

Not Just the Fire Hoses and the Marches: Developing a Model for User Centered Community Archives

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Abstract:

Archival social justice often emphasizes documenting the Activists and the Big Moments. But social change, even in the Civil Rights movement, is much more than just the fire hoses and the marches. One way that archivists can give voice to these untold stories is to assist community archives. Two associated projects developed techniques to collect and disseminate hidden histories related to civil rights in Virginia and Alabama. Kids in Birmingham 1963 (Kids) was created during the 50th anniversary of the “Year of Birmingham,”¹ a turning point in the nation’s struggle for civil rights. The web site offers a place for people to tell their personal stories of coming of age in that turbulent time, stories that may otherwise be left out of the history. It borrowed techniques from Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) - a statewide collaboration that has created a union catalog of resources about the process of integrating schools in Virginia. DOVE has gained national attention for creative use of community organizing and digital technology to document and share the suppressed history of Virginia’s experience with school desegregation. The common elements and the techniques employed in the Kids and DOVE projects have led to the creation of a user-centered model for community archives. The model identifies four components: identifying stakeholders’ information needs and interests; gathering or creating content; providing an archives; and marketing the content. Protocols developed by the projects include techniques for discovery of public and private records, community building through face-to-face encounters and social media, linking community members with users of the archived content, conducting market research, and packaging content as attractive and usable products.

Introduction

How do communities begin documenting their hidden histories? How do they make sure their histories will not just be preserved but disseminated? While case studies of community archives are becoming more common in the United States, a review of archives literature reveals no standards/how-to manuals/best practices to guide communities and institutional archivists working with communities in such documentation and dissemination efforts. Two related projects Desegregation of Virginia Education and Kids in Birmingham 1963 developed techniques to capture and actively share the history of communities engaged in the civil rights movement in Virginia and Alabama. This article analyzes their methods and suggests improvements that may serve as a model for other communities to use in documenting and disseminating hidden histories.

Literature Review

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called 1963 “the year of Birmingham.” S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the peacemakers, Martin Luther King Jr., Eight white religious leaders, and the ‘Letter from Birmingham jail’*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 226

Community archives are well-supported in the United Kingdom and well-documented in archival literature.² Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd find that independent repositories are created by underrepresented groups wanting to document their histories, sometimes in response to perceived documentation gaps in traditional archives.³ Flinn et al., Michelle Caswell, Joan Nestle, and others find that autonomous archives are also formed because of a lack trust in established repositories and a desire to control how their history is preserved.⁴ Case studies in America are becoming more frequent and have begun to identify the needs of community archives.⁵ Diana K. Wakimoto, Debra L. Hansen, and Christine Bruce's case study of Lavender Library, Archives, and Cultural Exchange Sacramento Incorporated (LLACE), the authors identified key issues for community archives: creation of community archives as a dedicated space, budget and staffing, collecting and collection development, description and access, and sustainability.⁶ Pedro Oriarzal also sees sustainability as problematic, specifically for ethnic diasporas relying on cyberspace to hold their cultural memories.⁷

Lacking in both the UK and American literature is a systematic attempt to compile methodologies for creating and sustaining community archives. Several authors raise the need for practical assistance and best practices. Cristine N. Paschild, in writing about the Japanese American National Museum, is concerned that "...by continuing to privilege theoretical rhetoric over a practical understanding of community archives' material needs, the archival profession hazards the perpetuation of the segregation and marginalization it seeks so adamantly to remedy."⁸ Tracy B. Grimm and Chon A. Noriega note, "Ultimately, to expand preservation of and access to primary source materials of under documented topics such as Latino history, the archives profession must support a methodology that calls for assisting community organizations and individuals to care for their own history."⁹ Wakimoto et al. suggest a comparative study of community archives to develop best practices.

² See for example Jeannette Bastian and Ben Alexander eds., *Community archives: The shaping of memory*, (London: Facet Publishing, 2009).

³ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 71–86.

⁴ Michelle Caswell, "Toward A Survivor-Centered Approach To Records Documenting Human Rights Abuse: Lessons from Community Archives," *Archival Science* 14 (2014):307–322. DOI 10.1007/s10502-014-9220-6.

Joan Nestle, "The Will To Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York," *Feminist Review* 34 (1990): 86–94.

⁵ An example is Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi eds., *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*, (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014).

⁶ Diana Kiyoko Wakimoto, Debra Hansen, and Christine S. Bruce, "The Case of LLACE: Challenges, Triumphs, and Lessons of a Community Archives," *American Archivist*, 76(2): 438-457.

⁷ Pedro J Oriarzal, "Migrant Memories in the Ephemeral Digital Age: The Case of the Basque Institutional Diaspora in North America" in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi. (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 297-313.

⁸ Paschild, Christine, "Community Archives and the Limitations of Identity: Considering Discursive Impact on Material Needs," *American Archivist* 75(2012): 127.

⁹ Tracy B. Grimm and Chon A. Noriega, "Documenting Regional Latino Arts and Culture: Case Studies for A Collaborative, Community-Oriented Approach," *American Archivist* 1(2013): 106.

For institutional repositories wanting to work with community groups, Mary Stevens, Andrew Flinn, and Elizabeth Shepherd suggests a range of engagement possibilities.¹⁰ For repositories wanting to be more inclusive, Joan D. Krizack, provides lessons learned. Some are procedural: the positive effects of “a well selected advisory group”; dealing with donor requests, demands, and invitations; ways to pitch the project to potential donors; some are philosophical about the ebb and flow of projects.¹¹

Problem

Two projects faced underserved populations with a largely undocumented history. In 2007, Sonia Yaco, then an archivist at Old Dominion University, began hearing from patrons who had looked, without success, for material on Virginia’s reaction to the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board*. The Virginia legislature passed laws intended to “massively resist” racial integration of schools from 1956 to the mid-1960s.¹² The governor and local school districts used these laws, beginning in 1958, to lock out over 12,000 students, some for five years. Scholars told Yaco that they had looked for documentation for years with little success.¹³ As the 50th anniversary of these lockouts approached, journalists and city officials were having difficulty finding primary sources on the events. Few institutions were actively collecting records related to school desegregation and even archivists had trouble finding the few scattered collections on that did exist.¹⁴ Without a concerted effort to improve documentation and discovery, Yaco was concerned that history would forget the experiences of those involved in the process of integrating schools in Virginia. Yaco formed a new organization, Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE), to find, catalog, and encourage preservation of material related to the integration of schools, public, private, K-12, and post-secondary, in Virginia from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s. DOVE was to be a collaboration of history professionals, community groups, and public officials, which also aimed to raise awareness of this history and create resources to be used by educators. The project needed to create new techniques to meet its goals, particularly because DOVE had no dedicated staff or funding.

¹⁰ Stevens, Mary and Andrew Flinn, Elizabeth Shepherd. “New Frameworks For Community Engagement In The Archive Sector: From Handing Over To Handing On,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16 (2010): 59-76. DOI: 10.1080/13527250903441770

¹¹ Joan D. Krizack, “Preserving the History of Boston’s Diversity: One University’s Efforts to Make Boston’s History More Inclusive,” *Libraries’ Staff Research and Publications* (2007), 6. Available at: <http://works.bepress.com/jkrizack/1>

¹² Sonia Yaco and Beatriz Hardy, “A Documentation Case Study: The Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Project.” in *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*, ed. Mary Caldera and Kathryn K. Neal (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2014), 143-176

¹³ For instance, historians Jeffrey L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford spent years trying to find official records about the Massive Resistance school closing crisis in Norfolk Virginia. They cite multiple examples of public officials falsely claiming that records did not exist or barring access to records that did exist. “Dispelling these persistent myths [about the nature of the desegregation process] has been made difficult by those in power still comfortable with the way things were and are in the port city.” Jeffrey L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford, *Elusive Equality: Desegregation and Resegregation in Norfolk’s Public Schools* (Charlottesville: University Of Virginia Press, 2013), xii

¹⁴ Yaco & Hardy, “A Documentation Case Study: The Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Project”, 149

In 2013, Ann Jimerson, the daughter of a civil rights organizer, was concerned about another untold story. Her family had lived in Birmingham, Alabama, when it was ground zero for the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁵ In May of 1963, young people, some as young as eight, joined in the Children’s Crusade, marching in defiance of police orders to protest racial segregation. They were met with police dogs, fire hoses, and arrests. In the fall, public schools began integrating, followed almost immediately by the murder of four young girls when Klansmen bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and instigated further violence. Later the same day, two other young African-Americans were murdered in related incidents—police shot Johnnie Robinson in the back for purportedly throwing rocks and two white teenagers murdered Virgil Ware.¹⁶ While the activities of leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr., the young marchers, and the young people murdered have been documented, the stories of those who did not march, white and black, or who survived the church blast, were for the most part unknown.¹⁷ In anticipation of the 50th anniversary of 1963, Jimerson wanted to find a way to capture the memories of those who had lived in Birmingham. She was active in DOVE so envisioned a project that would use some of the same techniques. However since Jimerson is not an archivist, was working with geographically dispersed project participants, outside of a repository, and had no institutional backing, she needed new techniques. She created an online community archives, Kids in Birmingham 1963 (Kids), for collecting and sharing narratives of people raised in the Birmingham area to reclaim their own childhood experiences and add their voices to the documented history.¹⁸

Methodology

DOVE and Kids used similar elements as they developed their projects:

- identify stakeholders
- locate existing content and/or create new content
- create, prove access, and preserve an archive
- market content to end-users

DOVE

The first step for DOVE was to **identify stakeholders**, which included public officials, educators, and former students who had participated in desegregating schools and people such as cultural history professionals and scholars who were not participants in the process. Yaco invited stakeholders to join the project and **asked about their information needs**. Repositories wanted to find school desegregation related material in their regions. The media and history researchers asked for primary sources about the struggle around desegregating schools. Historians were particularly interested in oral histories from those who lived through integration. Community groups and public officials said they wanted to be able to find

¹⁵ Ann Jimerson contributed to her brother’s book about their family’s experiences in Birmingham, Randall Jimerson, *Shattered glass in Birmingham: My family's fight for Civil Rights, 1961-1964*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014)

¹⁶ United Press International, “Six Dead After Church Bombing Blast Kills Four Children; Riots Follow Two Youths Slain; State Reinforces Birmingham Police”, September 16, 1963 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/churches/archives1.htm> Accessed September 1, 2015.

¹⁷ For a fuller description of the silent voices see Sonia Yaco, Ann Jimerson, Laura Caldwell Anderson, and Chanda Temple, “A Web-Based Community-Building Archives Project: A Case Study of Kids in Birmingham 1963,” *Archival Science* DOI 10.1007/s10502-015-9246-4.

¹⁸ “Kids in Birmingham 1963,” Kids in Birmingham 1963, accessed November 13, 2014, <http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/>.

primary and secondary material about how their school districts were desegregated. Stakeholders raised concerns that once that material was found, that it might be taken to a repository outside their community.

To address these needs, DOVE established an organizational structure with eight geographic regions, each to be led by a regional chair. DOVE prioritized surveying repositories for relevant holdings to **locate existing content**. While record surveys are commonplace, the still-sensitive nature of school integration, uncovering sensitive and often tightly-held materials required developing new tools and protocols. These ranged from procedures to deal with access and discovery roadblocks, to agreements on how to handle territorial issues. For instance, when potential donors contacted DOVE, they were directed to the DOVE chair for their region. If a repository refused to allow surveyors to inventory their records, surveyors were instructed to try to locate community members who knew the repository staff and could inventory records instead. Other roadblocks were discovery related. If the surveyors already knew that a collection had material on *school desegregation* but they were told no such materials existed in the collection, surveyors were instructed to try other terms in the DOVE-developed thesaurus, such as *integration for busing*, or *African-American students*. In her own surveying experience, Yaco found that using different terms to describe the racial integration of education elucidated different responses from repositories because some terms have temporal, grade-level, and political connotations. *School desegregation* typically suggests events in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly for K-12 public schools. *Integration* is more commonly linked to the process in in the 1970s in all levels of education, public and private. *Forced busing* suggests disagreement with the court-ordered busing for racial balance that occurred in the 1970s. However other people, documents, and indices use *school desegregation* and *integration* interchangeably.

The Center for Teaching and Learning at Old Dominion University worked with Yaco to create a training curriculum that would be appropriate for archivists, historians, retirees, college students, and community members. In addition to creating teaching materials for face-to-face workshops, interactive online and DVD-based tutorials were also developed.¹⁹ The curriculum included surveying exercises using sample documents, templates to be used when contacting repositories prior to surveying, the DOVE thesaurus, and train-the-trainer material. The training resulted in a number of surveys of a number of repositories. Yaco and other DOVE members conducted workshops in 2011 that included both training and surveying at six repositories. One of the attendees was a National Archives staff member who then surveyed the National Archives at Philadelphia holdings for court cases related to integration in Virginia. A retired archivist working with Virginia Tech took the DOVE online training and then surveyed small colleges in southwestern Virginia for relevant holdings material.

The results of the collection surveys, which includes repositories contact information, were compiled into a union catalog hosted at Old Dominion University. Yaco reviewed bibliographies and followed up on suggestions from colleagues to add additional relevant primary and secondary sources to the DOVE catalog. **Patrons can access the catalog** online to search for relevant collections and view the results in list or map format. With no permanent funding or paid staff, DOVE relies on participant repositories and volunteers to add content and maintain the catalog.²⁰ Staff at George Mason University, Duke University, and Old Dominion University edited the catalog, added subjects, and did name-authority work from 2009 to 2013.

¹⁹ The online training, “How to Conduct a Records Survey,” is available at <http://lib.odu.edu/specialcollections/dove/training/player.html>.

²⁰ The DOVE catalog is available at <https://www.odu.edu/library/special-collections/dove/catalog>

The DOVE digital collection is published at: <https://www.odu.edu/library/special-collections/dove/digital-collection>

DOVE actively **marketed the project and content to the media and educators**, who in turn publicized the project and identified more sources. Yaco spread word of the project through traditional academic channels – conference talks, listserv lists, newsletters, and academic publications. She distributed DVD versions of the training to history professors. As publicity grew, people involved in various aspects of school integration contacted the project offering collections. Project leaders met with community groups and educators. This led to a wider audience, expanded use, location and **creation of content** for educators, and the identification of other outreach opportunities. In 2012, DOVE, American Association of Retired People (AARP) Virginia, and civil rights groups launched the *School Desegregation: Learn, Empower, Preserve* initiative, a series of community discussions that included a traveling exhibit and oral history gathering.²¹ More than 5,000 people visited the exhibits and more than 100 have contributed oral histories. Some attendees brought photographs and documents to add to the DOVE digital collection. For many, the events marked the first time that they had shared personal recollections about school desegregation and Virginia's efforts to "massively resist" integration. Education and History faculty at Old Dominion University now utilize DOVE as a way to teach about school integration history. Yaco and others wrote an proposal for a teacher workshop "The Long Road from Brown: School Desegregation in Virginia" using DOVE resources and scholars.²² Funded in 2015 by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the workshops included over 80 teachers from across the country. After seven years of collaborative effort, with little funding, DOVE has successfully increased discovery, resources, and awareness of the legacy of school desegregation in the state. This history is no longer hidden.

Kids

In creating the Kids in Birmingham 1963, Ann Jimerson modeled some aspects the project on DOVE. She began by **identifying stakeholders** – the people who lived through the "year of Birmingham," media, educators, and students. She **researched their information needs**, interests, and preferences of formats and channels. People who had been children in Birmingham in the 1960s wanted to share their experiences, but needed a way to tell their stories that would not require travel or complicated technology. To get project content used by the media, reporters would need to be able to speak with the storytellers directly. To easily use the content in classrooms, educators needed easily accessible primary sources and lesson plans that included Birmingham's civil rights history and rubrics for assessing learning. Educators and students also needed to be able to have interview storytellers by e-mail, phone, or in-person. Jimerson, a senior specialist in a health communication and behavior change project, lacked any external funding source.

Based on these needs, Jimerson created the Kids project as an online community archives, containing written stories – first person accounts – along with tools for collecting and using those stories. Storytellers **create the content**, sometimes with the assistance of Jimerson. **The public can access stories** by clicking on a photograph or on a storyteller's name or using the site's search engine. Several pages contain content for reporters, educators, and students, including an invitation to request a direct interview with the site's

²¹ In 2013, the Society of American Archivists presented the J. Franklin Jameson Archival Advocacy award to the Virginia AARP and Dr. Warren Stewart for their work with DOVE.

²² The Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop is sponsored by Old Dominion University and Virginia Commonwealth University with support from The National Endowment for the Humanities <http://thelongroadfrombrownneh.weebly.com/>.

storytellers. Tips for teaching about the “year of Birmingham” and a lesson plan are also on the Class Room page.²³

Jimerson actively **markets the project** and its content through social media, speaking engagements and attendance at commemorative events. The project uses Facebook and Twitter to draw attention to the Kids website. Social media also encourages interactive participation and shares secondary sources, such as news about related projects, press coverage, books, student projects, and relevant local happenings throughout the US. This marketing has paid off, attracting new storytellers and accessing new users of the content. Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, included five of the Kids stories as central texts in their literacy-based, anti-bias curriculum *Perspectives for a Diverse America* for primary and secondary schools. Storytellers have responded to dozens of requests for speakers and for interviews, enriching student projects, a doctoral thesis, newspaper and magazine articles, radio stories, conferences, a commemorative event in New York City, a traveling exhibition in the UK, and a children’s picture book.

Two years after its launch, the website offers 53 stories, about half from whites, and half from blacks. The Kids project has created a community that, due to segregation, could not exist in the past.

Results

Strengths.

DOVE and Kids successfully developed tools that helped the projects meet many of the information needs of their stakeholders. DOVE improved collection and discovery of records about the racial integration of schools in Virginia. DOVE’s records survey and training material was used to catalog existing collections in state repositories. The strategy of creating partnerships with community organizations was particularly effective in raising awareness about the history of school desegregation, creating community conversations, and documenting the school desegregation process through oral histories. The Kids project provided a platform for children who lived in Birmingham in the 1960s through its website and social media. The website also served to link media and educators with Kids storytellers, which led to the intended audience - journalists, students, and educators – and well as others, interviewing storytellers.²⁴

From the outset, both of these projects took a marketing approach to disseminate the newly collected histories, through community events, traditional and social media, interview opportunities, and educational outlets.

Weaknesses

Yaco envisioned a cohort of librarians, archivists, and community members who, with a little training, would scour local collections and communities in search of relevant documents. Early DOVE members and community members enthusiastically completed training to learn to conduct a records review, yet few applied that training to add new materials to the DOVE catalog once the training was completed. In the Kids project, the passive provision of a “submit your story” form on the Kids website did lead to one or two stories, but most of the stories were the result of considerable coaxing and coaching.

Opportunities

²³ Kids in Birmingham 1963 Class Room page, <http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/class-room/>

²⁴ Yaco, Jimerson, Anderson, Temple "A Web-Based Community-Building Archives Project", 13.

Stakeholders change, as do their needs. The initial audience for DOVE was scholars, media, and patrons seeking information about their communities. A catalog seemed the right answer and has been useful to patrons. However, the traveling exhibit created a new audience and participants for DOVE, people who wanted to actively share their experience, rather than reading static documents from the past. Kids' online narratives were a response to the sharing at DOVE events. In part because DOVE has led to more press and more statewide availability of sources for information about school desegregation than previously existed, the catalog has become less of a focus for the project.

Threats

DOVE and Kids sustainability is a concern with both projects. The network of regional repositories involved in DOVE is staffed by professional archivists with preservation standards. The digital files of oral histories collected during the traveling exhibit are in Old Dominion University's Special Collections, which has a digital preservation policy. However the DOVE website is less stable. DOVE leaders continue to seek assurances from Old Dominion University Library that with new staff and shifting priorities, that institution will continue to host the DOVE website, maintain the catalog, and make all DOVE tools and resources, including the survey tutorial, easily accessible.

Yaco and other DOVE participants documented the procedure for porting data from the Microsoft access backend to the front end at Library of Congress. However it is a cumbersome process. The long term preservation of the Kids website and the original content is also at risk. The site is hosted on a commercial server and paid for by Jimerson. Jimerson is currently evaluating possible repositories to ensure systematic preservation of the Kids website and content.

Findings

While the Kids project is a community archives and the DOVE project is a collaboration that includes traditional repositories and community groups, the similarities between the projects led Jimerson and Yaco to see that they formed the basis of a model for under-documented communities with hidden histories to use in creating a community archives. The model is an answer to the query, "We've got a hidden history, now what do we do?" The short answer is, "Learn what users need; find, create, and preserve it; and package, market, and teach it."

The user-centered community archives model contains four components:

- **Identify stakeholders and their information needs and interests.** The stakeholders include the community that is being documented and potential end-users. Who has the records? Who wants to use them? For some communities there is existing documentation but it is scattered; for others there are no known records. Identifying record holders and potential users is necessary also. The key is designing for the uses that could be made of this archives from the beginning.
- **Find or gather existing records or help to create new documentation** with oral histories or written narratives. A methodology or protocol similar to that used in the DOVE project may need to be developed for uncovering sensitive and often tightly held materials. Projects such as Black Metropolis Research Consortium in Chicago are providing more tools.²⁵
- **Develop an archives.** This can be physical, virtual, consortial, etc. What matters is that it is publicly accessible with discovery tools and will be preserved. For DOVE, rather than creating a new archives for donated materials, it formed a network of interested regional repositories to

²⁵ Lisa Calahan (2010) Black Metropolis Research Consortium, Midwest Archives Conference, Chicago, IL. Accessed at http://www.midwestarchives.org/ccboard/17689149_1284673658026.pdf. Accessed 30 April 2014.

which donors are directed. The analog and digital collections, including the oral histories, are preserved by professional archivists. Kids created an online platform for collecting and displaying stories. Jimerson is currently evaluating possible repositories to ensure systematic preservation of the Kids website and content.

- **Market content to the media, educators, and community.** “Market” here is shorthand for promoting use and developing products and services with end-users in mind. One of the best ways to make sure that an archives endures is to ensure that it has the support of the community. Its content should be packaged in ways that make it appealing to both educators and students so that it is used in the classroom.

Conclusion

As DOVE and Kids in Birmingham 1963 discovered, there is little guidance available for collecting the history of groups who have been left out of the written record. The projects found they needed to develop new techniques and methodologies for capturing this history. A priority for both projects was ensuring that the collected history was not just preserved but also broadly disseminated. An emerging four-component model includes the processes and techniques refined through these two projects. The model will enable additional underrepresented groups to empower themselves, build their communities, and share their histories widely.

Resources

Bass, S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the peacemakers, Martin Luther King Jr., Eight white religious leaders, and the ‘Letter from Birmingham jail’*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001)

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