

## Connecting Communities with Libraries, Archives, and Historians through Oral Histories

This proposed project aligns with one of the NLG program's goals and objectives, specifically Objective 2.2: Develop or enhance collaborations between libraries and stakeholders, and leverage opportunities to address community needs.

The University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Information Science, UNT's Oral History Program, and Louisiana State University (LSU) request \$ 73,809 for a one-year **National Leadership Grant (NLG)** under the **National Forum Grant** category. This project will convene librarians, archivists, oral history practitioners, community-based memory workers, and other stakeholders in oral history from across the nation to identify best practices, strategies, and existing challenges around building and implementing oral history projects. The project will connect disparate perspectives and approaches of various stakeholders in community oral history projects and programs.

### Project Justification

*Statement of Need:* Oral history has long been recognized as an invaluable resource for preserving historical and cultural memory and its documentary value has been acknowledged in many libraries and archives. Additionally, as cultural heritage institutions have sought to make their collections more comprehensive, oral history has become an important focus of curatorial practice. Increasingly, along with a growing interest in community history/community storytelling projects, oral history has been regarded as an essential part of most community-based archives where community members record, share, and save their unique individual and community memories<sup>1</sup>. Many different groups and communities outside the traditional cultural heritage profession are now empowered to create oral history and present it online. They often face challenges in fulfilling their mandates to collect, preserve, and make accessible their oral history, especially in terms of practice sharing, capacity building, and sustainability, as evidenced by the report of the Architecting Sustainable Futures project<sup>2</sup>. To overcome these challenges, they often work with established cultural heritage institutions, such as university libraries and archives or local historical societies.

The discussion on what oral historians and archivists have to offer each other has been consistent over the past several decades; for instance, how can they advance their common interests in creating, preserving, and interpreting oral histories? Such discussion has mainly taken place in oral history literature as traditional historians have not taken an active role in collecting resources for preservation. Archivists and librarians have not been highly visible in this conversation; their active participation in oral history, both as collector and creator, has been overlooked (Swain, 2003). Further, oral histories do not always fall neatly into most established standards archivists or librarians have set forth; this can raise difficult questions when professionals become involved in decisions about what to select for preservation and on what basis, and on how to properly describe oral history collections (Flinn, 2007; Matusiak, et al., 2017). Due to different perspectives and the needs of these two groups, there are certainly gaps in practices and capabilities regarding challenges, constraints, and limitations of community oral history projects.

As such, this project will bring together academic and community oral history practitioners, librarians, and archivists to share their experiences, identify challenges and gaps in current practice and standards, and pinpoint the latest solutions and implementations for community oral history projects.

*Broad Impact:* The approaches and challenges to curating oral history that we will identify in this project will support the improvement and enhancement of access to and use of oral history, which is a collection of community stories. It also will ultimately help unify and connect members of the community and construct and amplify community history and identity. The outcome of this project will provide a model for community engagement and involvement that fosters a robust partnership and collaboration among established memory institutions and their community partners.

### Project Work plan

*Phase 1 National Conversation:* We will host a series of four virtual forums to stimulate and facilitate a national conversation about strategies, best practices, and challenges of community oral history. The first forum will showcase different types of community oral history initiatives; they will be led by six invited speakers who will share their experiences and lessons learned from the initiatives. The remaining forums will explore proven methodological practices and emerging trends for oral history; these interactive sessions will be organized under specific themes (e.g., describing oral history records, using oral history collections) and be led by nine speakers. Forum attendees will be invited to submit questions in advance of each forum, which will be collected and aggregated for speakers' response. All forum speakers will be invited through

<sup>1</sup> Community may include organizations, urban neighborhoods, and rural, small-town settings as well as shared social identity.

<sup>2</sup> <https://architectingsustainablefutures.org/>

recommendations from the project advisory board and referrals from practitioners. The virtual forums, which allow broad engagement by various stakeholders, will also be utilized as a gateway to promote our project and to recruit potential focus group participants.

*Phase 2 Focus Groups:* We will conduct a series of four focus groups with an anticipated attendance of seven to eight people in each group to identify their needs and priorities for oral history curation. It will be used as a way of getting deeper into the issues facing oral history practitioners. The focus groups will target the following participants who have engaged in community oral history projects: 1) library and archive practitioners, and 2) oral and public historians<sup>3</sup>. Focus group interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis.

*Project Team:* PI Dr. Jeonghyun Kim, Associate Professor in the Department of Information Science at UNT, directs the IMLS-funded Digital Curation and Data Management Graduate Academic Certificate program. Co-PI Dr. Todd Moye is a Professor in the Department of History and Director of the UNT Oral History Program. Co-PI Ana Roeschley is an Assistant Professor of Professional Practice in the School of Library and Information Science at LSU. The following collaborators have agreed to serve on our advisory board. They have expertise and experience with oral history and public history projects and will be consulted on the speakers and programs for the forums: Dr. Doug Boyd, Director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries, Past President of OHA and creator of the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS); Morgan Gieringer, Head of Special Collections of UNT Libraries; Carolyn Goldstein, Public History and Community Archives Program Manager in the Joseph P. Healey Library at the University of Massachusetts Boston; Gretel L'Heureux, Oral History Coordinator for the Denton County Office of History and Culture; Dr. Patrick Jones, Associate Professor of History and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nebraska; Dr. Jamie A. Lee, Assistant Professor of Digital Culture, Information, and Society in the School of Information at the University of Arizona; Jake Mangum, Project Development Librarian for the Portal to Texas History; Sarah Milligan, Head of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program, Oklahoma State University Library, Member of the OHA Council; and Dr. Andrew Torget, Associate Professor of the Department of History, Director of the Digital Scholarship Lab at UNT.

### **Diversity Plan**

Currently, the oral history field is populated by a diverse group of people who come to and work with oral histories in a myriad of often siloed ways. They include, but are not limited to, local historians, librarians and archivists, students, journalists, teachers, and academic scholars, cultural workers, community organizers, and documentary artists who might have different levels of expertise, skill, and interest. As such, we will address this diverse audience's needs and engage them throughout all aspects of our project. Considering community oral history often has been employed as a tool to collect the voices of previously unrepresented groups (Karrouche, 2019), the project team will include voices and perspectives of underrepresented and/or underserved communities into the project by inviting forum speakers who serve and/or represent underrepresented, marginalized, and/or underserved communities.

### **Project Results**

A white paper that compiles the findings of focus group interviews, main themes, and recommendations from the interactive forum discussions will be published and made available on the grant website. We will also create a short YouTube video describing the findings of each phase.

### **Budget Summary**

The total amount requested from IMLS is \$73,809. Budget estimates include \$4,500 for payments for forum speakers; \$3,600 for payments for focus group participants; \$21,857 for graduate students' support; \$10,750 for graduate students' tuition; \$13,997 for project team efforts; \$4,000 for PI/Co-PI travel, and \$15,105 for indirect costs.

**References:** Flinn, A. (2007). Community histories, community archives: Some opportunities and challenges. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 28(2), 151-176; Karrouche, N. (2019). Still waters run deep. Including minority voices in the oral history archive through digital practice. Paper presented at DH 2019, the 2019 iteration of the Digital Humanities (DH) conference; Matusiak, K. K., Taylor, A., Newton, C., & Polepeddi, P. (2017). Finding access and digital preservation solutions for a digitized oral history project: A case study. *Digital Library Perspectives*, 33(2), 88-99; Swain, E. (2003). Oral history in the archives: Its documentary role in the twenty-first century. *The American Archivist*, 66(1), 139-158.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that most people who self-identify as oral historians are found in the communities that they serve. They are teachers, artists, social activists, and community members.