Oral History Projects:
We’ve Done Them and You Can Too!

Bill Shumaker
Personal Empowerment Recovery Coalition of Arkansas

Oryx Cohen
National Empowerment Center

Saturday, October 29, 2011
WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

• A dialogue of a prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee about the interviewee’s life experience

• Can be either in a general/biographical way or around a specific topic or event
Important Considerations

• Interviewees may need some direction from the interviewer

• Record the exchange on audio or audio-visual equipment

• The interviewee shares his or her point of view, feelings, experience, and/or story
Important Considerations Cont.

• It is not a simple conversation

• Oral history interview recordings and transcripts are archival and historical documents
WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

- As Judith Moyer says in the Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History:

  “Oral history is the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences.”
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

• First a topic or research question must be chosen
• Then you can choose a name for the project

For Example:

The Voices of Experience & Recovery Oral History Project

TOPIC: The mental health experience and history in Arkansas
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

Find Oral History Participants:

- Consumer/Survivors
- Family members
- Mental health service providers
- Others with historical knowledge
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

Developing the Structure

• Prepare by writing out your questions
• Bullet pointing topics you want to cover
• Just know that the interview is unpredictable
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

During the Interview

• Start with a statement of who you are
• Your project name
• Who you are interviewing
• Where
• When
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

Some background questions might help to get the interview started:

• Where were you born?

• Where did you grow-up?

• Who were your parents and what did they do?
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

• Open-ended, broad questions can get the interviewee started with their story
• Many specific questions will be answered without you needing to ask them
• Specific questions may be needed occasionally
• Let there be some flow
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

• When you end the interview say, “thank you for the interview.”

• Some researchers send each interviewee a ‘thank you’ note.
HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED?

For Example:

The Voices of Experience and Recovery Oral History Project

• Funded by an Olmstead Grant
• The grant proposal was written by Kaye Kundahl, a social worker within the Arkansas Division of Behavioral Health Services
• The Butler Center for Arkansas Studies will archive the interviews and they will be accessible on the Butler Center website
• The Butler Center is part of the Central Arkansas Library System
USING ORAL HISTORY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Two Key Questions*

1) What is the social change you seek?
2) Do others share your vision?

* This second part is critical as you do not want to influence your interviewees with your bias
USING ORAL HISTORY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Why Oral Histories?

• Personal testimony is powerful
• They go into depth about experiences
• They are in people’s own words
• We are the evidence!
USING ORAL HISTORY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

How Can You Make Social Change?

• Look at these stories as “raw data”
• Presentation/messaging of stories
• Highlight aspects of stories that will be most helpful in achieving your goal
• Consider using social media
USING ORAL HISTORY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

For Example:

MindFreedom Oral History Project

• http://www.mindfreedom.org/personal-stories

Publication
How Do We Recover? An Analysis of Psychiatric Survivor Oral Histories
HOW CAN YOU DO YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT?

Suggestion: Get A Grant!

• Write a grant proposal and submit it to your state’s humanities council or another agency that funds projects that have to do with the arts, social sciences, and/or the humanities
• Agencies that fund projects that have to do with mental health and/or health care
• National Endowment for the Humanities (The N.E.H. has a list of local humanities councils on their website)
• Lots of other grants!
HOW CAN YOU DO YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT?

Equipment Needs

• A digital voice recorder to record the interviews

• A laptop computer to process the interviews & make CDs

• An external hard drive to store the interviews
HOW CAN YOU DO YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT?

Other Needs

• A sponsoring/archiving agency that will archive the recorded interviews and provide access to them
• A scholar, someone with an upper level degree in history, the social sciences, or related field to oversee the project -- it could be someone in your sponsoring or archiving agency.
HOW CAN YOU DO YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT?

Release Forms

• These are needed so that the interview can be used and accessed by the public

• The interviewee, and the interviewer, sign the rights to the interview over to the archiving agency

• You may want to consult with an attorney when crafting the release
Contact Us

Bill Shumaker
williamshumaker@gmail.com

Oryx Cohen
oryx@power2u.org