

Association of PERSONAL HISTORIANS

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Combining Personal History With Community Outreach Produces Winning Outcome

by Trena Cleland

While most of us strive to generate healthy incomes through our personal history businesses, we can also support our work and ourselves by occasionally volunteering our services. Rather than ask what our clients can offer financially, our question becomes "What can they offer that is meaningful?" Because there is almost nothing as meaningful as a heartfelt story, the rewards that can come from volunteering are many.

The elders I met through SMC had survived in the mean streets of Oakland with creativity and ingenuity, like modern-day pioneers, in spite of mental disabilities and substance addictions. Most had lived functional but hardscrabble existences before succumbing to depression and illness. A few had been in and out of the

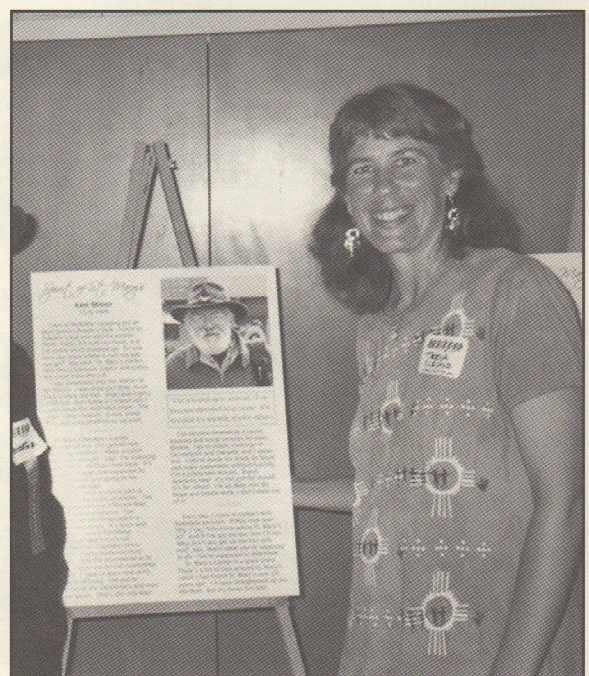
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I first volunteered my personal history skills in early 2004, when St. Mary's Center (SMC), a non-profit social service agency for homeless seniors in Oakland, California, invited me to collect the oral histories of several of its clients. The many ripples that this project generated have resulted in a variety of unexpected benefits for everyone involved.

*Trena Cleland
with storyboard.*



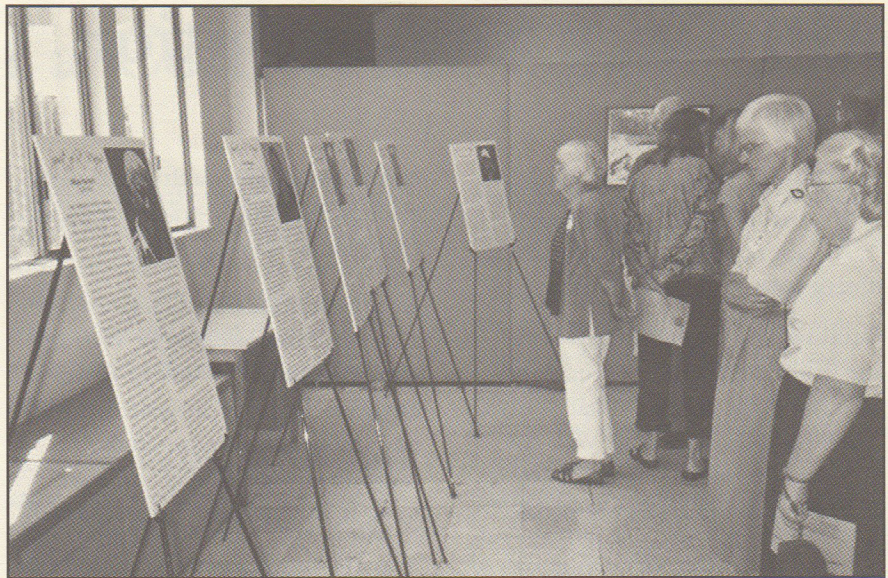
criminal justice system. If I wanted stories, they had them in spades.

My primary motive for volunteering was to support SMC's noble work with this vulnerable population. I have long felt discomforted by the fact that mostly affluent whites can afford my services. I asked myself, "Are the lives of poor people of color not equally worthy of witness?" Knowing the answer, I was grateful for the chance to work with this new population and sensed it would be a win-win project for all.

After meeting with SMC staff and brainstorming ideas about how to design an oral history project, I wrote a proposal to clarify our agreement and prepared a permission slip—using helpful samples from the APH Web site—for each interviewee to sign. The agency chose twelve representative elders for me to interview. I made a number of visits to SMC for the brief interviews, which lasted about one-and-a-half hours each, then transcribed and edited the material. I developed a friendly, first-name basis with staff and clients quickly, and all were most appreciative of my efforts.

By the time I met the clients, they had found new life and energy through the transformative power of SMC's holistic, multidimensional approach to case management. Our project's goal was to learn how these seniors had changed through understanding their mental, physical, and spiritual shortcomings and finding fellowship with others. What could they teach the rest of us? I started the tape rolling, and they began to talk.

One gentleman had been in prison for most of the past twenty-eight years, often for bank robbery. His world view has been utterly trans-



The storyboards on display at St. Mary's Center.

formed by the attention of his caseworkers; he now quotes Gandhi and is working toward a college degree in social work. Another is a former biker, methamphetamine addict, and hell-raiser who has been nursed back to health by the staff. A third is a delicate middle class woman whose husband's death drove her into poverty; she is now an outspoken advocate on mental health issues.

Space does not allow me to share many of the elders' statements, but they were by turns colorful, poignant, profound, and joyful. They also reinforced the importance of our work, as Joe Baptiste's words illustrate.

"I learned to help myself by listening to other people tell their stories and realizing I've got a story, too. My story is my wife died in 1986, and my life spiraled downhill. When I lost her, I didn't have nobody to hold me and keep me standing strong. I didn't have no guidance. I got into drugs and alcohol, and I became homeless in 1989. Before I came to St. Mary's, I

was living in a hotel room. I was around a lot of people who were alcoholics and drug addicts, and I was one of them. I'd go to church, then go home and put up my Bible, then go out and get drugs.

"When I came to St. Mary's, I found out the truth of myself. I had been in total denial that my wife had passed, that my life had got worse, that I was an alcoholic, that I was an active drug addict. Once I realized I was an addict, I started trying to do something about the problem. It's part of my sobriety now to see the enduring wisdom in the story of my life."



Over time, the collected stories have been used in many ways. At SMC's gala community celebration, excerpts were displayed along with the clients' photos on large storyboards. Several of the interviewees spoke from the dais, and I gave each of them the edited transcript of

APH Web Site Evolution

by Marty Walton

You all know that the visible part of an iceberg is only about ten percent of its mass; ninety percent is under water.

Building and maintaining a Web site is like that, too. So much goes on behind the scenes! What you see when you visit the APH Web site represents probably less than ten percent of the thinking, research,

communications, drafts, trial pages, evaluations, and re-trials responsible for what is "above water."

At some point, most likely in 2006, a totally redesigned APH Web site will be unveiled. It will be easier to navigate than our current site, yet have more information and resources available than we have now. It will generate increased traf-

fic from outside APH, which will benefit both the organization and the membership. And it will be easier to maintain because of the use of new tools.

What we're working on involves site structure, links and connections that will appear intuitive, and appropriate use of keywords. It's a consultative process and an evolutionary one, as we on the APH Web site committee learn from our experience of actually using our own and others' sites and provide feedback and vision in developing a better model.

In the meantime, of course, we keep the APH Webmistress, Peggy Moody, hopping with concrete tasks. In addition to the revised search categories for the membership directory, described in the spring issue of the newsletter, together we have:

- created Web pages for the entire 2005 conference program,
- produced online registration pages for the conference,
- developed a media section with press releases and other information for reporters,
- posted summaries of job descriptions for the open board positions recently voted on by the APH membership, and
- listed links to newspaper articles mentioning personal history or APH members.

Two APH members in particular are responsible for the vision and the technical know-how that underlies all the current work and future plans. They are Mary Breakstone

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their interviews along with their audiotapes. At the end of 2004, several of the profiles were beautifully presented in SMC's glossy annual report, which credited me.

The most recent thrill for all involved was a multi-page spread featuring a set of the profiles in the monthly newspaper, *Street Spirit*, which is sold by local homeless vendors. The content is available on the Street Spirit Web site, <www.thestreetspirit.org>, in the archives section under June 2005.

The benefits to me have been numerous: happiness at generating positive publicity for an organization I support; satisfaction for placing the elders' stories of healing and redemption in the public eye (and witnessing their delight at being "celebrities"); positive publicity for my personal history business; and the "good karma" I received for offering a service with no strings attached.

I now have a handsome portfolio that includes copies of the storyboards, SMC's annual report, and

the feature in *Street Spirit*. It's a great work sample when I go to visit prospective paying clients, and it helps me explain that the fees I charge allow me to volunteer with underserved groups. (I may do a similar project with women with AIDS.) My volunteerism adds a "socially responsible" dimension to my business that I am proud to share with everyone who inquires about my services.

Recently the Catholic diocese sold the land where SMC has sat for decades, and SMC will have to relocate. This reversal of fortune has made SMC especially glad to have the elders' upbeat, supportive testimonials to use in future fundraising appeals.

I want to emphasize that personal history work lends itself beautifully to short-term volunteer projects. Those who may be poor in savings but rich in spirit offer us the gift of their memories and reflections. Their stories not only help them, but the worthy organizations that reach out to them, and they also validate our work as personal historians. ♦

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