

## ORAL HISTORY: A STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

by Emily Winburn



In the fall of 2004 I began my first job as an archivist and instructional librarian at Indiana University East (IUE) located in Richmond, Indiana. While the position title may seem like a peculiar combination, I was sure that I could fulfill the duties involved in it. The library had just changed directorship and was in the process of reinventing its image on campus. Reinventing the library's image is not a new phenomenon for most of us involved in libraries in Indiana and across the nation. I am sure that many of you have found yourselves trying to convince patrons that not everything is available on the Web. You have also probably heard the ubiquitous phrase "The library as place" (Weise, 2004). IUE directors and staff were determined to make the library a "place." To do this, we began to focus on strategic planning. Bennett (2007) said that libraries are "essential partners in learning and scholarship with faculty and other colleagues," and continued by saying that librarians can target several areas including innovation (p. 371). This article discusses the responsibility of the librarians as well as the importance of innovation in the library's collection.

Our plan to make the library a central "place" on campus involved developing a premier library collection. This premier collection would include special collections such as regional oral history. The Regional Oral History project at IUE would not only include a physical collection housed in the library, but it would engage students, faculty, and staff in its development and implementation.

The library already held several oral histories from an earlier project coordinated by an IU East distinguished faculty member. The collection includes interviews of survivors, rescue workers, medical

personnel, and city officials who were directly involved in the aftermath of the downtown gas-main explosion on April 16, 1968. This explosion is significant in the Richmond Community because it took forty-one lives and devastated the downtown area of the city. This

event is viewed as significant to area residents not only because of the devastation but because of the outpouring of volunteers from the local area who put aside their personal differences to aid in the rescue and recovery effort. This collection, currently on analog tapes, was transcribed in the 1970s. The library's strategic plan includes provisions for the transfer of this collection to a more accessible digital format. An IUE faculty member is currently working to create a documentary film of the event. The library may find that making the collection more accessible encourages other researchers to utilize this and the library's other collections of regional oral history.



The Marantz Digital Recorder was used for the oral history project.

Discussions with several faculty members who had expressed an interest in some type of documentary history led to a partnership. Use of the oral history collection found its way into undergraduate research projects for many of the upper-level United States history courses. The obvious benefits were two-fold. First, the students in the history courses would be learning about the concept of oral history and collecting original information. Second, the library would gain a unique collection.

Once we formed the partnership, the next steps were to research and plan for the purchase of equipment, get the necessary campus approvals, and plan the course project logistics. The arrangement of equipment was probably the least difficult. The library was able to set aside some funds for the purchase of four Marantz digital recorders, and we borrowed four microphones. The oral history collection project was a multi-faceted process.

The process of oral history interviews may represent potential unintended consequences such as confidential information being revealed in the taped conversations. To avoid such consequences, Indiana University requires that this type of research have Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals. The IRB is responsible for protecting the rights of subjects of institutional study and requires the investigator to provide all of the plans and processes for the study in order to determine how it could impact the subjects of that study. Informed consent is also an important part of this process. A form, signed by the interviewee, explains the interviewee's individual rights to withhold information or ultimately withdraw from the study. While the interviewer would have the interviewee sign a Deed of Gift (DOG) to the repository directing the interview, the IRB is more concerned with the rights of the interviewee. In the case of the student projects at IU East, the IRB request was approved on a conditional basis. The conditions were that the students submit interview questions to the IRB for approval and documentation conferring consent had to be signed appropriately during the interview process. The IRB promised a twenty-four hour turn around time on the approval of all of the interview questions. Also, the IRB recognized and approved the need for relevant follow-up questions during this type of interview.

The spring of the first year of the project I was awarded the Advancement in Teaching and Learning Award by the Indiana University East Information Technology Department. This award provided two additional Marantz recorders and six flat surface microphones. At this time the library also purchased a high quality Sony computer for manipulation and storage of the recordings.

Throughout the initial semesters of the project, students interviewed people for the following courses: *History of Women in America*, *Afro-American History*, *Survey of American History*, *Indiana History* and *The*

*Nature of History*. The resulting collection includes interviews with prominent citizens of East-Central Indiana. Examples of the interviews in the collection include: an interview with a local area "Rosie the Riveter"; a pioneering African-American police officer; a Tuskegee Airman; and others whose history would be lost with the passing of a generation.

The future of the project is organic. The foundation of oral history at Indiana University East has been set. However, the challenges in its path include funding for transcription, provision of research access, database personnel support, and institutional commitment. With the evolution of scholarship in the area of history, memory, and community history, the project will continue to expand and evolve. Many oral history centers are now focusing on not just individual stories but are documenting a specific recent time period throughout a community. This would include all age ranges so that interviews would involve the very young, the very old, and everyone in between. Using this time capsule approach to history makes it accessible to all citizens and allows history to remain alive and vibrant.

## REFERENCES

- Bennett, M. (2007). Charting the same future? *College & Research Libraries News*, 68(6), 370-377.
- Weise, F. (2004). Being there: The library as place. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 92(1), 6-12.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Winburn, (winburn@indiana.edu) a 2002 Indiana University SLIS graduate, began her first librarian position in 2004. With responsibilities in archives and experience with local history collections and oral histories, she began incorporating her service and scholarship into a long term oral history project for East Central Indiana.



An Indiana University East student interviews longtime Richmond resident Alvin Ferguson.



The author prepares the recording equipment before an interview.