim Tryka is associate director of the Virginia Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia.

Danielle Mizzy is assistant head of the Engineering Library at the University of Pennsylvania. Have an idea for a "Job of a Lifetime" story? E-mail: danielle@seas.upenn.edu

"I was running from technology. I thought I was going to sit in some special collections library and work with old books and no technology. What I found was that I was happy to get away from the number crunching and move towards more textual applications of computers, what is being called humanities computing. While doing my master's there weren't a lot of classes about digital libraries or digital applications, so I started working with the Digital Research Library at the University of Pittsburgh. They had a large finding aids conversion project, moving paper and word processed documents into Encoded Archival Description so that they would be accessible on the Web. I found that I took to it very easily. As a friend of mine refers to it, 'I found my inner geek.'"

Partners at home and abroad

Tryka's projects have involved collaborating with many different groups, both inside and outside the university. "We have worked closely with the Geospatial and Statistical Data Center (Geostat) at the University of Virginia. For the Geography of Slavery Project, we're having a really interesting problem. We are working with runaway slave ads from the early 1730s to the 1860s. During that time, not only does West Virginia split off of Virginia, but county boundaries are continually changing. So something that in 1730 might have been Goochland County, in 1850 might now be part of Albemarle County. Since Geostat knows about working with GIS and mapping, we went to them to ask 'Where can we find official place names?' They gave us a great database of modern Virginia place names to work with. And we want to have a time series of maps so that people can see what Virginia looked like at different times. At this point, we're waiting for the Newberry Library, which has been working on Historical atlases of all the states, to finish Virginia."

Another local partner is the Robertson Media Center at the UVA. "We're working on a project on Civil Rights in Virginia and we're using local news footage. A Roanoke television station had donated news footage to the Media Center. We're in the process of trying to help them index this footage, and we've started digitizing portions of it that apply to our project.

"This is new for us on a couple of fronts. We've never delivered that much video before and we need a new server optimized for multimedia. Thanks to internal university collaboration, we are able to put up part of the money and our Information Technology group, ITC, is putting up the rest of the money."

"Across the pond," VCDH is working with a group at the University of East Anglia in England. "They have a Virtual Norfolk project that in some ways is similar to our Virtual Jamestown project, and it looks at a similar time-period albeit in England. We've been trying to figure out what might be fruitful for both organizations. Everyone in this country has to learn colonial history, so working with that time period has broad appeal."

The digital community

Tryka shared that UVA has been a wonderful place to work, but sometimes it's difficult to find time to take advantage of it. "I'm sitting in the midst of plenty in terms of a digital community. But it's easy to get in the mode where you are buried in

your own projects, and you find that something is broken and needs fixing now, and you can easily forget that 50 feet away there are people you could go have really interesting an exciting conversations with. It's important to know what is going on in other electronic centers, but hard to keep up with."

She went on to describe an exciting recent development. "UVA has just approved and is starting to hire for a Digital Humanities Computing Master's degree. This will be interesting to watch develop because there's an intriguing tension in teaching this type of subject. Do you teach theory or do you teach practice? You can't do theory without practice because they're very intertwined at the edges. Theoretical questions make people go out and figure out something in practice, which leads to new theoretical questions."

She expressed a keen desire to be involved. "With this degree starting at UVA, it's going to attract people and it will be an opportunity for me to both share my knowledge and learn new skills."

With her wealth of expertise and passion for the work, Tryka would definitely be an asset in training the next wave of digital innovators. ■

Digital projects manager

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For more information, visit: <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/>

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