Do You Remember Me?
Writing Oral Histories with Nursing Home Residents

by
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Horse and buggy. Milking cows. Jumpin’ Jack, John Dillinger. William Tell. Peru State College. What do all of these have in common? If you type one of these words into a World Wide Web search engine such as Alta Vista or Yahoo!, you may find yourself linked to the Aurora High School’s junior class oral history project. My students’ Web page is an electronic version of our book, *Elderly Voices — Living Links to the Past*, a collection of narratives of nursing home residents in Hamilton County, Nebraska. This project, which involved three school districts in three Nebraska counties, sent high school students into nursing homes to collect history from the very elderly.

Project Background

I began thinking about an undertaking like this in May, 1997, when Aurora’s city administrator, Mike ‘Bair, approached me about orchestrating a project to preserve stories of the elderly. The impetus: his wife, my teaching colleague, Alice Bair, had regrets about not recording some of the family history before her 100-year-old grandmother died. As Mike lamented, “Now all that personal history is lost.”

Lost stories. Those words rang loud in my ears. I thought about my own father and his natural gift for storytelling. He had entertained us for hours when we were kids. A few years ago, I gave him a tape recorder to record some of his memories. Of course, the tape recorder sat. He never did do it, and now I know why. Recording oral histories is a daunting task.

The means and skills for acquiring personal stories began to come together in June 1997, when I was a participant in the Nebraska Writing Project Rural Institute in Henderson, Nebraska. A focus of the institute was on heritage and place, but when I was asked to write about my place, I found that I knew very little about Aurora, Nebraska, population 4000. I had lived for five years in this community at the heart of one of the richest corn-growing regions in America. Aurora, a town of quiet, tree-lined streets with well-maintained Victorian houses, has the lowest crime rate of any town on I-80. It is a place where the students at our high school of 300 see no reason to padlock their lockers. But while I knew surface facts and had cursory impressions, I knew little of the rich heritage that has contributed to the present culture of our region. Speakers at the writing project institute motivated me to work with my students to find out much more about this community which was our home, and Carol Gulyas, institute coordinator, suggested ways to get grant money to pay for our work.

Scholar Support

Immediately after the institute, I wrote mini-grants, and in September, I received notice of our awards. Two cooperating scholars would be available: Nancy Duncan, a professional storyteller, and Barbara
Sommer, an oral historian. Both would be in our schools early in October. Nancy, who has experience working in schools, demonstrated a talent for entertaining students while at the same time tackling with them psychological issues relevant to the work they would be doing. What, she asked, will the nursing home residents think of you? What do you think of them? She tried to dispel the myths the two groups might hold of one another: teenagers are drug-using, good-for-nothings. People in nursing homes drool and soil their pants. Nancy was interested in getting the personal stories, the colorful memories, the entertaining pieces. She wanted the students to create story maps and then tell the stories back to the residents. She talked to students about the importance of honoring each resident's story. Is it true to character? Does it convey the intended meaning? Have you kept the spirit of the story? Nancy also wanted to see visual art incorporated into the project, so we had one class of art students attend a session to talk about sketching the residents' portraits.

Barbara Sommer familiarized students with legal issues, emphasizing the need for release forms for the use of the stories and photographs in both the hard copy and electronic versions. Further, Barbara introduced students to some skills they would need for their interviews: how to pull detail from an interviewee, how to formulate open-ended and follow-up questions that would encourage an outpouring of rich information, how to find story threads in emerging narratives. Barbara also brought in state-of-the-art recording equipment and each of our classes performed mock interviews with peers.

The Process
Once Nancy and Barbara had attended our classes, we were ready for our first visit to Memorial Community Care Home in Aurora. I had established student teams of two or three and matched each with a resident. Our initial visit was solely for the purpose of socialization. On the bus trip to the homes the students were very quiet. I knew they had apprehensions. I knew that despite our preparation they were not sure what they would say to the residents. After we arrived, students began knocking on residents’ doors. When no one responded to a knock, the students were extremely shy and afraid to crack the door open and check to see if the resident was awake. But the staff assured us that it was all right to wake people up, so students became more comfortable and less apprehensive. When students did enter a room, they often found a homey atmosphere that some had not anticipated. There were arm chairs and a television, and often photographs of family and friends and handicrafts the residents had made. Some rooms had knickknacks and flowers on the night stands. Though some of the residents were confused as to why we were there, most were grateful to have visitors, and all had the typical politeness that is a given for their generation.

The atmosphere on the bus ride back to school was quite a contrast to the atmosphere on our earlier trip. The noise level had risen, stories were being exchanged: “Mrs. English, my guy remembers dirt drifts in the Dust Bowl;” “Mrs. English, our lady worked in a bank that was robbed by John Dillinger!”

Students took these tidbits of information and went to work in their American history classes conducting research in the media center, so they would understand more about these events and people. After the research process, students were ready for the actual taping sessions. Students labeled and taped their introductions onto their tapes, gathered up their tape recorders and notebooks and pens, and we traveled once again to the nursing home. Most of the students were surprised that many of the residents had forgotten them already, but as the teenagers gently prodded with, “Do you remember me?” residents began to focus, interviewers and interviewees were put at ease and the interviews began.

From “The Life of Merna Wall”
by Dennis Roberts, Brady Johnson and Jeremiah Fisher

We then asked about the Dirty Thirties. She had a lot to say. It was all dirty all the time. When they woke up, they would have dirt and grime in their eyes, and dirt on their nose and lips. They didn’t have electricity so they didn’t have a fan, so their days were very hot, and the nights were cooler so they would sleep with the window open a little bit. When they got up in the morning, there would be a lot of dirt on the floor and they would have to walk through it. They had oak floors and the dirt and sand would be rough on their feet. They couldn’t eat breakfast till they had washed the table first, because there would be a layer of dirt on it.
On my rounds through the nursing home, I found some pairs working very well. The residents were providing long, descriptive passages, filled with interesting details, and students were asking appropriate follow up questions. I also found pairs that weren’t working. A resident might be nonresponsive, a patience-trying experience for the student partners. Sometimes the students had to ask the same question several times; sometimes a resident would only talk about one thing. Eva was fixated on World War II and the rationing during that period. Rudy repeatedly came back to a horse named Joe. Often they simply couldn’t remember — after all, some were beyond their hundredth year. They needed a memory trigger, and my students were struggling to come up with one that worked. What did residents remember of Adolph Hitler, the dust bowl, childhood games? What was a typical day like on the farm?

Other students had a much easier time of it. According to Andrea and Brooke, “We began the interview by asking Virginia how many brothers and sisters she had. An hour later, she had not only told us her entire life history but the history of most of her relatives. We never got to our second question!”

My students and I learned useful lessons as we went through the interview process. We learned to compensate for hearing loss almost inevitably suffered by these elderly folks. Most of my students learned to knock loudly, to talk loudly, to enunciate clearly, and also to speak slowly and maintain eye contact at all times. An important factor in the eventual success of the interview turned out to be whether or not the student interviewer could be heard on the first visit.

The most successful interviewers created comfortable situations for the residents, offering few surprises. When students entered they offered handshakes and introduced themselves, telling residents why they had come. Interviewers learned to keep things simple, asking one question at a time and clarifying answers to the questions.

One of the most interesting facets of the project was the inclusion of third-year art students. These students accompanied us on our visit to Memorial Community Care. They too were partnered and sketched the same resident. The art students were well prepared by their instructor, Ms. Pam Brechbill. She taught them how to ask for permission to sketch and demonstrated ways to help the residents feel at ease. It helped, of course, that residents were attending to the questions posed by my English students, a process that relaxed them and drew their attention from the sketch artists.

Interviews done and tapes secured, my students began the most difficult process of all: transcribing, the dreaded “T word,” as they called it. Students used headsets to listen to the tapes, and we transcribed for several days in class. I found some partners working together with two sets of headphones, while others split up the job, one transcribing while the other started the narrative. Some students would write
show the students how to put together bits about family members or pieces of farm stories all in the same paragraph.

When students had completed the final draft of their narratives, we scheduled a follow-up interview at the nursing home. Students read aloud the narratives and asked for verification and clarification. Even after this process, I felt students needed more response, so I asked residents’ families to look over the stories, a step which led to some further revisions. But for the most part, students had gotten the information straight.

With our final draft narratives in hand, we scheduled several days in the computer lab with our archaic IBM 386s. Undaunted by outdated computer equipment, we created basic Web pages in Microsoft Works with the help and instruction of our computer programming teacher, Mr. Michael Derr. Mr. Derr showed my students some very basic HTML prompts helpful in creating colored backgrounds, providing headings, linking to other Web pages, and including images. Though this computer work was a first-time experience for about ninety percent of my students, almost all completed the work.

Challenges
This past spring, with the Web pages near completion and the evaluation of students done, I spent some time in reflection. What would make future oral history projects work better? For one thing I’d want a longer block of time. I found 47-minute class periods constraining. In such a short time, it was difficult to establish the fluidity required for an in-depth interview. A successful interview requires get-acquainted time, time for bonding. My colleague at another school district, Dorothy Apley, worked on a 90-minute block schedule, a time period that allowed interviewers to establish intimacy, to ask follow up questions and develop thematic threads.

Further, I would involve fewer students in the project, perhaps 40 students rather than 110. Mrs. Apley’s smaller Geneva group achieved an intimacy that I admired but was unable to emulate because of our large numbers. It was difficult for me to coach individual students as 110 teenagers worked to write

Students were responsible for transforming the transcription into a coherent, structured narrative. Students found that much of their narrative came in bits and pieces that they had to structure into a story. At this point I got pretty heavily involved. When I went over the rough drafts, I drew many arrows. I tried to

Charlotte Killion as sketched by Megan Pinnie

longhand and others would type at the computers, but all would start, stop, rewind, stop, start, rewind the tape recorders. If students had difficulty understanding words on the tape, they’d ask for my help. Often I could decipher the words, but just as often, the words were too muddled and indistinguishable. For some, transcription was an insurmountable task. One student cried when he could not make sense out of the tape, his partner dropped out at semester, and he was left alone to finish the job. Sadly, the tape disappeared. Two other groups had a similar experience. Remarkably, the remaining 102 students did finish writing the narratives.
publishable pieces. A smaller group would have made this task less overwhelming.

In addition, if I tackle this project again, I'd schedule more time with each professional scholar—at least a week for each. I'd also give greater emphasis to a study of the times in which our interviewees lived, perhaps by focusing on a single decade.

Finally, I'd try to update some of the technology. If we had had external microphones rather than the tape recorder's internal mike, we would have been bothered much less by the ambient noise that made it difficult to hear and transcribe the interviews. Another more advanced technological prop is on the way—a publication center with the newest computers. With these new computers, students will have a chance to immediately view their Web page designs rather than, one at a time, opening files at the teacher's computer. That limitation was a definite challenge to my tech-head students who were frustrated by text-based presentation without the visual effects.

**Achievements**

While in retrospect I can think of many ways to fine tune what we did, our project brought all who participated in it much joy. The number one pleasure was the interaction with the residents. One resident, Orson, had been very ill for some time, was bedridden and on oxygen. The first day his interviewers were absent, so I went in to talk to him about the boys coming the next week. Orson was at a point where he wanted to die. He was suffering a great deal of pain, but the next week, he was out of bed, in his wheel chair and dressed—suspenders and cap donned, he spoke slowly and whisperingly despite the oxygen tank. One week after the interview process, Orson died. Tami, a former student who worked at the nursing home, told me later that those boys' visits to Orson had done so much for him. Their visit had given him a reason to live just a little while longer. He had a story to give. How lucky we are. He had lived a remarkable life.

There were other celebrations, too. The students honed their writing and communication skills. The professional scholars brought in a great base of knowledge that one teacher, me, could not have contributed. The cross-curricular focus of this project—the history, the art, the computers—was also an achievement.

We also feel a sense of accomplishment and authenticity in publishing *Elderly Voices—Living Links to the Past* in both hard copy and electronic versions. But we celebrate most what we learned: love, compassion, patience, history, dignity, and a sense of our own mortality.

**Living Links**

Lately, because of our intense involvement with the elderly, I've found myself turning to the obituary page. I've grown a good amount of respect for those who work in nursing homes. I know when I say goodbye to my charges, they are at the beginning of their lives; it is a melancholy but extremely exciting time, full of boundless possibilities. For those working in a nursing home, saying good-bye means just that.

That is the only sorrow of this project; these special human beings who were so gracious to give us their stories are at the close of their lives. We have already said good-bye to Orson, Neal, Merna, Charlotte, John F., Rudy, John E., and Bus. I talk to my students about their deaths and we share that sadness, but we express our happiness that we have their wonderful stories. We can look back and feel, as Cometa says in her story, "I stop to look back on it, and I think I had a pretty good life. I think I did." And as her student interviewers ended the piece, "Well, we think so, too."

Earlier the students had greeted the residents with the question, "Do you remember me?" With the publication of *Living Links*, the voices of these residents will be heard for many generations. As they ask, "Do you remember me?" our answer is yes, and with great affection.

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From "Charlotte Killion"
by David Tonniges and Nick Kliever

Some of the stories she told us were funny, and we enjoyed all of them. One of the stories told of how she and her husband went to town to buy their first tractor, and when they came home, her husband went to park the tractor in the barn. He didn't know how it worked too well, and he hollered "Whoa," but the tractor didn't stop, and it went right through the back of the barn not stopping until it finally hit a tree and died.
From “Eveleen Callies”  
by Jessica Medinger and Jessica Davis

Eveleen tried to get any job that was available, so she found a job in a bank, her main job was being a bank teller. … The Dillenger Gang, led by John Dillenger, came into the bank, setting out to rob it. Some of the gang members had already “cased the joint” by coming into the bank and the surrounding businesses a few days earlier and asked some questions. One of the businesses adjacent to the bank was the Western Union where Eveleen’s husband worked. Eveleen’s husband accommodated their questions with very accurate answers, of course. He didn’t know who they were.

The Dillenger Gang then proceeded to rob the bank. When they entered the bank, there was an older couple who were the janitors. They were told to get down on the floor, but the woman said, “Oh, I can’t; I have rheumatism!” The gangster pointed the gun at her and said, “O.K. grandma … sit over there!” Following orders, she did it only to say later that it was the scariest moment of her life.

Resources Useful to Teachers

Undertaking Oral History Projects


This project was funded by the Nebraska Writing Project, the Nebraska Humanities Council and the Nebraska Arts Council and involved the Aurora, Henderson, and Geneva school districts in Nebraska. Cathie English’s class interviewed residents of the Hamilton Manor in Aurora as well as the Memorial Community Care home.

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From “Mabel Cantrell”  
by Ben Brill and Clark Mitchell

Mabel remembered one time when she had a bad experience when she was working in a cafe out of state. …Little did she know it, but her boss was a pervert. He would stand behind the uniforms in the girls’ changing rooms and watch while unsuspecting waitresses came in to change. On a few occasions, he would jump out and grab a girl while she was changing. When Mabel came in to change, she happened to notice his feet behind the uniforms. At that moment, she angrily threw down her work paraphernalia and left. She never went back either; she didn’t ever want to see that man again!