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Calendar

A monthly publication from New Hampshire Humanities



Sharing the gifts of the season

In this month's *Calendar*, we're pleased to share four stories that illustrate the transformative power of the humanities, sharing the gifts of attention, connection, understanding, and discovery.

The Gift of Attention: *Building community through oral history*

by Susan Hatem, Associate Director

One story seems to elicit another. Our experience is that one oral history project inspires others, too. "Reminiscence isn't a simplistic thing," says folklorist, storyteller and historian Dr. Jo Radner. It's a building block. It helps people understand who they are, both within a family and as an individual in society."

New Hampton's oral history project began like many:

"We came to the realization that many of our older, long-time residents were passing on and we needed to capture their stories before the stories were gone forever."

The Historical Society collected oral histories from 22 residents, ranging in age from 71 to 94. Each session was recorded on DVD and a master copy of each interview was catalogued. Emergent themes were identified and the team planned a public "story circle" to share them.

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New Hampton's oral history project has inspired other New Hampshire communities to record their stories.

Finally, more than 50 residents gathered in the library to hear a panel of long-time residents talk about the Grange, town celebrations, natural disasters, one-room schools, town governance, and cultural changes. When asked to name developments that most changed the town, the panelists spoke of the coming of automobiles, streetlights, television, and the Internet. But what they thought most affected the town was Interstate 93. It connected them to the wider world...but split the town in two. The storytellers shook their heads. The room became quiet. Then a "newcomer," not born there but a resident for the last fifty years, spoke up with an impish grin: "Well, like it or not, it was 93 that brought my family to town, so I think it was a good thing." The room filled with laughter.

For many, the question is not *why* but *how* to develop such a project. Over the last two years, supported by New Hampshire Humanities Community Project Grants, organizations in Hopkinton, Plainfield and Kingston hosted workshops facilitated by Jo Radner on "Building Community Through Oral History." Radner helped groups learn how to collect and share oral history. She urged people to come from their organizations or communities in teams of three, increasing the likelihood that lessons learned would be put into action. Her agenda

covered planning, researching topics to explore with the "tellers" or "narrators," interviewing skills and pitfalls, equipment needed, transcribing suggestions, and ways to present the results. Radner shared her experience and techniques, guiding interviewers-in-training through practice conversations.

The Hopkinton team, led by Heather Mitchell of the Hopkinton Historical Society and Donna Dunlop of the Town Library, hosted a capacity-crowd of 48, and passed on a waiting list of interested people.

After the workshop, the team went to work, assembling a list of key people to interview and questions to ask.

Several months later, as part of the town's 250th anniversary celebrations, 70 people filled the library's community room to watch a video of interviews with long-time residents.

New Hampshire Public Radio's Virginia Prescott recorded the stories of a panel of siblings from a family with deep Hopkinton roots, and photographer Bob LaPree's pictures of local residents were purchased for permanent display at the library. Dunlop says the oral history project's impact continues to be felt. "There's a shared commitment to capturing local stories now and a better understanding of how to make that happen. The Society's recent cemetery walk celebrated

Attention is a gift.

— Jo Radner, folklorist, storyteller and historian

local families' contributions to our town and there's an upcoming commemoration of World War I that will do the same."

In Plainfield, the historical society and "Friends" of the library organization hosted a similar workshop. Radner explored ways to forge collaboration between the interviewer and teller. She emphasized the value of the interviewer having a bit of familiarity with a potential topic, to build rapport and draw out details. Her quintessentially northern New England example, courtesy of Maine folklorist Sandy Ives:

Interviewer: *What did you use to cut the trees?*

Teller: [patronizingly, assuming the interviewer knew nothing] *An ax.*

Interviewer: *Poll ax or double bit?*

Teller: *Well, at the beginning we used poll axes, but then... [and the interview really took off]*

Susan Lirakis, a professional portrait photographer, came to the workshop while she was creating a collection of images and text that explored why people hold certain beliefs. "I didn't want to miss a story by asking the wrong questions," she said. "It was very helpful to hear how oral historians draw out reluctant subjects." Other participants came to the workshop with ideas for projects such as the Antrim Grange and the 1964 fire in Lebanon. The venue itself had its own story to tell: the Plainfield Town Hall boasts a 100-year-old, painted stage set designed by renowned artist and local resident Maxfield Parrish.

The Friends of the Kingston Historical Museum Association hosted a workshop where volunteers were trained to work with high school students to capture the memories of some of the town's older residents. Two teams with unique topics also took part: one preserving the history of the Mount Washington Observatory and another collecting stories about growing up LGBT on the New Hampshire seacoast. A participant wrote that the most helpful aspect of the workshop was becoming aware of "the amount of work required to prepare for the interview and the sensitivity involved in the questions you ask and how you ask them."

Jo Radner says that shared story and history is critical in creating resilience, self-awareness, and healthy interactions in communities and families. In these projects, she told us, our grants and expertise were important contributions. "Intangible but real, was [each] community's sense of New Hampshire Humanities' enthusiasm for what they were doing," she said. "It mattered that this central, statewide organization saw the project as significant."

In oral history projects, connecting people with ideas is all about the art of translating memory into story, and the priceless gift of relationship building through dynamic listening.



New Hampshire Humanities' **COMMUNITY PROJECT GRANTS** enable New Hampshire nonprofit organizations to design and carry out public humanities programs with the help of experts in philosophy, history, literature or other humanities disciplines. From dynamic lectures and discussions to walking tours, workshops and teacher professional development seminars, these programs offer participants ways to explore and discuss universal questions.

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