

Celebrating Our Donors and Showcasing our Collections: Making an Annual Gala A Signature Event

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Emory University's "12th Night Revel" just celebrated its 19th anniversary. As we prepare for the 20th annual gala, we are excited to share some of the lessons we have learned about what it takes to sustain a long running event that keeps donors engaged and giving.

The 12th Night Revel began as a way to combine a communal celebration of poetry into a fundraiser for the Emory University Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. A few dedicated supporters began the event off campus and came together to read from their favorite poets. Emory Libraries have strong ties to the poetry community.

Emory University's Raymond Danowski Poetry Library is a 75,000-volume collection of rare and first editions of modern and contemporary poetry, which seeks to collect every poetry volume in English published worldwide in the twentieth-century. This alone would make the Danowski Poetry Library distinctive, but it also includes over 50,000 literary journals, several thousand broadsides, recordings, counterculture newspapers, unique manuscripts, ephemera, and even objects that provide the full context of poetry as a vantage point on the twentieth century and beyond. Assembled by collector Raymond Danowski over 30 years, the collection is thought to have been the largest library in private hands until its arrival at Emory in 2004. The enormity of this collection makes an evening of poetry a must-have for Emory Libraries. More importantly, we have leveraged our relationships with the guest poets of our 12th Night Revel to increase our collections as many of them have chosen to house their papers at Emory.

Today the event takes place inside amongst the collections in the Rare Book Library and in the main campus library. The event uses a Patron-level system to generate top donations for the event. Patrons receive priority seating as well as exclusive invitations to meet-and-greets and other events throughout the year. Individual tickets are sold as well.

Each year, we have a Guest Poet to headline the event. Past poets include historic inaugural poet Richard Blanco, Seamus Heaney, and U.S. Poet Laureates Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, Juan Felipe Herrera, Billy Collins and Tracey K. Smith. The Guest Poets spend part of a day visiting classes, then they are the guest of honor at the event. The following day our guest poets hold a free public reading for the Emory community.

Another way we engage donors: Each year two people are chosen as our "Chief Revelers." This has become an honor associated with Emory Libraries. Important donors and other supporters take on this role. The Chief Revelers assist with the planning and cultivation of guests for the evening. They then serve as the emcees for the evening event.

Other ideas we would be focusing on in our presentation: Having a large item that Special Collections hopes to add that donors can help purchase; having supporters purchase tickets for students to use; using students throughout the event; highlighting collections and exhibits for guests to view that evening; reading poems from our collections; giving a book by the poet to each guest; incorporating a drawing of the guests to be a surprise reader at the event.

We have had great success with our 12th Night Revel. We use it as a fundraiser, but more importantly, as a Friend-Raiser. It has become the signature event for Emory Libraries' Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Collection. Most of our major donors attend and it is our top way to keep them engaged and enthused about our collections. In fact, it is the key stewardship event for our major donors. We look forward to sharing our best practices with ALADN attendees.