

DU Students Bring Voices to Life Through Oral History

By Christine Gipko, A'03, GA'06

History has long focused on prominent figures, but sometimes the people who are not well known have the most to say.

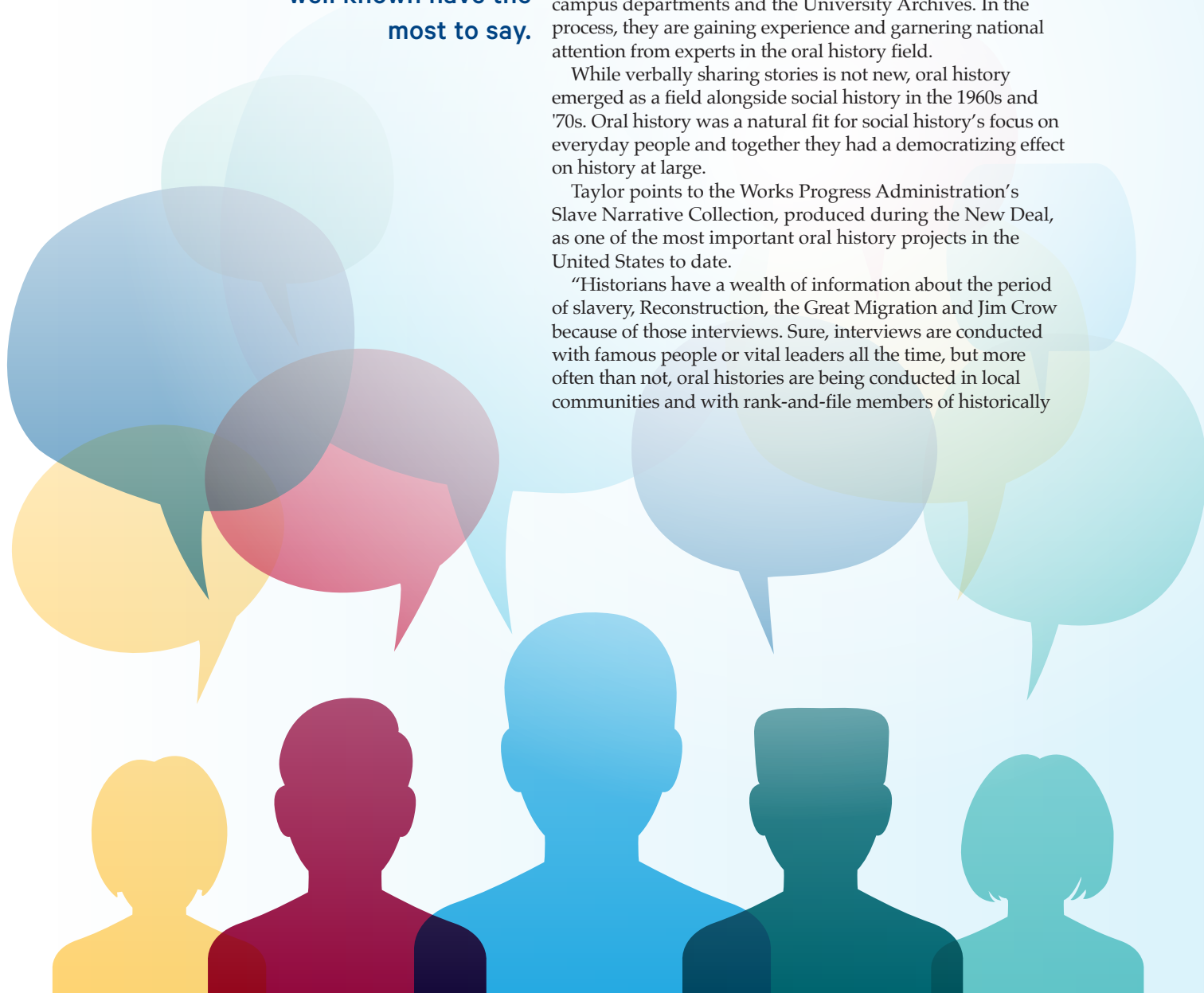
Duquesne's public history graduate students are using College Hall's new grant-funded Digital History Lab to capture the stories and voices that history lessons often omit.

Under the guidance of Dr. Jennifer Taylor, assistant professor of public history, master's degree students are collecting oral histories and creating documentary projects, often in collaboration with community partners, other campus departments and the University Archives. In the process, they are gaining experience and garnering national attention from experts in the oral history field.

While verbally sharing stories is not new, oral history emerged as a field alongside social history in the 1960s and '70s. Oral history was a natural fit for social history's focus on everyday people and together they had a democratizing effect on history at large.

Taylor points to the Works Progress Administration's Slave Narrative Collection, produced during the New Deal, as one of the most important oral history projects in the United States to date.

"Historians have a wealth of information about the period of slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Migration and Jim Crow because of those interviews. Sure, interviews are conducted with famous people or vital leaders all the time, but more often than not, oral histories are being conducted in local communities and with rank-and-file members of historically



significant events,” says Taylor. “Those are the stories that might get lost in administrative files or sit in an archive, yet they are preserved because of oral history.”

This spring, Taylor’s students used the Digital History Lab’s sophisticated equipment to preserve voices on campus. While interviewing Duquesne alumni for The Third Alternative documentary project, which knits archival photos with stories of former Dukes who helped to raise funds to save the University from a financial crisis in 1970, the students discovered they shared more than just an alma mater.

Despite nearly 50 years separating their times on the Bluff, students heard their own experiences in the interviewees’ stories.

 **TO LISTEN TO THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, VISIT**
www.duq.edu/third-alternative

When student Grant Stoner interviewed Terry Hartnett, editor of *The Duquesne Duke* in 1970, he quickly connected to her nostalgic affection for the Reverend Henry McAnulty, C.S.Sp., Duquesne’s ninth president and one of the University’s most beloved leaders.

“She remembered Fr. McAnulty working with students, providing emotional support and acting as a

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source of wisdom,” recalls Stoner, who recognized that same guidance and kindness in his own professors. “The classics department became like a family to me during my undergrad years. Dr. (Sarah) Miller and Dr. (Stephen) Newmyer influenced me to pursue a degree in public history. Without their guidance and kindness, I would not have entered the program.”

The students also took their The Third Alternative project to Washington, D.C., for the Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region conference, where they presented about the process of making a documentary and challenges they faced.

One of those challenges was accessibility. Stoner tried using assistive technology to complete transcriptions for The Third Alternative project because he does not have use of his hands to type. Unfortunately, no existing tools met Stoner’s needs, and this made it impossible for him to transcribe his interviews.

Stoner also shared his experience in a guest blog for the Oral History

Association, and his post sparked a positive discussion about the need for accessibility in the field.

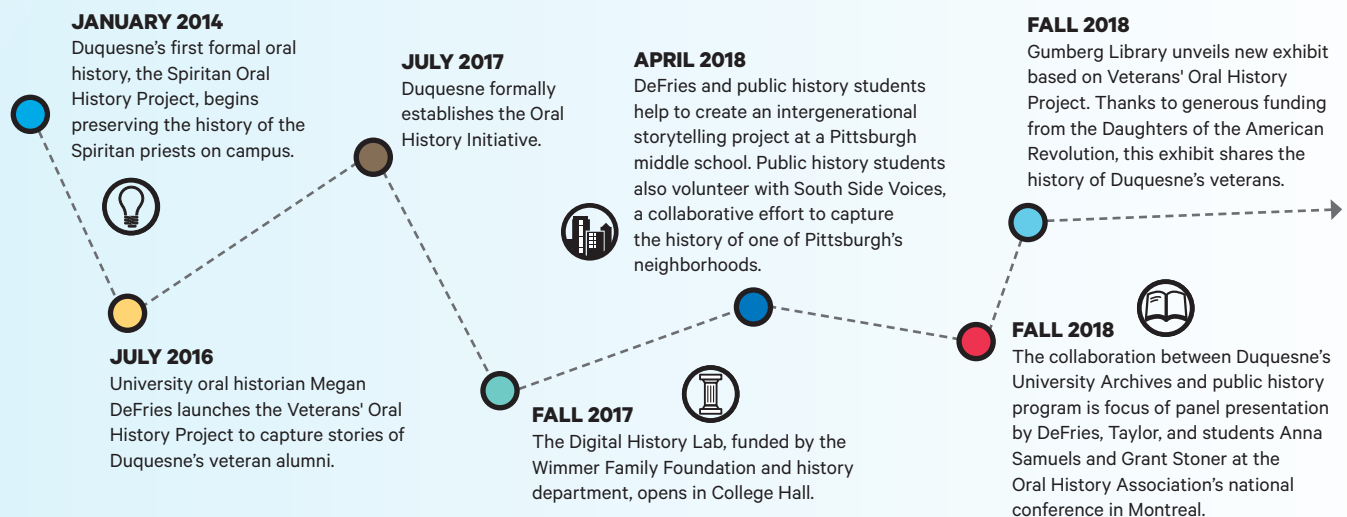
“The oral history field may not be entirely accessible,” says Stoner. “But by raising awareness, scholars can eventually develop appropriate pieces of technology to allow disabled historians to contribute.”

For Taylor, the interest in Stoner’s experience and the students’ work overall is a sign of exciting things to come—for the field, for the students and for Duquesne.

“Accessibility is such an important issue, and software developers have already reached out to Grant for feedback,” explains Taylor, who attributes her students’ new opportunities to their dedication, hard work in the lab and support from Duquesne.

“And we are positioning ourselves as *the* place in the mid-Atlantic. If you want to learn oral history, come to Duquesne and earn your master’s degree with us. We’ll teach you how to do it.”

DU'S ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE TIMELINE



In addition to using the Digital History Lab to complete coursework, students are taking their oral history training into the community. This spring, Taylor's students gave their time and skills to the South Side Voices project, a collaborative effort by several local organizations to commemorate East Carson Street's 25th anniversary as a historic district.

"I think that's what makes our graduate students so remarkable," says Taylor. "This wasn't for a grade. They were motivated by their love of oral history and a chance to build their experience and give back to the community."

Graduate student Anna Samuels was among the group who volunteered to help collect stories about the neighborhood's historic buildings. The experience taught her that sometimes the people who are most reluctant to speak are the most important to hear.

"Physical landmarks may be traceable through the narratives, but each narrator's experience is going to be a little bit different," says Samuels. "Sometimes narrators will apologize for their bad memories or minimize the importance of their stories. My favorite is when someone tells me, 'Oh, I don't have any stories,' and then talks for 30 minutes about a favorite memory. That's why the practice of oral history is a powerful tool. It gives people the chance to share their stories and hands the microphone to those whose voices often haven't been amplified."

The new Digital History Lab, which is supported by funding from the Wimmer Family Foundation and the history department, houses everything students need to do a complete oral history project: desktop computers equipped for transcription and video editing; portable oral history stations; professional cameras for still images and video recording; a three-point lighting system; and a dedicated interview area. Taylor sees great potential for the lab's growth and is careful to select equipment that supports a broad range of interdisciplinary projects.

"I'd love to see our program moving into doing exhibit film and mini documentaries, so I'm building that up alongside the oral history. That's why, when you see the door, it says

Like books and articles, oral histories are a valuable primary source for students.

'Digital History Lab.' I think we see it as something much bigger than just an oral history lab," says Taylor, who identifies interdisciplinary collaboration as one of the lab's best uses.

Taylor, along with Gumberg Library and the University Archives' staff, is eager to give all students a chance to use oral history in their studies and research. Soon the public will be able to listen to the oral histories collected for various projects through Gumberg's website. Like books and articles, oral histories are a valuable primary source for students.

With the University's Strategic Plan focusing on making Duquesne a flagship for community engagement, Taylor thinks this is the ideal time for public history to flourish on and around campus.

"What's really exciting about our public history program and the Digital History Lab right now is that they're organically meeting the greater mission and this new vision for the University. As the lab grows, we can do bigger projects. We can move into new areas. And we're going to see even more student community engagement and success," says Taylor. ♦

VETERANS' ORAL HISTORY EXHIBIT

A special exhibit, which will feature the history and stories of veteran alumni who participated in the **Duquesne Veterans' Oral History Project**, will be open **Nov. 1-30 on the fourth floor of Gumberg Library**. A "story share" event will be held from 4-6 p.m. on Nov. 7.

TELLING THE STORY OF DUQUESNE

Over the course of 140 years, Duquesne University has played a role in countless personal journeys. From the Spiritans and those they serve, to students and faculty, to communities in Pittsburgh and around the globe, innumerable voices have a Duquesne story to tell.

The University's Oral History Initiative, based in the University Archives, is helping to make sure those voices and stories aren't lost.

Led by Megan DeFries, Duquesne's oral historian, and Tom White, Gumberg Library's archivist and curator of special collections, the Oral History Initiative is focused on collecting, curating and facilitating oral histories linked to the Duquesne community and beyond.

"Our goal is to conduct oral history projects and provide training workshops to encourage interdisciplinary projects and community collaboration," says DeFries.

The Oral History Initiative is closely linked to the Spiritans, who were the subject of DeFries' first University oral history project in 2014. But as White notes, the connection doesn't end there. The Spiritan tradition of reaching people who live on society's margins is at the very core of oral history.

"What oral history does is capture the stories of people who often aren't recorded in regular history," explains White. "As an archivist, I deal with the paper—what people traditionally think of as history. But oral history captures the stories of people who fall through the cracks. It fills in gaps in the historical record. It tells their stories in their own words, so their voices are finally heard."

