

Amplifying Civil Rights Collections with Oral Histories: A Collaboration with Alumni at Queens College, City University of New York

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ABSTRACT: Representing a shift in archival methods, oral history is increasingly used alongside more traditional methods of documentation to capture institutional and community histories. In this article, the authors demonstrate how the Student Help Lived Experience Project at the Queens College Library's Special Collections and Archives (SCA) provided a vital supplement to more traditional methods of archival documentation. SCA was able to leverage resources provided by a partnering organization and a newly established graduate fellowship to bolster its relationship with other entities on campus and to engage alumni in a participatory, collaborative effort that centered their knowledge and interests. This article highlights models and lessons from the project and explores how oral histories collected for the project amplify existing collections in the archives. The authors found that revisiting collections through oral histories introduced nuance and complexity not available in the physical collections. The oral histories collected for the project enriched the historical narrative, bringing into vivid relief an important chapter in civil rights and Queens College history by uncovering personal motivations, details, and life lessons of interest to a wide audience of archives users.

Introduction

In July 1963, 16 Queens College students embarked on a six-week trip to Prince Edward County, Virginia, to tutor Black children who had been locked out of public education since 1959. Part of a student-led organization called the Student Help Project, the Queens College volunteers were white, with the exception of one Black female student, and predominantly Jewish. In Virginia, they lent support to a long struggle for equal education with national ramifications. Locally, they were part of a larger pool of volunteers who tutored children in underresourced schools in Queens. Many were also active in the campus chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). These students were united by their determination to take action to make the world a better place.



Figure 1: Queens College publicity photograph of Student Help Project volunteers in 1963. Rosalind Silverman Papers, Queens College Special Collections and Archives.

In 2009, Special Collections and Archives (SCA) in the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library at Queens College, City University of New York, began a collecting project to document the history of alumni who participated in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The college is known for its association with Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, when a contingent of Queens College students traveled to Mississippi to participate in voter registration drives and teach in Freedom Schools. Tragically, Queens College student Andrew Goodman was murdered by white supremacists in Mississippi that summer, along with fellow organizers Michael Schwerner and James Chaney.¹ The Student Help Project is a lesser-known but still vital component of Queens College's connection to the civil rights movement.

Over the 2020–2021 academic year, SCA undertook the Student Help Lived Experience Project to further document this history, carrying out 14 interviews with alumni. This article provides a case study of the project, including successful outcomes and challenges faced, with a goal of providing useful information to other archivists interested in oral history. The authors explore how oral histories collected for the project enhanced the historical narrative, supplementing and amplifying existing collections.

Background in the Literature

The Student Help Lived Experience Project drew from oral history practice, as well as participatory and community archiving models. In 2012, Terry Cook conceptualized four “shifting archival paradigms” within the Western archival tradition over the last 150 years: evidence, memory, identity, and community. Overall, the archivist moved “from passive curator to active appraiser to societal mediator to community facilitator.”² In 2012, the “community facilitator” paradigm was “on the horizon . . . not yet fully formed.”³ Characteristics of this emerging framework included centering community practices and Indigenous knowledge; sharing archival expertise, authority, and resources with community members; and engaging stakeholders with mainstream holdings in new ways.⁴

The emphasis on community facilitation has impacted college and university archivists in multiple ways. In “Building Relationships,” Eddie Woodward says, “College and university archivists are learning that, while a university records management program is important, it only tells half of the story . . . the social and cultural side must be documented as seen through the eyes of the students who attended the school.”⁵ Jarrett M. Drake challenges college and university archivists to “document student protests and activism that critique or otherwise implicate the college,” thereby exposing institutional histories of racism and inequality.⁶ Project STAND, a radical grassroots archival consortia project, provides practical guidance about how to document student activism without causing harm to marginalized communities.⁷ Overall, archivists must consider the social, ethical, and political dimensions of their work to build truly diverse, inclusive repositories.

Today, oral history is a natural choice for archivists wishing to document the student point of view and the history of dissent within their institutions. Yet, this represents a sea change in archival practice. Traditionally, Western historians were skeptical of oral history as a reliable methodology to document the past. According to Alistair Thomson:

The late-nineteenth-century development of a professional history discipline based in universities led to the institutionalization of historical procedures and training inspired by the work of German historian Leopold von Ranke. The primary concern of the new professional historian was to discover “what really happened” in the past, and the most reliable sources were documents which could be preserved in archives and checked by other researchers. Oral evidence was regarded as unreliable folk tales and treated with disdain by academic historians.⁸

This scholarly cold shoulder began to thaw after World War II, as the availability of portable tape recorders made it easier to record interviews and create transcripts.⁹ However, even as oral history became more common, academics were quick to assert that the technique belonged in the ivory tower, not in the hands of the masses. For example, in 1955, Vaughn Davis Bornet fretted that “the interview method can, in careless or irresponsible hands, produce reminiscences filled with problems for the historian.”¹⁰ In Bornet’s view, only trained “interviewer-historians” following stringent standards were qualified to carry out this work.¹¹

Despite concerns over the trustworthiness of oral history, the practice continued to grow in popularity, gaining traction as historians increasingly aimed to document underrepresented populations. By the 1970s, historians were urging archivists to use oral histories to illuminate the lived experience of ordinary people and to document the history of social movements from the bottom up.¹² Writing in *American Archivist* in 1983, James Fogerty defended oral history as an important method for documenting gaps in traditional archives. In particular, he felt that interviews could illuminate the “thoughts and motivations” of collection donors in ways that records alone could not.¹³

According to Ellen Swain, despite defenses in the literature like Fogerty’s, many archivists were painfully slow to embrace oral history, remaining attached to traditional notions of archival neutrality.¹⁴ The integration of archives into the field of library science also deemphasized subject expertise, with technology—web development, databases, and access systems—taking center stage in the profession in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁵ However, postmodern theory, with its emphasis on the value of subjective and lived experience, also influenced the archival literature in the 1990s. Responding to a changing theoretical landscape, as well as calls from social historians and activists for more grassroots approaches to collecting, archival professionals began to take a more proactive stance toward documentation and appraisal, with a goal of creating a more complete historical record.¹⁶

Recent scholarship has explored the relationship between community-based archiving practices, public history, and history-making. Community-based archivists and public historians are both committed to common interests, such as illuminating marginalized narratives, highlighting societal concerns, and developing accessible content that connects past histories to the present. In their article for *The Public Historian* in 2018, authors Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci—all individuals working in community archives—argue that the connection between community-archiving practices and public history is the mutual need to engage in activism that challenges traditional notions of neutrality and objectivity in both arenas.¹⁷ By surveying staff at 12 community archives sites, the authors observed that community archiving projects are part of an ecosystem that aligns with public history practices. The authors conclude that “community archives both provide support for history-making activities and are themselves a product of history-making processes. Public history production is thus intimately wrapped up in the practice of creating and sustaining community archives.”¹⁸ Community archives have societal implications in the sense that these repositories are actively engaging with tools that reject the passivity of the recordkeeper, while introducing new historical perspectives. Ideally, the relationship between public history practice and community archiving is reciprocal and mutually supporting.

Whether conducted by archivists or public historians, oral history serves as a primary tool for including varied voices in historical narratives. In his publication discussing the benefits of oral history projects, Michael Frisch asserts,

... oral history emerges a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.¹⁹

Oral history is unique in its duality that creates and documents history, which joins together the fields of archives and public history through its practice. Frisch's point about the power of oral history is exemplified in the outcomes of the Kentucky Civil Rights Oral History Project (KCROHP). This project collected the experiences of over 100 individuals who lived through segregation and the civil rights movement. Using oral history, the KCROHP exposed the reality of lives of average Kentuckians that were affected by Jim Crow laws and racial tensions. Most important, the project “broadened [the] understanding of the regional and national movement” by painting a microcosm of history through the conducted interviews.²⁰ The value of the KCROHP situated a specific narrative of social activism in Kentucky among the entirety of the civil rights movement and explored the histories of people who were otherwise lesser known.

In the twenty-first century, archivists have merged their technical expertise with larger goals of community empowerment. Examples of collaborative, interdisciplinary oral history initiatives abound, especially in New York City. The Queens Memory Project established a sustainable model for documenting the histories of residents from one of the nation's most diverse counties. The Brooklyn Public Library and the New York Public Library have carried out numerous oral history initiatives centered on various neighborhoods, as well as on social and religious identities. Nationally, StoryCorps democratized the oral history model by facilitating submissions of stories collected by everyday people on a broad scale, collecting more than half a million stories since 2003.²¹ The Oral History Association's website currently lists over 60 “Centers and Collections,” many of which are situated in archives and libraries.²²

Oral history training and standards remain important but are no longer the exclusive purview of professionals or scholars. In 1955, best practices included hiring stenographers to transcribe texts, discarding original media, and retaining only brief audio extracts for reference, which “could be made on 33 1/3 r.p.m. disks or with an expensive, high-fidelity tape-recording machine similar to those used by radio stations.”²³ Today, oral histories can be conducted using smartphones, over Zoom, or with inexpensive digital audio recorders. Software can automate the production of transcripts (or at least provide decent first drafts), and tools like the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) can be used to index and synchronize transcripts with sound and video for display on keyword searchable, online platforms.²⁴

In a 2016 article published in *American Archivist*, Jessica Wagner Webster found that “though archivists have been involved with the oral history movement from its early days, archival professional literature is surprisingly sparse in its presentation of oral history case studies.”²⁵ Using keyword searches, Wagner Webster determined that the word “archivist” appeared only 36 times in articles published in *Oral History and Oral History Review*, excluding results in the front matter, back matter, and regional network lists.²⁶ Moreover, Wagner Webster found that *American Archivist*, the oldest and most prestigious archives journal in the United States, contained only 37 articles with the phrase “oral history” in the title from 1938 to 2011, with only one published between 2000 and 2011. Replicating this approach, the authors found that only three articles with the phrase “oral history” in the title had been published in *American Archivist* from 2012 to 2022.²⁷ This points to the need for more oral history case studies to be published from the archival perspective.

Despite the gap in the professional literature, oral history has been widely adopted in the field. As reported by Wagner Webster, in a survey of 150 archivists conducted in 2015, 83 percent of respondents said that they or their colleagues had carried out an oral history project at their current place of employment.²⁸ Additionally, 71 percent planned to conduct an oral history project in the near future despite considerable obstacles, such as lack of support, time, and resources.²⁹ In academic libraries, oral history is increasingly used alongside more traditional methods of documentation to capture institutional and community histories. Academic archivists may initiate their own oral history projects or collaborate with faculty or administrators who conduct interviews. In either case, oral history projects are challenging because they draw upon skills that fall outside of standard archival training and require specialized workflows, software, and/or equipment. Despite improvements in technology, oral history remains time and resource intensive.

Recent scholarship highlights the advantages and challenges of integrating oral history work into academic archives and libraries. Rebecca Ciota notes that archives and libraries often become involved in oral histories “at the tail end” of the process, serving as repositories for externally generated content.³⁰ However, at Grinnell College, the Libraries and the Office of Development and Alumni Relations (DAR) were able to create a “balanced and functional partnership” in an effort to collect Alumni Oral Histories.³¹ As Ciota explains in a useful case study, the Libraries and DAR share labor and other project costs. DAR coordinates collection of the interviews during the annual reunion weekend, pays for transcription software, and funds student workers. The Libraries supervise student workers, create metadata, and upload the oral histories to Digital Grinnell, the Libraries’ Islandora-based digital platform.³² The project is worthwhile for both entities: it supports DAR’s fund-raising goals, and enriches the Libraries’ unique collections.

At Texas Tech University, archivists Robert Weaver and Zachary Hernández of the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC) explored the feasibility of converging archival acquisition processes and the collection of oral histories. They concluded that when equipped with dedicated staff and resources, conducting oral histories with donors while acquiring new accessions created “moments for reflection and

discussion . . . boosted the creation of richer metadata and uncovered deeper connections between this project and existing materials.”³³ Not only did the integration of oral histories into the archival workflow benefit the processing archivists, it also proved that fostering relationships with donors can democratize and increase the transparency of archival processes that involve community interests. The success of the SWC’s incorporation of oral histories into the field of archives further demonstrates that the two previously independent spheres are mutually beneficial and should be explored at greater lengths in other archival projects

Civil Rights Movement History

In Prince Edward County, Virginia, Queens College volunteers became connected to a long, historic struggle for civil rights and equal education. The story began in 1951 when Barbara Johns, a student at the segregated R.R. Moton High School in Farmville, led her classmates in a strike to demand better school conditions. The students wanted a new school. Resources in segregated public schools in Black communities, such as at Moton High School, were decidedly inferior to those found in schools for white students. Moton, built in 1939, was overcrowded from the start, with 450 students by 1950, although the building could only accommodate 180 students. Tar-paper shacks lacking adequate heat in the winter were the solution to overflowing classrooms. The school building did not have a cafeteria or gymnasium and was assigned a few broken-down buses from the white schools to transport only a portion of its total number of students. Overall, the school lacked up-to-date equipment, learning spaces, and books, and it was underfunded and in a state of disrepair.³⁴

Although desegregation was not their initial goal, Johns and the other students agreed to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filing a suit on their behalf to overturn the legal basis of maintaining segregated schools. This suit became one of five cases to make up the historic Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Although *Brown v. Board* declared de jure racially segregated public schools unconstitutional, many school districts resisted desegregating their public schools. Harry F. Byrd, a US senator from Virginia, called for a strategy of “Massive Resistance” to desegregation.³⁵ In 1959, a judge ordered Prince Edward County schools to desegregate; however, the county school board responded by closing the entire public school system rather than comply. The white community then banded together to open private, segregated schools for white students only. Religious and community institutions, relatives, and nearby counties provided limited educational opportunities for Black children, and, in many instances, Black children were sent to live with relatives in other counties or even states to receive an education.³⁶

The summer of 1963 brought major changes to Prince Edward County. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sent field organizers to Prince Edward County to conduct training in direct action and nonviolent methods. The local NAACP Youth Council, under the tutelage of Reverend Goodwin Douglas, pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Beulah Church in Farmville, not only protested the school

lock-out but also demanded desegregation of movie theaters, stores, and other municipal facilities. Queens College volunteer Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum captured wonderful black-and-white photographs of one of the sit-ins, which are preserved with her papers in the archives.³⁷



Figure 2: Sit-in demonstration outside the segregated movie theater in Farmville, Virginia, 1963. Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum Papers, Queens College Special Collections and Archives.

The Virginia Student Help Project had its beginning the summer before, when Queens College student Hanoch McCarty (then known as Fred) saw a story about the school lock-out in Prince Edward County on an NBC news program. At McCarty's urging, student members of the Jamaica (Queens) Student Help Project and CORE organized the trip to Virginia with the help of Education Department professors Rachel Weddington and Sidney Simon. Preparation for the trip included fund-raising, publicity, and training for living in the segregated South. Once in Prince Edward County, the 16 volunteers spent six weeks living and socializing with Black families, tutoring children, and organizing a community library. At the request of community leaders such as Reverend L. Francis Griffin of Farmville's First Baptist Church, the Queens College volunteers focused on teaching and did not directly participate in local demonstrations. The local community wanted the volunteers there to help, not to lead the fight.

During the summer of 1963, Special Assistant to the Attorney General William vanden Heuvel was also present in Prince Edward County on a fact-finding mission. Under the leadership of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, vanden Heuvel and the US Department of Justice played a pivotal role in establishing the Prince Edward Free School Association, which provided children with free education during the 1963–1964 school year. Schools were then ordered to desegregate by the Supreme Court in 1964 (*Griffin vs. County Board of Prince Edward County*), and the public schools reopened for the 1964–1965 school year.³⁸

The history of the fight for equality in Prince Edward County is more thoroughly documented by the Robert Russa Moton Museum, site of the former Robert Russa Moton High School, which is now a National Historic Landmark and museum. The museum brings this history to the public and educational partners through physical and digital exhibitions, highlighting the “leading role its citizens played in America’s transition from segregation toward integration” while also serving as a policy center and community resource.³⁹

The Student Help Lived Experience Project: A Case Study

In 2009, SCA kicked off its civil rights collecting initiative. The first donation of 30 boxes of materials came from alumnus Mark Levy, who served as co-coordinator of the Meridian (Mississippi) Freedom School in 1964. More donations from activists of the 1960s followed, including collections from six alumni who participated in the Student Help Project and traveled to Prince Edward County, Virginia, in 1963. Their papers include organizational records, clippings, photographs, political ephemera, correspondence, and tutoring curricula related to the Virginia initiative. Yet, alumni central to the project felt that something was missing from the archival record: the direct voices of the volunteers.

In 2018, alumni Stan Shaw and Mike Wenger, who served as chairpersons of the Student Help Project consecutively in 1963–1964, approached SCA with a proposal. They wanted to document the long-term impact of the Virginia initiative on the participants, including those who did not save physical materials, but still had important memories to share. Additionally, they wanted to illuminate the role of supporters who helped orchestrate the project, but did not travel to Virginia. Shaw and Wenger felt that oral histories and/or submission of written reflections would be the best way to include this information in the archives. SCA was immediately enthusiastic about Shaw and Wenger’s proposal. The department strives to implement a collaborative archival model, which integrates the voices, desires, and concerns of donors and stakeholders. Moreover, with the Queens Public Library, Queens College co-administers the Queens Memory community archiving project, which uses oral history to document the history of the borough and the campus. The college’s relationship with Queens Memory provided a strong foundation to take on Shaw and Wenger’s proposal. However, the head of SCA, Annie Tummino, was hesitant to commit to the project without dedicated staff resources. Oral history initiatives are time intensive, involving research, planning, outreach, consent, and documentation.

A joint initiative of the Queens Public Library and Queens College Library, Queens Memory is a successful participatory local history project. The program’s goal is to “raise awareness and a sense of ownership in the production of our shared historic record,” representing the people of Queens in all of their diversity.⁴⁰ Within the Queens Memory model, library staff provide archival processing and long-term preservation of and public access to interviews and other archival donations from Queens residents as well as programming, training, equipment, and resources to communities and individuals across

the borough.⁴¹ This facilitates submission of interviews, scanned documents, and other local history materials from volunteers and residents. Digital files are managed centrally and made accessible through a variety of online access points, including the Queens Memory Aviary portal, Queens College's instance of ArchivesSpace, and the CUNY OneSearch catalog (discussed in more detail later in this article).

Initially founded as a pilot project in 2010 with a \$25,000 collaborative digitization grant from the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO), Queens Memory is now in its twelfth year, with several dedicated staff, dozens of volunteers, and a vibrant roster of initiatives. The project has preserved close to a thousand oral histories; conducted hundreds of public programs, including story-sharing events, scanning days, panel discussions, training sessions for new participants, and personal archiving workshops; and produced three seasons of an award-winning, multilingual podcast. Its Ambassadors Program trains branch librarians from diverse neighborhoods to collect memories from their local communities. Administrative responsibilities for Queens Memory are delineated through a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Queens Public Library is responsible for long-term preservation of digital files, while the Queens College Library is responsible for hosting the Queens Memory website. Generally, Queens Public Library focuses on public and neighborhood-based outreach, while Queens College Library documents the history of campus communities and provides assistance to faculty teaching public history classes. Building on the college's historic connection to the civil rights movement, the Queens College Library prioritizes documentation of student activism, social change, and diverse populations.

In 2019, the Civil Rights and Social Justice Archives Endowed Fellowship program was established through the generosity of Freda S. and J. Chester Johnson. The program supports annual selection of a Fellow from the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies to carry out a project related to the civil rights collections. The establishment of this new program allowed SCA to move forward with Shaw and Wenger's proposal. Tummino elected to dedicate the first fellowship to what became known as the Student Help Lived Experience Project. Victoria Fernandez was selected from a competitive pool of applicants as the inaugural Fellow. With the assistance of Shaw and Wenger, and under the supervision of Tummino, Fernandez dedicated 300 hours over the 2020–2021 academic year to the project, earning a \$2,500 stipend each semester. The fellowship was designed to be carried out entirely remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fernandez's work included conducting outreach, carrying out interviews, creating metadata, processing transcripts, and compiling resources.

Fourteen interviews were conducted with alumni, who included volunteers of the Student Help Project, students who were politically active in campus government and helped support the initiative, and involved faculty members. The initial outreach list was compiled by Stan Shaw and Mike Wenger, the alumni who initiated the project. The Queens College Alumni Relations office helped provide contact information for the individuals with whom Shaw and Wenger had lost touch. Sadly, several people associated with the project had already passed away or were in ill health. When reflecting on

outcomes at the end of the project, Shaw and Wenger expressed some regret that the oral history project had not been organized years before, when folks were in better health and their memories sharper.

To launch the project, Shaw and Wenger drafted interview questions based on their own recollections and experiences they felt were pertinent to include in the oral histories. The questions were divided into four sections: 1) personal background information; 2) Virginia project experiences; 3) Jamaica project experiences; and 4) questions regarding project outcomes and later-life lessons derived from the volunteers' participation in the Student Help Project. A brief list of questions for nonparticipants, such as faculty and student supporters, was also included. Fernandez then revised the questions to be open-ended and to facilitate further discussion of the interviewees' responses or anecdotes. A complete list of interview questions can be found in the appendix. As a means of accommodating participants who did not want to be recorded or felt that it would be easier to provide written responses, the interview questions were also made available as a Google Forms survey. None of the participants, however, selected this option.

Before conducting interviews, Fernandez attended a Queens Memory training, consulted informally with an experienced oral historian, and reviewed existing oral history protocols and technologies. She read existing finding aids related to the Student Help Project and researched the history of school desegregation in Prince Edward County. This preliminary work provided a strong foundation for the interview process.

The interviews were primarily conducted through Zoom meetings, with the exception of two that were phone calls recorded using the Rev Call Recorder application. By using the aforementioned platforms and software to record interviews, the files generated were saved to archival standards despite only having access to basic technology without professional recording tools. Interviewees were required to sign consent forms that certified their participation in the oral history project. The release confirmed that the content created could be used by Queens College and the Queens Public Library and was protected under the Creative Commons License for distribution by the entities listed.

Through a multistep process, the interview files were prepared for publishing and access on Aviary, the platform Queens Memory uses to provide access to audiovisual materials. After identifying possible participants and coordinating the interview, the project Fellow ensured that all components of the interview were prepared for upload. This included the creation of accompanying metadata for the file and the extensive editing of transcripts that were also uploaded to Aviary. Initial drafts of the transcripts were produced by [Rev.com](#), the service Queens Memory uses to generate transcripts from audio and/or video files. The drafts were then reviewed by Fernandez, who made batch revisions to fix common errors and remove filler words like “um” and “uh.” Fernandez then listened to the interview files alongside the transcripts to correct more specific grammatical errors that automated software did not catch, such as the mention of individuals or phrases that were not understood due to low audio input. This process required that an interview be played back at least two times at 1.25 speed, generally taking between 4 and 10 nonconsecutive

hours to complete. Transcripts were edited using standards outlined in the “Oral History Transcription Style Guide” created by the Columbia University Center for Oral History Research (CCOHR).⁴² The interviewees were also integral in the subsequent steps of the process, as they were asked to proofread transcripts to revise any factual errors they might have stated or to provide further comments for clarification. Finding aids for the oral histories were created in Queens College’s instance of ArchivesSpace, with links to the digital files on Aviare. (SCA developed a guide that adapts DACS standards for oral histories.) These ArchivesSpace records were further harvested for access in OneSearch, CUNY’s integrated library catalog, via scheduled OAI-PMH requests. Last, the links to the interviews on Aviare and the finding aid records were shared with the participants, along with a note of appreciation that acknowledged their contribution to the project.

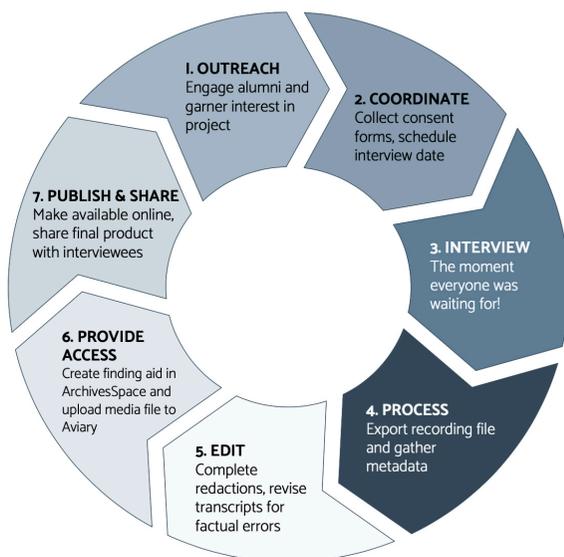


Figure 3: Workflow of Student Help Lived Experience Project tasks. Image by Victoria Fernandez.

Of the 14 total interviews, 10 were conducted in a traditional interview format, with one interviewer and one narrator. While these interviews were successful, the remaining four, which were more collaborative in style, became the favorites of the project team. These interviews involved three to five people, with multiple alumni being interviewed together by archives staff, or alumni interviewing each other with archives staff assisting. This model combined the strengths of the professional staff (knowledge of policies and procedures, keeping the interviews on track, and running the technology) with the strengths of the participants (intimate knowledge of the history and the ability to build on existing relationships). In these interviews, the alumni frequently jogged each other’s memories and asked impromptu follow-up questions, leading to more nuanced narratives. Many humorous and tender moments also emerged as the alumni recalled their shared histories and friendships.⁴³

Amplifying Collections through Oral History

Conducting and accessioning oral histories about particular collecting areas of the library's repository helped foster a better understanding of existing archival records maintained by the institution. Because Tummino and Fernandez were familiar with the existing records, they were able to develop and ask targeted questions about previously donated materials during interviews. Although metadata provides description for archival objects, it can often fall short of including details, dates, or personal background information that users would be interested to learn. The tailored approach of linking an individual's oral history with their donated collection contextualizes the narrative of their experience, as well as the circumstances in which items were created and saved for many years or even decades.

For example, the interview conducted with Rosalind Silverman Andrews demonstrates the usefulness of adding personal narratives to existing collections. Andrews was among alumni who donated personal materials such as correspondence, letters of support, newspaper clippings, project fliers, and a photograph that pertained to her involvement in the Student Help Project to SCA in 2009.⁴⁴ However, the items in her collection were limited to the brief descriptions included in its accompanying finding aid. Tummino emailed Andrews digital files from her collection prior to the interview to help her remember anecdotes from the summer of 1963 and create a comfortable space to share her memories. The records included correspondence from readers of *The Herald Tribune*, to which people from around the country sent letters with modest donations to Andrews in support of the volunteer initiative after seeing a feature about the Student Help Project in the newspaper. As a result, Andrews reacted with renewed surprise that readers mailed her donations and wanted to contribute to the Student Help Project. She recalled the following in her interview when speaking about the letters:

That was another thing that struck me about it when I looked at that [the letters]. There was an article in *The Herald Tribune*, I think it was, it was about our going down there before we went. And it had my name in there, it could even have had a picture, I don't know, but it had my name and address, which of course in this day and age would never happen. . . . I got no hate mail and instead what I got was several people writing to me and sending me checks, like for twenty-five dollars, to tell me to buy supplies for the kids.⁴⁵

Andrews's explanation of the support letters further contributed to the background of the Student Help Project by providing more information about the different types of fund-raising done by the volunteers to prepare for their trip to Prince Edward County. The practice of revisiting alumni collections in the oral histories allowed Andrews to add a personal narrative to the materials that were physical representations of the memories she made nearly 60 years ago.

While some interviews with the alumni illuminated details about items within the archives of the QC Library, others used the interview as an opportunity to capture memories that were not on record. During the outreach phase of the project, the project team contacted a list of individuals who had donated to the archives in the past, as well as alumni who did not have direct ties or affiliations with the college's library or who simply did not keep records and ephemera from their summer in 1963. The Student Help Lived Experience Project wanted to include the perspectives of as many volunteers as it could connect with, irrespective of whether they had materials in the collections. As a result of this effort, the oral history project was able to collect memories and reflections that were otherwise not a part of the archival record. This was particularly true of the interview with June Tauber Golden, who had not donated materials but was able to share in the interview how she became involved in the Student Help Project and included anecdotes about her interactions with other students on campus. Arguably, her most impactful remark made during the interview was her retelling of a conversation with classmate and fellow activist, Andrew "Andy" Goodman:

One of the people who was planning to go down [to Mississippi] asked me about my experience in Prince Edward County. And I said to him, you know, some of it was dangerous, you had to sort of learn about it, but that it was the first time in my life, I said I never felt so alive in my life because I felt like I was looking at a deep-seated resident, evil inequality, and beginning to maybe be able to do something about it and maybe turn the world around. And it was one of the most, for me, exhilarating and life affirming things. The person that I had the conversation with was Andy Goodman. And I said to him, "You know, you will just always be thankful that you've gone." And unfortunately, that was not what happened. But I do remember that that was, that was the feeling we had coming out of it. That we had learned as much as the kids had about how maybe we could, we could open up the world.⁴⁶

As previously mentioned, Andrew Goodman was a student at Queens College who was murdered in 1964 along with Michael Schwerner and James Chaney during the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Even though Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner were immortalized in media reports of the time and are remembered on campus through the dedication of the library's clocktower, Tauber Golden's remarks demystified this well-known event by connecting a personal relationship to the greater history of the civil rights movement. In turn, Tauber Golden's anecdote personalizes the experiences of the student activists for researchers. Her testimony also deepens and extends the historical narrative of Queens College's connection to the civil rights movement, which often focuses on Mississippi Freedom Summer. Because of the Virginia initiative a year earlier, the idea of traveling to the Deep South to engage in civil rights work was already familiar to students on campus when SNCC began recruiting for Freedom Summer in the spring of 1964.

Similarly, unique personal reflections were revealed in the final interview of the project which was a roundtable interview with alumni Stan Shaw, Carolyn Hubbard-Kamunanwire, and Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum. The controlled environment of the oral

history set the foundation for narrators to share reflections that did not exist in the physical collections and may have not been included if it were not for the interviews with the project volunteers. Hubbard-Kamunanwire, who is Black, was the only person of color among the rest of the student volunteers, who were representative of the predominantly white and Jewish campus community. It was important to the project team that Hubbard-Kamunanwire and Leslie Francis “Skip” Griffin Jr., the son of the local Prince Edward County reverend, were included in the oral histories to represent the voices of color who were primarily affected by social events of the 1960s. In the roundtable discussion, Hubbard-Kamunanwire challenged remarks that alumni offered in previous interviews and contributed to a perspective that was missing in the physical collection:

Shaw: Carolyn, we’ve often talked about in these previous interviews how us white folks went to Prince Edward and suddenly, we were fearful of whites and totally comfortable with Black people. Did you find that amusing?

Hubbard-Kamunanwire: I don’t know if amusing is the word I would use. I think of it in reverse. Why weren’t you comfortable with Black people in New York?

Padow-Sederbaum: Interesting.

Hubbard-Kamunanwire: Why, why weren’t you comfortable with us as Black students on campus? Because there was some of that too. Why weren’t there more Black people teaching us at Queens College? Dr. Weddington was one of very few—

Padow-Sederbaum: There were three people.

Hubbard-Kamunanwire: That’s, that sounds about right. So, you know, I thought of it that way and I thought of it in terms of, you know, people who are now so comfortable here in Prince Edward, why don’t they carry some of this back to New York?

Shaw: Hopefully they did.

Hubbard-Kamunanwire: And change our environment at Queens.

Shaw: Right. Good points.

Hubbard-Kamunanwire: And those were the thoughts I had at the time.⁴⁷

Many of the people interviewed for the project expressed that they were welcomed by the Black community of Farmville, yet they began to grow weary of white people since they had inflicted so much injustice and hardship on the Black community. Shaw and Wenger also reiterated how they felt “embraced by and enveloped within the Black community” of Prince Edward County and contrastingly “began to recoil at [their] own skin color” because the oppressors looked like them.⁴⁸ However, Hubbard-Kamunanwire offered a very different perspective from that of her peers since she had experienced racial inequality firsthand, and her parents were involved in the NAACP while she was growing up. Through oral history methodology, her own insightful and honest reflection was captured on record and is reflected in the archives.



Figure 4: “Roundtable” interview with Stan Shaw, Victoria Fernandez, Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum, and Carolyn Hubbard-Kamunanwire (clockwise from top left) conducted through Zoom video conference platform. Image by Victoria Fernandez.

The method of collecting interviews decades later provided the alumni a platform to reflect on how the Student Help Project shaped their lives and careers. Only a few volunteers from both the Jamaica and Virginia initiatives actually went on to pursue careers in the education field. Yet, many shared in the interviews that the lessons and skills learned from their summer in Prince Edward County changed the trajectory of their lives. The concluding interview questions asked participants to reflect on their lives since 1963—how did the experience inform their personal and professional futures, what skills did they develop as individuals or activists, and how did the Student Help Project change their outlook on effecting social change? Many expressed that the Student Help Project was the most important activity they participated in during their young adult lives. In the interviews, alumni shared how they continued engaging in different forms of social activism that were centered around educational initiatives after they graduated college and even still today.

For example, alum Fern Kruger shared that the lessons learned from her time as a volunteer in Jamaica led her to the path of working as a career counselor in an alternative high school for youth who were formerly incarcerated. Kruger felt that her participation in the Student Help Project gave her “a sense of the power of community” that helped her to realize how project-based learning and community organizing can be effective and impactful models of hands-on education.⁴⁹ At the time of the interview, Kruger also shared that she continued her involvement in activism by canvassing in low-voter turnout neighborhoods in New Orleans, Louisiana, and participates regularly in social protests, especially during the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. In the interviews, it is apparent that, for many of the alumni, their participation in the Student Help Project

influenced their lives from then on and created lifelong friendships that have sustained their dedication to antiracism and progressive politics over the decades.

Centralizing Collection Access and Publicizing Outcomes

As the project came to a close, Tummino and Fernandez were eager to share outcomes with the Queens College community. Though various access tools had been created, they were spread out in disparate digital systems, making them difficult to find. To streamline access for users, the team elected to create a LibGuide to centralize access to all finding aids, digitized photographs and documents, and oral histories related to the Student Help Project.⁵⁰ LibGuides are used extensively by Queens College librarians to curate access to research materials and therefore seemed like a logical choice to collate the project's assets. Thanks to the LibGuide, researchers are now able to locate and explore a diverse array of archival resources documenting the history of the Student Help Project via a single access point. Additionally, the LibGuide provides a bibliography of secondary sources related to the fight for equal education and school desegregation in Virginia, including books, journal articles, and external websites.

To publicize this new research tool and project outcomes more broadly, SCA proposed that the Office of Institutional Advancement dedicate one of its "At Home with Queens College" virtual programs, which features research and expertise of members of the college community, to the project. The event was held in December 2021, several months after the conclusion of the fellowship. Titled "Stories from the Civil Rights Archives," the program garnered close to a hundred attendees. During the program, Tummino and Fernandez used a variety of primary sources, including oral history clips and excerpts, to highlight the history of the Student Help Project at Queens College and in Virginia. The program was a great way to engage the public, promote SCA's role in preserving college history, and demonstrate the impact and success of the fellowship program.

Conclusion

Overall, the Student Help Lived Experience Project was successful on multiple fronts. SCA was able to leverage resources provided by the Queens Memory Project and the new Civil Rights and Social Justice Archives Endowed Fellowship to achieve its goals. For Fernandez, the fellowship bolstered her professional resume and led to several professional development opportunities, including presenting at conferences of the Oral History Association and the Midwest Archives Conference. Oral history work lent itself well to the virtual format, since digital tools were used for recording, transcribing, and cataloging the interviews. The digital nature of the project allowed SCA to retain momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a successful model for a virtual graduate fellowship.

From an institutional perspective, the Student Help Lived Experience Project enriched SCA's relationships with the Office of Alumni Relations and the Office of Institutional Advancement. SCA continues to partner with these campus entities to offer online

programming, conduct oral histories, advertise exhibits, and solicit materials for the collections. Through these activities, SCA celebrates and preserves diverse alumni memories for future generations. The college administration appreciates SCA's willingness to facilitate these outreach opportunities with alumni, who make up the college's primary donor base.

Overall, the Student Help Lived Experience Project was successful because it centered the knowledge and interests of alumni themselves. The idea for the project came from Stan Shaw and Mike Wenger and would not have gotten off the ground without their initial outreach and recruitment work, nor without the assistance of Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum and other participants. The interview questions were collaboratively shaped by alumni with SCA staff, and several of the interviews were conducted in a small-group format with multiple participants. SCA plans to pursue these collaborative approaches to oral history in the future.

The oral histories collected for the Student Help Lived Experience Project enrich the historical narrative, bringing into vivid relief an important chapter in civil rights and Queens College history. While SCA's existing collections tell part of the story, the oral histories capture a more nuanced version of events, uncovering personal motivations, details, and life lessons of interest to researchers, new generations of activists, and the general public. Moving forward, SCA will continue to use oral history to amplify existing collections and expand documentation of the college's historic connection to struggles for civil rights and social justice. For repositories that are able to secure the necessary resources, oral history initiatives provide a vital supplement to more traditional methods of archival documentation.

Appendix: Student Help Lived Experience Project Interview Prompts

I. Personal Background

- Where did you grow up? How would you describe your neighborhood?
- How were you influenced by your parents' political views?
- Did you experience or witness social injustice growing up? Can you think of a particular instance where you felt that you needed to be an agent of social change?
- Why did you enroll at Queens College?
- Describe your campus experience. What was the campus like at that time?
- In what other campus activities or forms of activism did you participate, apart from the Student Help Project?
- How did you get interested in or involved with the Student Help Project? Which project(s) were you involved with (Jamaica/Virginia/both)?

II. Virginia Project

- What motivated you to spend the summer in Prince Edward County?
- What types of fundraising or training activities did you help to organize or participate in to prepare for the summer in Prince Edward County?
- How were Queens College faculty involved in this project? What faculty members were involved? Can you share specific examples of how they supported the project?
- What were your assumptions, fears, anxieties, hopes, and expectations regarding going to Prince Edward County and living with local Black families? How did the reality of Prince Edward County compare?
- Did you ever travel outside of New York before visiting Virginia? If so, to where?
- How did your parents feel about you going to Prince Edward County and living among local families in the Black community?
- How prepared did you feel for the experience, from both a personal and a teaching perspective?
- What was an average day like in Farmville?
- What was it like as a white student to live in Farmville for the summer? How was it different from New York?
- How did your students react to having been denied a public education for four years? What was your reaction?
- How did you feel about the local demonstrations against segregation that were going on while you were in Prince Edward County? To what extent did you want to join the student demonstrations?
- Did you attend the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on 28 August 1963? What do you remember about the event?
- When you returned to New York at the end of the summer, what changed in how you viewed society? Were you more attuned to demonstrations of racism and injustice in your everyday lives?

III. Jamaica Project

- What motivated you to tutor with the Jamaica project?
- For how many semesters did you tutor?
- Describe your tutoring experience. How did you feel about tutoring in under-resourced, minority urban neighborhoods?
- Did your university courses prepare you to tutor students?
- In your opinion, was the tutoring experience productive for your students?
- Was participating as a tutor in the Jamaica project a meaningful experience for you? Why or why not?
- Were you planning to be a teacher or educator when you were participating in the Jamaica project? Did your experience inform decisions about your career?

IV. Outcomes and reflections

- Did you feel that you made a difference in your students' lives? If so, how?
- Share any anecdotes that particularly touched you during your work with the Student Help Project. What did you learn from these experiences?
- How did this experience make a difference in your life? If so, how were you changed? In what ways did this experience inform your future, both personally and professionally?

- What specific personal, activist, and/or professional skills did you develop through SHP?
- How did the experience influence the remainder of your time in college and/or vocational decisions?
- In what ways did the experience influence your outlook regarding how to make social change?
- In what ways has the experience influenced your outlook regarding race relations in the United States?

V. **Questions for individuals who were not participants in the Student Help Project**

- What extracurricular or other campus activities did you engage with while at Queens College?
- What was your level of awareness or what did you know of the Virginia project? What about the Jamaica project?
- What impact do you believe these projects had on the broader campus community at Queens College?
- What impact did you have on these projects? In what ways did you support or were involved with the Student Help Projects?
- What impact did these projects have on you?
- In what other civil rights, social justice, or political activities on campus did you participate?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NOTES

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