

# Bridging the Generations:

A Manual for Initiating School-Based Oral History Projects

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# Bridging the Generations:

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### Introduction: Place-Based Education

Over the past decade, there has been much discussion and debate about the apparent decline in civic engagement in America. In his National Bestseller *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), Robert Putnam argues that the decline in civic engagement is linked to a decrease in levels of “social capital” within communities over the past twenty-five years. Social capital, which can be defined as “the features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives,” can be viewed as what holds society together. It is the level of connectedness, involvement, and trustworthiness among people (Putnam 1995). Social capital brings many benefits to society:

1. It “allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily” through the presence of social norms and the networks that enforce and keep those norms in place.
2. Social capital “greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly.”
3. It widens our “awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked. People who have active and trusting connections to others...develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society,” leading to lower levels of crime and violence.
4. The networks that make up social capital “serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates achieving our goals.” Communities that lack these networks “find it harder to share information and thus mobilize to achieve opportunities or resist threats.”

5. There are personal benefits to social capital as well: “people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with traumas and fight illnesses more effectively” (Putnam, 2000:288-9)

Putnam’s book sparked a national discussion over the best strategies for reviving “community” in the face of social capital deficits. One approach that may offer a starting point for many communities is place-based education. Place-based education integrates the local environment and classroom learning so that the community and the physical environment *become* the classroom. According to the All of a Place Institute for Connecting Schools, Youth and Community (2001), place-based education “enables students to see that their learning is relevant to their world, to take pride in the place in which they live, to connect with the rest of the world in a natural way, and to develop into concerned and contributing citizens.”

It is well documented that place-based education, which is real-life, increases academic performance (Emekauwa, 2004; Chin, 2001; Lieberman and Hoody, 1998). Place-based education brings the subject matter alive to students, making them feel as though they are truly a part of the subject of their education, adding a deeper dimension of motivation to learning. But place-based education goes beyond improving academic performance – it builds lasting connections between students and their communities. Students learn about themselves and their families, giving them a sense of belonging. The All of a Place Institute for Connecting Schools, Youth, and Community has found that place-based learning is especially beneficial in rural America, working to counteract the negative image of “backwardness” that is often attached to these areas. Through making learning real-life and based on one’s own community, “young people begin to see their community differently – that their place is special after all.” In fact, this “renewed sense of place” that this type of integrated learning offers has actually “encouraged young people in rural areas to stay in their home communities rather than migrate to cities” (Chin, 2001).

One strategy of place-based education that is becoming increasingly popular in schools across the country is school-based oral history projects. Oral history projects can bridge the younger generation and the older generation, and in the process, address many of the issues that have “contributed to the unraveling of community – the disconnect of young people from older community members, from their local history, from a sense of place” (Chin, 2001).

This manual seeks to provide a practical guide to initiating school-based oral history projects, both from the perspective of the school and the community. I start with ideas for how to “sell” the idea of a school-based oral history project to school

administrators, teachers, and the community. Sample presentations are included on an accompanying CD to aid in this process. Next, I discuss the various approaches to conducting school-based oral history projects with references to models utilizing each method. The final section is a step-by-step guide for implementing a school-based oral history project once the partners have been gathered and the approach has been selected.

Tools, including PowerPoint presentations, classroom activities, and sample forms and flyers are also included. The goal of this manual is to provide the reader with multiple ideas and approaches to the same outcome: bridging the generations within communities through recording their shared history.

# **“Selling” Place-Based Education: Benefits to the Student, the Teacher, the School, and the Community**

When trying to “sell” the idea of place-based education to administrators and educators, one of the major obstacles to overcome is the mindset that standards-based curricula do not mesh with place-based curricula. This mindset is greatly unfounded, however, as the evidence in the literature points to the contrary: place-based education actually improves students’ overall academic achievement.

The State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER), made up of education agencies from twelve states that are working together to improve student learning through integrating the community and environment into K-12 curricula, conducted a study of forty schools that were incorporating place-based education into certain courses. They interviewed more than 400 students and 250 teachers and administrators. In addition, they administered four different surveys of the educators, including a general site survey, a learning survey, a teaching survey, and a domains survey. Quantitative data were also gathered, comparing standardized test score, GPAs and attitudinal measures of those students participating in place-based education programs to students in programs using more traditional, standards-based curricula.

## ***Student Achievement***

SEER found that students who had taken part in place-based educational programs had “better performance on standardized measures of academic achievement in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies.” Ninety-two percent of SEER’s comparisons of GPA in reading, writing, and math within schools that incorporate place-based education into some of their courses indicate that those students who have been in place-based education programs “academically outperform their peers” who are in more traditional, standards-based programs (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998).

Place-based education helps students move into a different mode of thinking. After switching to this approach, “students’ cognitive abilities appear to grow more rapidly” and they are “better able to synthesize information and to think more strategically.” This real-to-life educational strategy helps students link information across the disciplines to solve real problems. SEER found that 96% of teachers surveyed reported that students in their place-based educational programs “developed higher-level critical-thinking skills than those of their traditional peers” (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998).

A common argument against place-based education is that it stands at odds with standards-based reforms, including state-mandated achievement assessments and curriculum standards. However, a 2005 study published in the *American Journal of Education* found the opposite to be true. Through surveying teachers at 125 schools in Vermont and conducting interviews with practitioners of place-based education, Jennings, *et. al.* found that “more than half of the teachers...said that the standards support their existing use of place-based practices.” Furthermore, in contrast to the idea that standards-based reforms conflicted with place-based initiatives, the practitioners they surveyed and interviewed “portrayed the two as compatible and even complimentary.” Many even noted that they used the state curriculum standards as a guide for their place-based curriculum. Jennings, *et. al.* conclude from their study that “no conflict between standards and place-based education was evident at the policy level and in the classroom...This study suggests that the conflict between standards and place-based curriculum may be more rhetorical than real.”

### ***The Special Needs Child***

Powers (2004) found in her evaluation of four place-based education programs that students with special learning needs, particularly attention-deficit disorders, “performed better during the place-based learning activities.” They worked more independently than they did when seated in lecture formats, “engaging more enthusiastically with adult community mentors, and gaining the respect of their ‘non-special education’ peers as they thrived in the general school setting.” The study also found that students in general reported that “they learn better when their school work has a purpose.”

### ***Student Behavior***

Surveys that SEER administered to teachers revealed that 98% felt that through place-based education, their students were better able to work in group settings. Ninety-four percent stated that their students developed stronger communication skills, and 93% stated that their students were now acting “with greater civility toward others” (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998). As a result, teachers were seeing fewer discipline and classroom management problems.

### ***Teacher Rejuvenation***

Teacher enthusiasm and interest are important for two reasons. First of all, happy teachers reduce the rate of instructor turn-over in a school. Secondly, excited teachers spread their enthusiasm to their students, creating engaged and interested pupils who will

try harder because the subject matters to them. The SEER study found that 95% percent of the teachers using place-based educational strategies in their classrooms reported increased enthusiasm and commitment toward teaching. Many teachers reported that teaching through the local “had revitalized their interest in education and their profession” (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998). In fact, many teachers consider their place-based education endeavors “the highlight of their professional careers.” As they work closely with their students “in real-world situations, these teachers feel deeply rewarded as they see students, some for the first time ever, respond enthusiastically to what they are learning” (Chin, 2001).

### ***Rebuilding Community***

As the All of a Place Institute reveals, place-based education projects, particularly oral history projects, have the power to build social capital within communities where deficits once existed. Barriers between the generations evaporate and meaningful friendships emerge:

Elders, who may have previously viewed high school students as loitering menaces, value their interest in local history and are impressed at the quality they can produce. Likewise, students, whom have previously viewed their interview subjects as out-of-touch old people lacking anything in common with themselves, find the stories interesting, realize that these people were once very similar to themselves, and come away with a renewed respect for their elders (Chin, 2001).

Place-based education tackles many of the issues that have “contributed to the unraveling of community – the disconnect of young people from older community members, from their local history, from a sense of place” (Chin, 2001). It even has the capability to replenish diminished social capital through forging important bonds between young and old.

The Working Theory of Change (Powers 2004) holds that “when one has developed an attachment to one’s place, and one has the skills to proceed, an individual will become a more active participant in his or her community.” This increase in civic engagement will cause a broadening and deepening of social capital, “the invisible web of relationship.” As a community’s social capital improves, in the long run, this leads “to a healthier community, both natural and social.”

# Approaches to School-Based Oral History Projects

There are at least three approaches to initiating a school-based oral history project: through making it a project of an existing class, making it an elective class of its own, and making it an after-school club or extracurricular activity. Each of the three approaches has its benefits and drawbacks.

## 1. A Project within an Existing Class

Oral History Projects can easily fit into curricula for many classes, the most typical being English, History, and Social Studies, but oral history projects can also be used in Theater, Art, Speech, Communications, Journalism, Computer Technology, and Creative Writing. Some schools even conduct oral history projects across multiple classes. For instance, a history class might conduct and transcribe the interviews, while an English class writes poems and plays based on the transcripts, a theater class puts together a performance of one of the plays written by English class students, and a computer technology class creates a website that archives the transcripts, pictures, and poems generated by the other classes.

Some oral history projects integrate seamlessly in with certain county- or school-wide standards. (State standards for all subject areas can be accessed at <http://www.nea.org/classroom/curr-standards.html>). The “Boom Days of Coal” Oral History Project in the Upper Kanawha Valley of West Virginia is one such example. Through a partnership between the Kanawha Valley Health Consortium of the West Virginia Rural Health Education Partnerships and Riverside High School in Southeastern Kanawha County, a twelfth grade English class engaged in a place-based educational program during the Spring of 2005. All students at Riverside High School are required to complete a “senior project” in their English class before graduation. Students research a topic that interests them and write a six- to eight-page paper. These projects often end up being the same types of reports year after year, focusing on issues about which students have already formed an opinion before engaging in the research. The students in Peggy Alexander’s English class, however, did something a little different for their senior projects. These students’ research topics were centered on aspects of coal history pertinent to the area in which they live. “The Boom Days of Coal” Oral History Project became a focal point for their research.

At the beginning of the semester, Ms. Alexander’s students were assigned *Storming Heaven*, a novel written by West Virginia native Denise Giardina that is a vivid portrayal

of life in the coal camps during the unionization movement of the early twentieth century. The book captures the struggles and dangers of working for the coal industry – the industry that has shaped much of West Virginia’s history and people.

After reading the book, the students each selected topics relating to life in the coal camps in the early-to-mid-1900s. In the eleven-person class, topics included such aspects of coal camp life as music, clothing, food, mortality, health care, coal company stores, union leaders, and immigrants. Nursing students completing clinical rotations within the Kanawha Valley Health Consortium were each assigned one or two Riverside students to assist throughout the duration of the project. Community members Owen Stout and Robin Stewart, both of whom have a large interest in preserving the rich history of the area, recruited older adults who grew up in the coal camps during the 1920s-1950s to be interviewed. The class agreed upon a set of generic interview questions that all of the interviewees would be asked, and then each team developed a second set of questions specific to the team members’ senior project topics. Each of the six teams was responsible for conducting two interviews. The ninety-minute interviews occurred during two separate English class periods within the same week at the high school. Written consent was gained from each interviewee to digitally record the interview.

In order to augment the students’ learning experience, before the interviews took place, Owen led the students on a community tour of Cabin Creek, the community in which most of the interviewees live, and provided historical stories along the way.

The information that the students gained from their oral history interviews, the community tour, *Storming Heaven*, and additional research was used to write their senior papers. As indicated in written reflections about the project, the students gained much more through the place-based aspect of this project than simply more information for their papers. They benefited a great deal in terms of their own personal knowledge and through building connections to their community and their roots. Following is an example of one student’s senior paper, much of which relates to his interviews with Owen Stout, William Stout, and the student’s grandfather.

## *Food in the Coal Camps*

*Larry Vernati*

McDonald's , Wendy's, Hardee's, Shoney's – all of these restaurants are common places all of us would go to if we were hungry; for most of us foods like that are a common everyday meal. Frozen hot pockets and different TV dinners are regular get-up-and-go meals these days, but do we ever think about whether food was this easy to get years ago during the coal camp era? When people averaged a dollar a day and had to feed and support large families, the only way they could get a dollar was to do physical labor in the coal mines. Life wasn't always as easy as we have it today. Families had to work together to get the food they needed to survive.

Working in the coal mines and life in the coal camps were very hard and a major struggle. Husbands worked for very low wages and the company store would charge high, inflated prices that would break miners' paychecks if they bought anything. Families had to use everything around them to get by day by day. The main source of food families lived on came from the gardens they grew. "Every family had one, no matter who you was," according to William T. Stout and son Owen Stout, both residents of Cabin Creek. Big or little, whether it was a single tomato plant in a flower pot or a whole side of a hill, everyone had a type of garden (Stout). Even though some people still grow crops today, it was a vital necessity for living back in those days.

In the coal camps, the houses were built so close to each other that you could step from one porch to another, so you have to wonder how they found any space to make a garden. According to Owen Stout, son of a retired coal miner, people would have gardens spread throughout the hills and most of the time it would be on a slanted hill; people would just use whatever was space available to them (Stout). Most gardens would contain about the same thing, including vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, half runners, pumpkins, watermelons, onions, lettuce, corn, cabbage, beans (also known as a Miner's Strawberry), squash, rhubarb, and various other vegetables (Vernati). Most of the food grown was food that could easily be canned and put up. In the summer the families would grow the garden and can the food in glass jars to preserve the food for the winter. During the winter time, families would eat well good because of the food they canned and saved up. When a canned jar would go empty, people would line the jars up on their picket fences as a way of preserving them and

keeping them from breaking. No one would worry about them getting stolen either because all of the surrounding neighbors knew that it was one of their only ways of survival (Stout). A lot of families owned fruit cellars which they built on the side of their hills to keep their canned food and other things cool. Italians would make spice and herb gardens and sell them to the families throughout the camps (Stout).

One of the other main sources that families relied on was their livestock. Cows, chickens, and pigs were all an essential source of providing food. Chickens would lay eggs, which people would use in various recipes, and when the chicken would quit laying eggs, families would kill it and use the meat. Chicken coops were usually built on the side of a hill where it would be too steep to walk. Cows were the milk suppliers and would also be slaughtered and used for beef; they would graze in whatever space they could find available. Pigs could produce ham, ribs, bacon, and lard. Lard was used as a cooking grease.

When you eat, you get thirsty, and so families would have to provide something to drink. Most families did not have running water so they would have to get it out of a well or spring and boil it to make it sterile. Families would pick lemons and squeeze them for lemonade. The milk would come from the cows, and there were many types of tea.

Everyone likes to party, and the families in the coal camps were no exception. Moonshine, whiskey, wine, and any homemade liquor they could make were available and consumed. Miners needed no special occasion or excuse to start drinking. Superintendents used to call Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday after paydays “drunks’ holidays” (Corbin 35). A birth of a child, christenings, weddings, Christmas, New Years’ Day, and Saints’ days were all special days for drinking (Corbin 35). The drinking usually carried into the work week after these holidays, and the working would go down during those weeks. One of the biggest drinking days was the day that the miners’ would get their paycheck. On Saturday nights the miners would gather on the steps of the company store while they sang and told jokes as they drank their homemade liquor (Corbin 35). They would make liquor with anything they had at their disposal; even crops from their gardens were used. Most miners specialized in a homemade beer called “homebrew” which was made with ten pounds of meal, ten pounds of sugar, three pounds of yeast, water, and something for flavor such as peaches (Corbin 35). Most of the liquor was made in the hills, but stills could be found throughout the company town, in miners’ homes, in barns, and even while they worked or during their lunch break (Corbin 36). Saloons were a big thing

also; miners would go after work and drink. One saloon in Decota on Cabin Creek averaged \$300 a day (Corbin 35).

Plants were used extensively throughout the camps. The main uses of the plants were teas, vegetables, and medical reasons. Sassafras was one of the most common and most commonly-used plants during the coal camp era. A piece of sassafras about the size of your thumbnail can make numerous cups of tea (Robe 34). The tea is very tasteful and was one of the most common drinks around. The time to dig sassafras is after the ground has frozen and before the spring thaw. Dandelions were an important vegetable that was used in salads (Stout). Milk thistle plants were used to make tea, while the young leaves of the plant were eaten as vegetables (Stout). Mayapple, also known as Indian apple, duck foot, and wild lemon, were used in different teas (Stout). The leaves and the root were eaten. Many types of mushrooms were picked year-round. One of the most common was molly moochers, also known as morels.

Even though people picked and ate the mushrooms, they were basically indigestible and were eaten in small quantities. If people got mushroom poisoning, they used a derivative of the seeds in milk thistle plants (Stout). Blackberries, red raspberries, and wild grapes were different types of berries picked. Wild grapes were used to make wine. Pawpaws, known as the poor man's banana, were basically similar to a banana and was picked in the fall (Stout). You couldn't eat them till after the frost hit them because the frost ripened them. Another thing eaten after the frost is wild persimmons. When persimmons were green they were full of alum and as a joke people would give them to kids because it would make them pucker (Stout). Black nut, hickory nut, butternut, and hazelnut were many types of nuts that would get picked and used.

Some different ways of life that I didn't mention before are very interesting. To get ice, trucks would pull up with a big block of ice and put it in a wooden box that kept it cool. When you were out in the woods and wanted a treat, people would tear off a birch tree limb and suck on it because it would taste like chewing gum (Stout). When miners would go on strike, since there was a lack of food and money, the government would send trucks filled with things known as "commodities" to supply the miners' families (Stout). The truck would contain things like cheese, peanut butter, canned meat, and many other things (Stout). Some of the few items of food that people would actually have to buy from the company store were sugar and flour.

Miners on Cabin Creek used anything and everything they could just to see another day. Today's families have access to cheap foods and dollar menus at fast food restaurants. Looking

back on life then would make anyone realize they have it made compared to the struggles the families put up with in the coal camps. After hearing of the hardships they had to endure, nobody would choose that lifestyle over the one there is today. Without those families doing the best they can, some of the people you may be friends with could very well not be here.

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The benefits of integrating an oral history project into a preexisting class are numerous: there will always be students to participate in an on-going project; it makes collaboration with other subjects and classes possible; it is an out-of-the-ordinary project, so it is able to rejuvenate and invigorate classroom learning; it is less involved than going through the process of creating a separate class; and it opens up the possibility of integrating school and state achievement standards for English and writing into the oral history curricula.

There are also challenges to this approach, however. Because the project is a requirement of a preexisting class, students may view it as "just another assignment." Furthermore, it may be more difficult to convince teachers that they can actually integrate achievement standards in with a community-based project such as this. However, both of these drawbacks can be overcome by careful planning.

## 2. An Elective Class

If your school is willing to engage in a larger, more long-term project, creating a separate elective class for the oral history project is probably the best approach. As a separate class, the oral history project can incorporate many different aspects of learning and the students can be engaged in many different mini-projects, such as website design, book layout, audio editing, and creative writing from the transcripts.

One excellent example of a school that has created an elective class for their oral history project “Voices of the Valley” is Anderson Valley Junior/Senior High School in Boonville, California. Since 1997, this school has been documenting the lives and stories of local residents through an oral history class elective, which is open to students in the ninth through twelfth grades. The class creates books of the interviews with an accompanying CD that contains segments of the elders’ stories. Over one thousand copies of these volumes have been sold since the beginning of the program. In addition, since 2003, Voices of the Valley has collaborated with a local radio station to create a radio show that highlights the stories and accomplishments of some of the oral history interviewees. The class has also created an excellent website with some of the oral history transcripts and photographs. The students are actually the ones who create the website, take photographs, interview elders, transcribe interviews, plan the book and CD layout, and help coordinate the radio show. Thus, students involved in this elective class are able to see the project through, from start to finish, and are able to engage in all aspects of the final product.

For more information on Voices of the Valley, please see their website:

<http://www.ncrcn.org/vov/>

It is obvious that there are many benefits of creating an elective oral history class. Students are able to be engaged more thoroughly in all aspects of the project, from conducting the interviews to creating a book layout and planning a radio show. Another benefit is the fact that students enrolled in this elective class *chose* to be a part of it and so are likely to be more engaged than they would be if an oral history project were just a unit in their English class. Thus, students, for the most part, are already excited about the project and so do not need to be convinced of its merits.

The major challenge with this approach is finding a teacher willing to dedicate to teaching this class. The planning and organizing involved is undoubtedly larger-scale than a typical English or History class where curricula are already available. However, thanks to programs like Voices of the Valley, who have paved the way, so to speak, there are schools that can serve as a model to other schools interested in initiating an elective oral

history class. In addition, money may be a concern and it may be necessary to seek outside funding sources, through foundations or corporate giving.

### **3. An After-School or Extracurricular Activity**

If your school has an after-school program, initiating an oral history project is an excellent project for the youth. Curricula can include anything from simply interviewing and photographing grandparents to something as involved as creating a book, play, or mural based on the interviews.

The School for International Studies in Brooklyn, New York initiated an after-school oral history project through a New York Times grant to “allow youth to explore the meaning of September 11<sup>th</sup> through dialogue.” The area surrounding this school in Brooklyn was steeped in ethnic tension after September 11<sup>th</sup>. To counteract this tension, educators Amy Starecheski and Gerry Albarelli led students in the after-school program through a process of interviewing diverse elders in their neighborhood and compiling their favorite interviews in a booklet called “Brooklyn Stories.” For more information about this project and other similar projects, see:

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/oral/sept11.html>

One strength of this approach is that, as in the case of the elective class, students are engaged in such a program out of their own free will and so will likely have higher levels of enthusiasm than if they were completing this project as a class requirement. However, one major drawback to this approach is that there is no grade holding the students accountable to follow-through with this project. Transcription can be a time-consuming and tedious endeavor, and without the accountability of a grade, it is easy for students to lose interest or only transcribe part of the interview. Thus, alternative forms of incentive must be put in place to ensure the project is completed.

# Implementing a School-Based Oral History Project: A Step-by-Step Guide

## I. Gathering your partners and promoting buy-in

Whether you are starting as a teacher hoping to initiate a school-based oral history project with your class or you are a community member or community organization wishing to find a class with which to work on an oral history project, the first step is to gather your partners. Included with this manual are two presentations – one from the community perspective aimed at teachers and school administrators, and one from the teacher perspective aimed at community members and organizations. The presentation can be used as a tool to peak interest in the missing partner.

### Where to Start?

If you are a teacher looking for community partners, places to start include:

- Local senior center – Not only are senior centers great places to find potential interviewees, but it is also a good place to find a “community liaison,” someone who will take on the role of introducing the students to the history of the community and will facilitate the interview process by finding the appropriate individuals to be interviewed.
- Civic Organizations, such as the Lions Club, Rotary Club, Women’s Club, or Historical Society. These people often have many connections in the community and can help gather interviewees. They may also be willing to take on the role of community ambassador to introduce the community’s history to the students.
- Churches, Temples, and other places of worship.
- If none of those outlets proves fruitful, take out an advertisement in the paper for volunteers interested in preserving their community’s history.

If you are a community member or community organization, places to start include:

- Setting up a meeting with the principal of your local high school or middle school. If you can sell the principal on the idea of an oral history project, he or she will sell the idea to the teachers of that school.
- Try to get on the agenda of the next teachers’ in-service day

- Try to get on the agenda of the next Parent-Teachers' Association meeting
- If you know a teacher at a local school who you are interested in working with, work together to sell the idea to the school administration.

Included with this manual is a CD with presentations that can be used to market the idea, both from the perspective of a teacher marketing it to the community and from the perspective of a community member marketing it to teachers or school administration.

## **II. Setting Goals, Learning Objectives, and the Project Timeline**

It is important for the community partner and the class instructor to articulate their goals for the project before it begins. This will ensure that both parties understand the other's hopes and anticipated outcomes for the project.

The community partner may have certain goals for the number of interviews that are to be completed, the individuals that are to be interviewed, and the final product. The instructor may have certain learning goals for the class in terms of the content and focus of the interviews and the final product. The community partners and school partners should write out their shared goals, deciding ahead of time what the outcome will be. The responsibilities of each partner should also be clearly stated and recorded for future reference. Along with the responsibilities, goals, and objectives, a clear timeline with dates and tasks should be created.

This document should be typed up and given to all people involved in administering the project. This will ensure accountability and will provide a document to which all involved can refer if questions arise.

## **III. Building Student Buy-In and Enthusiasm:**

### **The Community Tour and Pre-Interview Reflection**

Particularly if the oral history project is a mandatory assignment within another class like English or History, it is important to get the students excited about the project and to help them think ahead of time about what they can learn and how they can benefit from being fully engaged in the project. A community tour led by an elder who grew up there can help them see their community in a different way and to start thinking about how different it was fifty years ago. A pre-interview reflection activity can help students deal with any fears they may have associated with the project and to think about what they want to learn from the elders they interview.

### Activity: The Community Tour

Taking the students on a guided tour of their community, led by an elder, can be an excellent introduction to the past. The students who were a part of the Boom Days of Coal Oral History Project in West Virginia benefited tremendously (and had a great time) because of such a tour of Cabin Creek before they began their interviews.

Cabin Creek has a rich history relating to the Mine War of 1912-1913 and the unionization movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Community leader Owen Stout, who grew up in a coal camp on Cabin Creek, agreed to take the students on a tour of some of the historical sites in the community. We borrowed a van from a local church, and Owen took the group to see overgrown machine gun bunkers dating back to the early days of coal mining, (the bunkers were used by the coal companies to prevent miners from gathering in groups of more than two, so as to stop any unionizing efforts) old graveyards buried beneath decades' worth of weeds, and to the top of Kayford Mountain to see one of the current Mountain Top Removal operations taking place in Cabin Creek. Along the way, Owen told stories of growing up as a youth in Cabin Creek and the ways in which things have changed over the past fifty years. He also brought in some local knowledge about the medicinal herbs and food plants that grow on the mountains.

After the tour, the students were asked to write a short reflection about what they learned from the experience. Reflections are an important way to help students process what they have seen. The reflection is what changes a simple experience into a *learning* experience. Some examples of student reflections from the community tour component of the “Boom Days of Coal” Oral History Project in the Upper Kanawha Valley, West Virginia follow.

*What struck me the most on our trip up Cabin Creek was the spot we hiked to see the machine gun bunker. I kept asking myself “why would a coal mine need a machine gun bunker?” That’s like going to a Wal-Mart that has a watchtower in the center of the store.*

*The bunker was used to “guard” the mines against strikers and people trying to unionize. It sat on a hill that overlooked both valleys and gave a clear view of the area.*

*- Eli Smith*

*On my trip to Cabin Creek, I learned so much about our history. I saw many places and monuments from history-making events such as graves, a weapon bunker, mine openings, and buildings that still stand today. It was a very memorable experience, and I benefited from it very much. I have read about these places in books and heard about them from residents of Cabin Creek, but actually seeing these places was remarkable. I would recommend anyone interested in our past and the places and people that have made West Virginia what it is today, take a tour of Cabin Creek. It is full of hidden information.*

*- Nichole Hess*

*During the Cabin Creek field trip there were two memorable things to me. The first was the two trees that Owen showed us. Sassafrass was used for tea and Birch tasted like spearmint gum. The reason for this being so memorable to me was that I was surprised at how much the Birch limb smelled like a refreshing piece of gum. The second part of the trip that stood out was when we visited the machine gun bunker. Why this part of the trip appealed to me is because I imagined towers stretching over great distances, having one as far as the eye could see, and then building others at the same distance. I feel that machine gun bunkers were a pretty violent way to keep control of the workers.*

*- Larry Vernati*

### **Activity: Pre-Interview Reflection**

Engaging in reflection before the interviews can be just as important as engaging in reflection after the interviews are completed. The pre-activity reflection can help students think about and deal with their fears, questions, and reach a better understanding of what it is that they hope to learn from the elder they interview. Furthermore, it will cause the student to be more mindful of the connection between the interview and their learning while the interview is actually taking place.

One pre-interview reflection activity that can be used is to tape four pieces of flip chart paper or posterboard to different sections of the room. Write the following on the posters:

- Poster 1: What do I want to learn most about this community's past?
- Poster 2: What do I want to learn most about the person I interview?

- Poster 3: What are my fears about this project?
- Poster 4: What is exciting to me about this project?

Have the students get up and move from poster to poster, writing their own answer to each question. After everyone has written something for each of the four questions, have them sit in their seats. Read each question and all of the responses that people have provided. Have a group discussion about their fears, excitements, and hoped-for learning. Transcribe these questions and responses, and distribute them to the students during the next class period. At the end of the entire project, re-visit the questions and responses.

## **IV. Creating the Interview Guide**

It is a good idea to have certain questions that are common to all of the interviews while still leaving room for the student to ask questions that are specific to his or her area of interest. One approach to promoting ownership over the interview process is to let the students decide as a group the general interviewing questions that will be common to all interviews.

### **Activity: Group Brainstorming**

Divide students up into groups of two or three, and tell them to pick a recorder and a reporter for their group. Give them ten minutes to brainstorm questions they believe should be asked of all interviewees in the project.

Once the ten minutes are over, have each group's reporter stand up and tell the class the questions that his or her group developed. Make a list of all of the questions on the chalkboard or on a flip chart.

After each group has reported, tell the class to individually select the ten questions on the chalkboard that he or she thinks are the most important "group questions" to ask. Have the students write these questions on a piece of notebook paper. Collect the lists and rank the questions, according to how many "votes" each received. The ten questions that received the most "votes" will be the ones that are common to each interview.

After deciding on the questions everyone will ask, give the students an opportunity to develop an interview guide that is specific to their area of interest. Thus, each interview will have general questions that everyone will ask, as well as more topic-specific questions that will be different depending upon the interviewer. (See Attachment 1 for a sample Interview Guide).

## V. Recruiting Interviewees

The community liaison is essential during the recruiting process. He or she will have an idea of who in the community should be interviewed, based on the research interests of the students.

A flyer describing the project can be made for recruiting purposes (see Attachment 2 for an example recruiting flyer). The community liaison should work with the class instructor to set the interviewing schedule and arrange transportation if necessary.

## VI. Preparing for the Interview

There are two key components to preparing the class for the interview: gathering and learning how to use the equipment, and learning how to conduct an interview.

### Equipment:

- Audio recorder – You can use either digital audio recorders or tape recorders. It is advisable to use some sort of audio recorder to free up the interviewer from taking notes, allowing the interviewer to be more engaged in the interaction. Using an audio recorder makes the interview run more smoothly, more like a conversation. That is not to say that the interviewer cannot make occasional notes, but an audio recorder means that the interviewer does not need to continually take notes.
- Extra tapes (if the audio recorder is a tape recorder)
- Extra batteries
- Notepad
- Pens/Pencils
- Extension cord (if recorder needs a power source)
- Camera (digital or film)
- Interview release form
- Interview guide

## Lesson: How to Conduct an Interview

A number of aspects of interviewing technique should be included in this lesson. Following are some points that should be included in a discussion of proper interviewing technique, led by the teacher or community leader. It may also be helpful to create a hand-out of these points for the students.

### **Interviewing Technique**

1. Introduce yourself at the beginning of the interview and take a little time to tell your interviewee about yourself. This will help establish rapport and a sense of comfort for the elder.
2. Ask the interviewee if you can record the interview. Tell him or her that it will help ensure that you will be able to accurately transcribe the interview and will not miss any of the important things they may say.
3. Place the audio recorder on a flat surface within easy reach and run a test before you begin the interview to ensure that the equipment is working properly.
4. Read the **Interview Release Form** (see Attachment 3) aloud to the interviewee. Never assume that the interviewee can read. It is best to make it part of the interview protocol to read the release form to everyone. Fill the form out for the interviewee and ask him or her to sign where you indicate.
5. Begin the interview with simple, straight-forward questions, such as, “What is your full name?” “Where were you born?” “How many brothers and sisters did you have?” Simple questions will help the interviewee feel more relaxed and less nervous. Many people you will interview will have never been interviewed before and will worry about “giving the wrong answers.”
6. Look interested and give non-verbal feedback throughout the entire interview. Once you ask a question, your job is not done. You need to be an active listener, making the interviewee feel like he or she is telling you the most interesting thing you’ve ever heard. Some tips for active listening:
  - a. Sit forward on your chair close to the person – don’t slouch.
  - b. Nod your head every once in awhile to let them know that you’re listening
  - c. Smile often
  - d. Maintain eye contact. This will make them feel like what they have to say is important

7. Prepare an interview guide ahead of time. Be sure that the questions are open-ended and avoid “yes” or “no” questions. The *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* suggests that using questions that begin with “How” “What” or “Why” will draw out fuller responses than asking questions that begin with “Do” or “Did.” (For example, ask, “How did you learn your trade?” or “What was it like learning your trade?” instead of “Did you like learning your trade?”)
8. If there is a pause or silence, don’t rush onto the next question. Give your interviewee time to think about what you’ve asked. If it seems that the interviewee doesn’t understand your question, you may need to ask it in a different way.
9. Ask the interviewee for stories or anecdotes about the topic you are interested in. As the *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* relates, “stories are important sources of information for the community researcher – they encapsulate attitudes and beliefs, wisdom and knowledge that lie at the heart of a person’s identity and experience.”
10. Be aware of your interviewee’s body language. If it seems that he or she doesn’t want to talk about something, don’t push it. Just move on to the next question.
11. Don’t be a slave to the interview guide. If your interviewee goes off in some different direction, let it happen. You may end up learning about a subject you didn’t even think of.
12. Ask your interviewee if he or she has any old pictures, scrapbooks, photo albums or momentos, tools, or letters. These can be great “triggers” for old memories that may be buried.
13. If your interviewee is getting tired, stop the interview and schedule it for another time.
14. Always be extremely thankful to the interviewee for his or her time. Send a thank you note, and if possible, a copy of the interview transcript and/or pictures.

### **Activity: The Practice Interview**

One of the most important ways to prepare for the interview is to practice interviewing technique. The following is an activity that can be done in class.

Have the students bring in an object or photo from home that helps define who they are or where their family is from. They should write at least one page about the item's significance and should bring the item with them to class.

Divide the students into pairs for the practice interview exercise. One person will play the role of the interviewer and the other will be the interviewee. The interviewer should ask questions about the object that the interviewee has brought, keeping in mind all of the guidelines that have been presented. After the interview is over, the interviewee should fill out the **Critique Form** (see Attachment 4) on the interviewer and should go over the critique with the interviewer, giving suggestions for how he/she could improve.

Have the pairs switch roles and complete a second interview and critique.

## **VII. Conducting the Interview**

Interviews can either be conducted at the elder's home or at the high school. There are benefits and drawbacks to each approach. Conducting the interview in the elder's home will provide access to items such as old photographs, family heirlooms, and other historical objects. In addition, the elder may be more comfortable and more talkative in his or her own space. However, it is usually more difficult from the school's perspective for students to conduct the interviews in homes. Transportation for the student may be an issue, particularly if the student does not yet drive.

An alternative to conducting the interviews in the home is to have the students interview the elders at the school during class time. This approach cuts out the issue of transportation for the student, but it may limit certain elders' ability to participate. One possibility is to organize transportation for the elder, either through the community liaison or through a family member. If this is the approach taken, the interviewees should be asked to bring along any visual aids, such as pictures or historical objects to show during their interview. If a scanner is available, photographs can be scanned, and objects can be photographed.

In the case of interviews conducted in the school, it is necessary to reserve multiple quiet spaces for the interviews ahead of time. It may be necessary to conduct the interviews over two or three class periods. Each interview should take place in an enclosed room that is relatively quiet.

Regardless of the location where the interview is conducted, students should be sure that they have all of the necessary equipment and supplies on the checklist (Attachment 5) with them.

## VIII. Post-Interview Reflection

As was noted in Section III, reflection is the key that translates a simple experience into a *learning* experience. It is essential for the students to engage in critical reflection in order for the learning to concretize itself in their minds. After they have completed their interviews, ask the students to write a few paragraphs about what they learned from their elder. Students can reflect on what they learned about their community, about life in the past, about how to interview someone, or anything else that struck them. Interview reflections can make a wonderful addition to a volume of transcripts or essays generated from the interviews.

Excerpts from a few interview reflections from the Boom Days of Coal Oral History Project in West Virginia follow:

*It was truly an honor to have been given the opportunity to interview Harvey Hodges. He was very knowledgeable of every topic I asked him about. This interview was mandatory in order to get information for my senior project, but I ended up learning so much more than what was required. Although my family has a coal mining background, I never really knew that much about how things were back when coal miners and their families lived in the coal camps. I found out so much about where I came from, why I've been raised the way I have, and about who I really am. Harvey told me that you really can't understand how hard things were then unless you lived through it, and because of him I have become more appreciative of the advances in technology and conveniences that we have to use today. I am very thankful to Mr. Hodges for taking his time to come and speak with me.*

*- Tiffany Chestnut reflecting on her  
interview with Harvey Hodges*

*The interview with was the best part of this senior project. It was great to hear stories from the people that lived the lives that we are reading and researching. To us, it is lines in a book and to them it is their life. It has made this project very realistic. The interview is what has made this project so unique, to involve people from the community. It felt good to make someone else's life and stories important to others. It certainly made their stories important to me. Interviewing these people has been so enjoyable, and I*

*have learned so much from them. After all, they are the people that the books we read were written about.*

*- Nichole Hess reflecting on her interview with Monty Shelton*

*I learned a great deal in my interview. I interviewed Bob Farley who worked in and around the mines for most of his life. He was very knowledgeable and was able to tell me so much about life in the mines. I couldn't believe how much Mr. Farley remembered about living on Cabin Creek. We talked about the mine wars, daily happenings, and he was even able to help me with my specific topic, immigrants in the mines. I was especially moved when Mr. Farley talked about his near death experience working underground for the Carbon Fuel Coal Company and his childhood bout with polio that had left him with a permanent limp. He had been through so much and somehow still found the strength to talk to me about it all. I truly had a positive interview experience, and I hope Mr. Farley and the other interviewees know how much their time and information was appreciated.*

*- Amanda Schmitt reflecting on her interview with Bob Farley*

## **IX. What to Create from the Interviews**

There are many, many creative outcomes produced from oral history interviews. Following is a list of seven possibilities, but there are many more possible outcomes and variations on these seven.

- 1) **A Book** - This book could include interview transcripts, student reflections on the project, narratives of stories told in the interviews, poems, photographs and/or essays that combine historical research and lessons learned from the interviewees. This book can be created and sold as a fundraiser for the project or to cover the costs of the publishing. The “Boom Days of Coal” Oral History Project in Cabin Creek, West Virginia used this approach. There have been two volumes created to date, and they can be viewed at [www.boomdaysofcoal.org](http://www.boomdaysofcoal.org)
- 2) **A Website** – The website can act as an online archive of all of the interview transcripts that have been completed. Photographs, video clips, audio clips, songs,

poems, and other important records generated or discovered through the interviews can be included. Examples of school oral history websites include:

- “The Boom Days of Coal Oral History Project,” Riverside High School, Upper Kanawha Valley/Cabin Creek, West Virginia: [www.boomdaysofcoal.org](http://www.boomdaysofcoal.org).
- “Bland County History Archives,” Rocky Gap High School, Virginia: <http://bland.k12.va.us/bland/rocky/gap.html>
- Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, Edcouch-Elsa High School, Texas. [www.llanogrande.org/publications/home.html](http://www.llanogrande.org/publications/home.html)
- Montana Heritage Project: [www.edheritage.org/index.htm](http://www.edheritage.org/index.htm)
- “We Made Do – Recalling the Great Depression,” Mooresville High School, Indiana. Webpage: [www.mcsc.k12.in.us/mhs/social/madedo/2002](http://www.mcsc.k12.in.us/mhs/social/madedo/2002)
- Pasco High School, Washington. “: <http://users.owtcom/rpeto/stu.html>
- San Mateo Middle College High School, California: <http://pages.prodigy.net/meng25/mchs>
- “What Did You Do in the War, Grandmother?” South Kingstown High School, Rhode Island. Webpage: [www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII\\_Women/tocCS.html](http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/tocCS.html)
- “Tell Us How It Was: Students Interview their Elders” What Kids Can Do. Webpage: [www.whatkids-cando.org/intro.html](http://www.whatkids-cando.org/intro.html)

**3) A Play** – Students can interview elders about a particular event in local history and develop a play or plays from those interviews. A performance of some of the plays could be given in front of an audience of the interviewees and others from the community

- See <http://www.whatkidscando.org/oralhistorymedley.pdf> for an example of a play written from oral history interviews in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

**4) A Mural** – Using events and people discussed in the interviews, students could create a mural or other pieces of artwork to depict the history of their community. This mural could hang in the school, in a community building within the town, or be a traveling exhibit.

- “Forever Told, Forever Kept” is one such storytelling mural based on oral history interviews with elders in McHenry County, Illinois. After conducting

the interviews, students did research at the McHenry County Historical Museum to learn what types of clothes were popular and the modes of transportation that were used before World War II. The students completed sketches, which were then transferred to five large canvas panels that made up the mural. The finished painting includes an image from each elder's childhood and a portrait of each of the storytellers as they appear today. The mural is entitled "Forever Told, Forever Kept" to reflect the students' belief that "once people tell about their life experiences, their memories are forever kept in the hearts and minds of those who hear and see their stories."

The mural is in five parts so it can be easily moved from one location to another. Educational materials, a video, a book, and poetry written by the student artists accompany the mural as it travels around the state. For more information, see:

[http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/labs/lab\\_076.asp](http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/labs/lab_076.asp) and  
[http://servicelearning.org/resources/links\\_collection/index.php?popup\\_id=412](http://servicelearning.org/resources/links_collection/index.php?popup_id=412)

- 5) **An Oral History Newsletter or Yearly Journal** – This publication could be sent to people in the community to document the school's progress in creating an oral history archive for the community. Narratives, poems, artwork, photographs, and excerpts from interview transcripts could be included in the publication.
- 6) **A History Exhibit** – Students can create a display that tells the story of their interviewee and of the community through photographs and objects that have been collected or borrowed. Students can print a few quotes from their interviews that are reflective of the times, and create interpretive labels for each item in the display.
  - The Latin American Youth Center in Washington, DC created a "Heritage Box" for each of the individuals interviewed in their oral history project. For more information see <http://www.layc-dc.org>
- 7) **A Community Recipe Book** – This book could include local favorite dishes, along with memories, stories, and pictures of the cooks. The celebrations and traditions that typically accompany these foods could also be documented within this volume.

## X. The Community Celebration!

An absolutely essential component to any school-community oral history partnership is an end-of-project celebration in which the storytellers are thanked and honored for their participation in the project. The manner in which this can be done is varied, but the purpose is the same: to show the elders the end result of the time they gave and the stories they shared during the interview process.

The Boom Days of Coal Oral History Project in the Upper Kanawha Valley, West Virginia held a reception for the interviewees and their guests in the library of Riverside High School at the end of the school year. The students each gave a presentation on their topic relating to coal history, incorporating stories and what they learned from the elders they interviewed. The interviewees were publicly thanked and their student interviewer presented them with a thank-you gift and a copy of the *Boom Days of Coal Oral History Book*, which included transcripts from each of the interviews, a copy of each student's senior paper, and their reflections from their interview and the community tour. Students and elders socialized after the presentations with finger food and punch. This project, culminating with the celebration, was a wonderful way for elders to engage in "life review," an important process in which every elder should engage. This activity provides the elder with a sense of having led a life that has had meaning and value.

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## Sample Interview Guide: Boom Days of Coal General Oral History Questions

Please ask these fifteen questions of every person you interview. Be sure to also ask your own interview questions that are specific to your senior project.

1. What is your full name? What was your maiden name (if applicable)?
2. In what town did you grow up?
3. What year were you born?
4. In what places have you lived throughout your life and when did you live at these places?
5. How many brothers/sisters do you have?
6. When you were growing up, where did you live and what was your house like? Did you live in a house owned by the coal companies? What were your living conditions like?
7. Were you or anyone close to you involved with the unionization movement? How so?
8. Were there any strikes while you (or your husband, father, etc.) worked in the mines? Tell me about them.
9. How would you compare life in Cabin Creek/Upper Kanawha Valley when you were growing up and a young adult to life now in this area? What changes have you seen in this area over the past 50 years?
10. What types of illnesses were most common while you were growing up? Did many people die from illness?
11. How did you and your family deal with sickness? Did you go to a doctor primarily or use home remedies? If you used home remedies, what were some that you used?
12. How did the coal mines affect family life?
13. What did the coal companies provide for the communities and families? (Ball teams? Churches? Community Center?, etc.)
14. What did the kids do for fun?
15. What have been your most memorable experiences (good or bad) in Cabin Creek/Upper Kanawha Valley?

# DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL ABOUT GROWING UP ON CABIN CREEK DURING THE ‘BOOM DAYS OF COAL’ ?

If so, please consider being a part of the  
Cabin Creek Oral History Project!

Students from Riverside High School will be conducting oral histories with elders who grew up in the “boom days of coal” on Cabin Creek.

This first year, we will be interviewing 12 individuals, and we are looking for interested participants.

- The interviews will take place at Riverside High School the week of April 11 – April 15. We will schedule your interview for one day that week from 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm.
- If you do not have transportation to the high school, please let us know, and we will try to arrange a pick-up for you.
- There will be two Riverside High School seniors assigned to each interview participant. They will ask you questions about your life growing up, especially as it relates to coal history.
- During the first part of May, we will have a reception for all of the interview participants. At this reception, the Riverside students will present their projects and their oral history interviews.
- Each participant will receive a booklet with transcripts from all 12 oral histories at the end of the project.

For more information, please contact Owen Stout at \_\_\_\_\_ or Shannon Bell or Amber Crist at the Kanawha Valley RHEP office at \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Release Form

I understand that this interview and/or photos will be used by           (organization/school name)           for the purposes of preserving and promoting the history and culture of the people of           (town/community)          . I grant permission for the use of this interview in various formats, such as (but not limited to) written, audio, visual, and internet-based formats.

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Conditions: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address:

Phone number: (    )

Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**In-Class Practice Interview  
Peer Critique Form**

Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the appropriate box for each question.

**DID YOUR INTERVIEWER...**

**1. Introduce him or herself and the project?**

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| YES | NO |
|-----|----|

**2. Ask if he or she could record your interview?**

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| YES | NO |
|-----|----|

**3. Read you the consent form and have you sign it?**

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| YES | NO |
|-----|----|

**4. Check the equipment?**

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| YES | NO |
|-----|----|

**5. Break the ice with at least two easy-to-answer questions at the beginning of the interview?**

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| YES | NO |
|-----|----|

**6. Maintain eye contact throughout the interview?**

|        |                  |                  |       |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|
| Always | Most of the time | Some of the time | Never |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|

**7. Seem interested in what you had to say?**

|        |                  |                  |       |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|
| Always | Most of the time | Some of the time | Never |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|

**8. Ask open-ended questions?**

|        |                  |                  |       |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|
| Always | Most of the time | Some of the time | Never |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|

**9. Give you enough time to respond to the questions?**

|        |                  |                  |       |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|
| Always | Most of the time | Some of the time | Never |
|--------|------------------|------------------|-------|

**10. Thank you for your time at the end of the interview?**

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| YES | NO |
|-----|----|

## Interview Equipment and Supplies Check List

- ⇒ Audio Recorder
- ⇒ Extra Batteries
- ⇒ Extra Tapes (if applicable)
- ⇒ Interview Guide
- ⇒ Interview Waiver Form
- ⇒ Camera
- ⇒ Extra film (if applicable)
- ⇒ Pens
- ⇒ Notebook
- ⇒ Scanner (if possible – for old photographs and newspaper clippings)