

VPR&PS Research Support Competition Final Grant Report

“Piscataqua Oral History Project: Becoming American/Maintaining Identity”

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Project Narrative

The “Piscataqua Oral History Project: Becoming American/Maintaining Identity” involved training local students whose families were recent immigrants to the seacoast area to conduct oral histories concerning their experiences. We worked with local English as a Second Language teachers in Portsmouth and Rochester to identify student participants. The students’ countries of origin included Indonesia, Thailand, Mexico, and Taiwan. Thad Guldbrandsen acquired equipment for the interviews, and Judith Moyer, an oral historian, conducted two training workshops with the students. The students worked with their teachers and with Thad Guldbrandsen at the schools and in sessions at the Center for the Study of Community in Portsmouth. A high point of the experience was taking the students on an immigration history tour of Strawberry Banke Museum which provoked many comments and stories from the students comparing their experiences to those of immigrants in earlier time. Tape-recorded interviews were conducted by the students with other students and older immigrants from other ethnic groups; some transcriptions were completed, but language skills issues made this work slow. The project was assisted by an UNH undergraduate, Erica Bertolotto. The project was featured at the second annual Center for the Study of Community and Center for New England Culture Community Conference: “Becoming American/Maintaining Identity: A Community Conference on Immigration & Language in New England,” September 23-24, 2005. David Watters of CNEC provided introductory remarks setting “The Piscataqua Oral History Project” in the context of New England immigration history. Students and their ESL teachers presented the project, and at lunch, conference participants shared the ESL experience by taking mini-language courses. The project is featured on the CSC website (www.studyofcommunity.org). Thad Guldbrandsen was interviewed about the project for WOKQ and The Shark.

Support from the VPR&PS Research Support Competition funded summer salary supplement for Thad Guldbrandsen for his work with students, planning for the Community Conference, supplies and refreshments for meetings, and website development through UNH’s Web Solutions. Please see attached budget report from Angele Cook.

The most important goal was to give students the opportunity to record and consider their experiences as immigrants while improving their language skills. Another important goal was to help them see how their experiences would become part of the region’s history, connecting them to communities past and present. The students fostered

understanding of the experience of new immigrants for previous generations and groups. The project also connected Strawberry Banke Museum and the University of New Hampshire to vital new communities in the region. The creation of an archive of project materials and the success of the website mean there will be sources for research in the future. The impact of the work was measured by the success of the website and by attendance at the Community Conference. A less tangible and measurable impact is on the lives of the small group of students involved. This is a remarkable group of students.

This project was unprecedented for students, teachers, the CSC, and the CNEC, so changes in expectations were necessary as the work progressed. It became clear quickly that we would be working with a small group of students and that their language skills in English would vary greatly. Thus we scaled back expectations about the number of interviews to be conducted (on average two interviews were completed by each student, for a total of 10 interviews), and about how thorough the transcription could be. The website and the Community Conference gained prominence as vehicles for the results of the project. An unanticipated result of the project was the development of good relationships with the high schools involved and the ESL teachers who participated. The success of this project has renewed interest in oral history work at Strawberry Banke Museum. The project topic shaped the decision to focus on immigration and language for the Community Conference, and it also inspired us to invite Charles Simic to give the keynote address on his immigration and language experiences as a refugee from Yugoslavia, who by way of France and French, came to America and English.

The logistics of working in a high school environment and transportation made it difficult to gather the students together for work on the project. Student after-school work schedule and language barriers also made scheduling and work on the project difficult. Thanks to the efforts of the ESL teachers and Thad Guldbrandsen, the project overcame these difficulties.

Website Development and Results

(See PowerPoint presentation submitted separately on CD)

The web pages for the Center for the Study of Community and the Piscataqua Oral History Project provide venues for disseminating information about UNH research and collaborative projects to a wider public. The pages allow the public to access an archive of digital recordings. Visitors to the web pages can hear digital recordings of public lectures, performances, and short clips from interviews. This public archive of digital recordings will expand as future recordings are added to the web page. The site also features photographs of the students during workshops and tours at Strawberry Banke Museum.