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## PRESIDENT'S LETTER



By Sarah Milligan

It shouldn't feel like stepping into the OHA presidential seat snuck up on me, especially after the months of regular countdowns provided by our current Past President Troy Reeves, but time often feels strange. After two years on the executive council and four years as an elected council member, I feel optimistic I have a handle on where we are as an organization and hopefully what direction we need to keep moving, even if I'm a little surprised to find my term has started.

Atlanta was a fantastic meeting in so many substantive ways. Alissa Rae Funderburk and Autumn Brown did a phenomenal job working with the program and local committees to develop relevant, engaging and entertaining programming. There was a lot of thought put into making space for participants at all moments of their careers and finding points of celebration and collectiveness with intentionality. We ate well, and the coffee stations were free flowing.

Thinking temporally, it was such a gift to start this year's conference with a grounding and welcome to the ancestral homelands of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation by MCN Secretary RaeLynn Butler. Secretary Butler not only centered us as contemporary visitors to Muscogee lands but helped us visualize the current overlay of Atlanta to the thoroughfares and communities that existed before the forced removal of Indigenous people almost 200 years ago.

Every Peachtree Street we walked on in 2025 is a reference to the *Pakanhuili* or Standing Peach Tree Muscogee (Creek) village that once thrived there. With time comes many changes, but by sharing our history and culture forward, we don't have to lose sight of who we are and where we have been, no matter who is trying to dictate differently.

In my presidential year, I am hoping to continue to build organizational stability so we can stay solid in what feels like a current time of fragility. Look for more information sharing and colleague building opportunities in the coming year. Tell your professional circles, bring your friends and stay engaged. We will also be spending time setting our strategic priorities and objectives for the next few years, so fill out questionnaires, sign up for listening spaces and generally make your thoughts heard. We are building this for you.

Of course, I want to share my incredible thanks to our Executive Office at Baylor, Stephen Sloan, Steven Sielaff, Stephanie Barrett for the incredible amount of labor and skill that went into organizing, informing, and problem-solving leading up to and during this year's annual meeting. It is also my immense pleasure to acknowledge and highlight OHA's single full-time employee, Program Associate Hailey Rowe. While this was her second year in this position during an annual meeting, it was her first with her feet on the conference ground, and we absolutely could not have kept things together with the same amount of chill and cheer without her. I am incredibly grateful that the OHA has not only grown enough as an organization to support a full-time employee, but also to have someone as invested as Hailey on our team.

And lastly, thank you to all of you for your memberships, your conference attendance, your knowledge sharing and your investment in the work of oral history. You can, and do, make us better as a field.



## DIRECTORS' COLUMN



By Stephen Sloan

When thinking of the work of our association, we often focus on interviewers, archives, transcripts, programming and published collections. What undergirds all our efforts, however, what enables the OHA to flourish is the indispensable engine of volunteerism. For OHA, volunteers are not an optional extra—they are foundational and have been since the start of our community in 1966. To fulfill our mission, the association depends on its members stepping up as committee chairs, reviewers, session organizers, conference volunteers, mentors, committee members, advocates and more.

Why is volunteer participation so important? At least three reasons stand out: community building, sustaining our association's vitality and enabling access.

### **Community building**

Volunteers help knit together the community of oral historians. The conference, the sessions, the caucuses, the task-forces — all thrive when members give of their time. The act of volunteering signals a shared commitment to our approach and helps build relationships across institutions, regions, generations, perspectives and areas in which we work. When someone steps up to serve, even in a small way, they truly become part of the larger OHA community. That sense of belonging strengthens the network, deepens ties, enriches our understanding of oral history and ensures our association remains open, inclusive and generative.



**Sustaining the field's vitality**

Oral history is not a static methodology; it evolves. New technologies, new ethical questions, new applications demand fresh leadership. Volunteers power OHA's committees and initiatives—the advocacy committee, task forces on metadata and access, the annual meeting program, the education committee, OHA Council and more. Volunteers also bring in new energy, new ideas, and new ways of framing problems. In doing so they keep OHA current, dynamic, and responsive.

**Enabling access and inclusivity**

Because many functions within the association are powered by volunteers, OHA is able to offer more inclusive programming and broaden access. Conferences, webinars, working groups: each is amplified by volunteer labor and diverse voices. The invitation to volunteer is itself an act of democratization, inviting members at all stages of their career—students, independent practitioners, community oral historians—to engage, lead and contribute. In short, volunteerism helps keep the association from becoming closed or overly dominated by a few institutions.

Moreover, volunteers allow OHA to accomplish more without imposing increased fees or costs on all members. By contributing time rather than just dues, volunteers help keep the association's programs viable, accessible, and mission-centered.

Volunteering does ask something of each of us: time, willingness and sometimes the courage to step outside our comfort zones. But the rewards are many. Volunteers build their professional networks, gain leadership experience, deepen their engagement with the field and contribute meaningfully to our shared endeavor. Volunteering is the lifeblood of the Oral History Association. It builds community, renews our field, and broadens access.

As we devote ourselves to preserving the memories of individuals and communities, the act of volunteering is itself a form of collective memory work—our way of affirming that the preservation and interpretation of human voices is a shared responsibility. When we step into volunteer roles, we are saying: I value the story, I value the practice, I value the people who make it possible. And when we all pull in the same direction, what we achieve together is nothing short of remarkable.

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# Volunteer Spotlight



This month's Volunteer Spotlight turns the focus on three women who, though technically not volunteers, have collectively devoted untold hours of energy and enthusiasm to behind-the-scenes work that makes events like the 2025 OHA Atlanta conference a success. Conference attendees likely met one of them when checking in—or having a problem solved—at the conference registration counter. In alphabetical order, here they are:

**Stephanie Barrett**, the OHA's graduate assistant, brings a background in education, ministry and program development while pursuing a Master of Divinity with concentrations in language and ecology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Bard College.

Barrett said she is "particularly interested in how oral history can support community memory, environmental storytelling and theological reflection. My work reflects a commitment to amplifying diverse voices and exploring how narrative can foster justice, healing, and ecological awareness."

She added: "I'm grateful to be involved with OHA and inspired by its dedication to ethical storytelling and inclusive practice—values that deeply align with my own."

**Laura McNeice** is one of OHA Executive Director Stephen Sloan's doctoral students who uses oral history methodology for her dissertation, titled "Meaning, Memory, and Becoming: Oral History as a Tool for Teacher Identity Research." Her work focuses on how student teachers begin to develop their professional identities. She formerly was a graduate assistant at Baylor's Institute for Oral History where, she said, she "swiftly fell in love with the field."

A native of North Carolina transplanted to Texas, McNeice volunteered to help out at last year's conference and promised to come back any time OHA needed an extra hand. "I have enjoyed every moment of my time at OHA and loved meeting all the amazing people at the conference," she said. "It feels like my home away from home."

**Hailey Rowe** is OHA's program associate. A native of Columbia, South Carolina, she went to college in Charlotte, North Carolina, and since then has lived in Roanoke, Virginia, Waco, Texas, and now Jacksonville, Florida. She first joined OHA in January 2024 and said she was thrilled to return to the role in August 2025, working remotely from Jacksonville.

Rowe holds a master's degree in information science and a bachelor's in middle grades education and has been a middle school math and English teacher, a museum educator and a library serials assistant.

Rowe said her favorite parts of being OHA's program associate are communicating with members and serving as "behind-the-scenes help for the conferences," adding: "Laura and Stephanie are amazing!! They went above and beyond at the conference and I truly couldn't have done it without them."

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## Oral historians converge on Atlanta for panels, posters, networking, featured speakers, workshops, inspiration galore

Under the theme “Exploring our American Stories,” 463 oral historians gathered in Atlanta Oct. 15-18 for nearly 100 conference panels, plenary and keynote speakers, celebratory receptions, yummy food and drink, informal conversations, poster presentations, networking and adventures around the city. More than one-fourth of the attendees also attended workshops to hone their oral history skills.

And, although it was not part of the conference program, an uncounted number of conferees participated in Atlanta’s No Kings March on Oct. 18, joining what national march organizers estimated at 7 million No Kings participants in some 2,700 communities around the country.

This issue of the *OHA Newsletter* includes conference highlights and other news for oral historians.

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## University of Kentucky endowed chair in oral history pays tribute to OHA past president Terry L. Birdwhistell

The University of Kentucky will become the first higher education institution in the country to have an endowed chair in oral history, the Terry L. Birdwhistell Distinguished Professorship at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, named in honor of the former UK dean of libraries who died in 2023. Birdwhistell served as OHA president in 1991-92.

The Birdwhistell Endowment, established after his death, reached more than \$1 million by the time he was inducted into the university’s Hall of Distinguished Alumni in September.

Birdwhistell, a Kentucky native, earned three academic degrees at UK and spent his 50-year career there in the university’s library system, becoming known for his passion for conducting oral histories with notable public figures as well as everyday Kentuckians. He interviewed nearly 1,000 people throughout his career and was considered “Kentucky’s keeper of stories.”

Speaking at the distinguished alumni ceremony, his daughter, Jessie Birdwhistell, said her father “believed in the power of history to connect people, to shape institutions and to preserve voices that might otherwise be forgotten.”

She recalled that her father was fond of telling people: “Being an archivist and an oral historian is like planting seeds. You don’t know when they’re going to germinate or what’s going to grow. But it’s fun.”

“My dad could talk to anyone,” Jessie Birdwhistell said. “Teachers, students veterans, UK presidents, first ladies or public figures. He treated every story with the same care and curiosity. His superpower wasn’t just listening; it was making people feel heard. Listening in a way where people opened up and shared in ways they didn’t expect.

“He captured the heart of Kentucky’s history, one voice at a time,” she said.

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Pictured: Attendees and presenters of the IOHA 2025 Conference in Krakow, Poland

## International oral historians gather in Krakow, Poland

By Nancy MacKay, Independent Oral Historian

In September 370 oral historians from gathered from around the world for the biennial International Oral History Association (IOHA) conference, representing 55 countries, including more than 50 participants from the United States. I was one of the lucky Americans who attended. The conference took place in Krakow at the Jagiellonian University, founded in 1364! Sessions were in English and Spanish.

The 23rd IOHA conference started with a keynote address by Mary Marshall Clark from Columbia University, an OHA past president and active current member. She used her recent studies in Jungian psychology and psychoanalysis to suggest a more caring approach for the interviewer as receiver of a narrator's story, stressed the importance of the interviewer-narrator relationship and above all the value of listening. Her emphasis on the human side of doing oral history was well received and set the stage for serious discussion throughout the week.

The presentations that followed consisted of lively and thought-provoking discussions on oral history in relation to community archives, family history, wartime, migration and refugees, ethics and new technologies. We all left feeling confident about the importance of our oral history work, no matter where in the world we are working. Recordings from all four plenary sessions together with a photo gallery will be available on the website of Polish Oral History Association: <https://pthm.pl/home/> in November.

Among the U.S. speakers were: Doug Boyd, Adrienne Cain Darough, Natalie Fousekis, Michael Frisch, Fanny Garcia, Mary Gordon, Michelle Holland, Farina King, Leslie McCartney, Natalie Milbrodt, Sarah Milligan, Todd Moye, Kathy Nasstrom, Martha Norkunas, Troy Reeves, Stephen Sloan, Amy Starecheski and Angela Zusman.

IOHA participants didn't spend all their time attending sessions. In fact, some of our richest moments came in the hallways, in cafes, the dance floor, or informal chats on the square, where we met up by chance or choice, connected over common interests, and always came away inspired by new friends and new ideas. I can say with some assurance that everyone who came to Krakow for the first time fell in love with the city. And, like me, we Americans went home with much to think about, having experienced a country that has suffered so very, very much and in a few generations has risen to a happy, healthy, well-run country.



The IOHA provides a forum for oral historians around the world. The next meeting is in Macau in 2028. Membership options are available for individual, student or professional rates. This is a great way to get involved in the international community, and exchange ideas with colleagues from around the world. Here is the link to join, <https://ioha.org/join-ioha/>

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## Plenaries, keynote reflect social justice themes in wide ranging presentations

Two plenary sessions and a keynote speaker highlighted social justice themes in their OHA conference presentations.

Wednesday evening's plenary was a two-part event, beginning with a screening of "The Harvest: Integrating Mississippi's Schools," a PBS documentary by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Douglas Blackmon. The documentary tells the story of school desegregation in Leland, Mississippi, in the deeply segregated Mississippi Delta. Blackmon was a 6-year-old in the first class of Black and white children who would attend classes together in Leland until they graduated from high school in 1982.

Following the screening, Blackmon answered questions on a panel along with moderator Charles C. Bolton, a prolific scholar of Southern history and history professor at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, and OHA conference co-chair Alissa Rae Funderburk.

Bolton, also a Mississippi native, recalled that in the 1970s, white people in Mississippi cared more about maintaining white supremacy than about quality schools.

Blackmon said that after the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Mississippi decided to double down on segregation rather than comply with the court.

School officials built new schools for Black children to save segregation, but when school desegregation became inevitable, and Black schools were closed, the loss of those schools created trauma for Black children, he said.

Oral history, Funderburk noted, enables documentation of the larger context of a story, particularly in addressing complex, multi-layered issues like school desegregation.

Mississippi's story represents a microcosm of the nation, she said, adding that communities in Mississippi and Georgia, for example, are still fighting school desegregation, "but no one talks about it."

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At a Thursday morning plenary, panelists explored the relationship between oral history and community organizing.

Historian Daniel Horowitz, who has spent decades as an organizer for labor, environmental, criminal justice and anti-poverty issues, told oral historians that “organizing is a necessary skill for oral historians.”

Panelist Dartricia Rollins, a visiting librarian at Emory University and an organizer with the Black Alliance for Peace, was unable to attend, but in a prepared statement read to the audience she took issue with the belief that policy change is the goal of organizing.

“Policies don’t come first; our actions do,” she said, adding that policy changes are concessions by people who want to end the fights.

Panelist Ashby Combahee, the library and archives manager at the Highland Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee, noted the irony of nonprofit organizations, which are part of a capitalist structure and are “doing things government should be doing.”

Panelist Lynn Lewis, an oral historian, teacher and community organizer, suggested that small organizations often plant seeds for larger organizations and that even though groups might not totally agree, they need to work together to build power.

“In a natural disaster, we will all go out to lend a hand,” she said. “Now we’re in political disaster,” she added, suggesting that people with organizing skills all need to lend a hand now. “We don’t take action if we’re not hopeful that things can change,” she said. “We can’t do this alone.”

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Friday evening’s keynote address by Bettina L. Love, award winning professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College, challenged oral historians to face obstacles, especially in the classroom, head on.

“You’re going to be met with resistance,” she said, adding: “We are educators and we are under attack.”

In wide-ranging comments about the state of education and the environment in which today’s young people grow up, Love recalled a profound experience of truly being loved by a teacher when she was growing up in Rochester, New York.

She said her first-grade teacher, Miss Johnson, was from New Orleans but moved north after being forced out of teaching in a Black school there in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Miss Johnson was different from other teachers, Love said.

What Miss Johnson had was a deep, profound love for her kids,” she said, adding that lots of teachers care about their students, but too often, the students aren’t loved.

Love urged listeners to respect their students, trust them and tell them the truth. And that truth, she suggested, can be found in the stories oral historians can document, because stories shape public meaning.

“The stories a nation believes determine the laws it writes,” she said. “We have to tell our stories.”

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Pictured: Colin Richardson, Martha Ross Teaching Award winner, and his students

## Presidential reception features OHA award winners

At the Atlanta conference presidential reception, the Oral History Association recognized winners of OHA awards for an article, book, precollegiate teaching and multimedia presentations.

- **Article Award:** Ricia Anne Chansky, for “Oral History and the Climate Crisis: Listening in the Aftermath of Disaster.” The article describes undergraduate oral history projects that involved students working with community partners to document Puerto Ricans’ experiences during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017. Article reviewers said the project is a model for other oral history projects involving crises.
- **Article Award Honorable Mentions:** Shanna Farrell, for “From the Archives: Promises and Pitfalls of the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement Project,” and Anna Kaplan, for “A Black Woman’s Practice: Oral History from Fisk University’s Ex-Slave Narratives and the Black Women Oral History Project.” Article Award Committee members are: Todd Moye, chair, and Kathy Newfont, Jonathan Coulis and Nadia Awad.
- **Book Award Co-Winner:** Jason A. Higgins, for *Prisoners After War: Veterans in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, which uses archival research and interviews to examine the lives of U.S. military veterans and their involvement with the criminal justice system between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terrorism.
- **Book Award Co-Winner:** Michael Steven Wilson and José Antonio Lucero, for *What Side Are You On? A Tohono O’odham Life across Borders*, which tells Wilson’s life story as a human rights activist, preacher and member of the Tohono O’odham nation. Wilson edited his own interview transcripts, and co-author Lucero, a scholar of Latin American and Indigenous politics, provided historical context and interpretation. Book Award Committee members are Leyla Vural, chair, and Mary Rizzo, Tanya Finchum and Justin Bray.

- **Martha Ross Teaching Award:** Colin Richardson of Green Hope High School, Cary, North Carolina. Richardson, who teaches AP U.S. History and Honors Sociology, collaborated with the University of North Carolina's Southern Oral History Project and Asian American Center to complete an Asian American Oral History Project. In addition to completing oral history interviews, the students also collaborated with the school's music teachers to incorporate interview excerpts with a musical composition by an Asian American composer for a final concert. Martha Ross Teaching Award Committee members are: Roberto Fernandez, James Karmel and Alex Eaton.
  - **Mason Multimedia Award Co-Winner (up to three presented annually):** Christopher Pandza and Madeline Alexander, for "I see My Light Shining: The Baldwin-Emerson Elders Project," a collection of hundreds of interviews gathered over two decades in which community activists and storytellers describe their experiences in public life and how they have contributed to American history and culture.
  - **Mason Multimedia Award Co-Winner:** Laura Montanari, for "Songwriting Oral History Interviews: Archival Songs as Critical-Creative Pedagogy," which combines oral history, archival research, performance and music to engage with testimonies of women who participated in the Italian Resistance during World War II.
  - **Mason Multimedia Award Co-Winner:** MEM-Centre des Mémoires Montréalaises, "The Making of a Community-Based Museum Rich in Oral History," which incorporates community-led oral history and other approaches to storytelling to deepen museum visitors' understanding of Montreal's history. Mason Multi-Media Award Committee members are: Yolanda Hester, Max Peterson, Mark Caltrain and Simona Tobia.
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## OHA welcomes new leaders

OHA members elected during summer online voting the following colleagues to serve as OHA leaders:

- **First Vice President:** Alissa Rae Funderburk, Jackson State University
  - **Council members:** Adrienne A. Cain Darough, Baylor University, and Fanny Garcia, Voice of Witness
  - **Nominating Committee:** Lisa Brooks, Montclair State University; Jonathan Coulis, Emory University and Rachel Mears, Library of Congress Veterans History Project.
  - **Committee on Committees:** Steve Estes, Sonoma State University; Heather Fox, University of Louisville and Janneken Smucker, West Chester University.
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## School, music festival, college shootings lead to trauma-informed oral histories

Six women linked by community mass shootings in Texas, Illinois and Nevada shared at an OHA conference roundtable their experiences documenting the aftermath of tragedies through oral history.

Major takeaways? Oral history is not therapy, but trauma-informed interviewing can have therapeutic elements and requires that everyone involved have access to mental health support. Moreover, local public libraries can play important roles in bringing communities together.



Representatives from Uvalde, Texas, Highland Park, Illinois and Las Vegas, Nevada, summarized their respective communities' mass shootings followed by discussion.

Panelists Priscilla Martinez and Tammie Sinclair from Uvalde recalled the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in May 2022 as the school year was winding down. A teen-aged shooter killed 19 children and two teachers and injured 17 others. Law enforcement officials were sharply criticized for what was widely seen as a botched response to the emergency.

After a considerable delay, officers killed the shooter, who was barricaded in a classroom.

Panelists Cary Rositas-Sheftel and Cynthia Medrano of Highland Park recalled the mass shooting at the annual town parade July 4, 2022. A shooter positioned on a rooftop near the parade route killed seven people and wounded dozens. One child was orphaned after both of his parents were killed. The shooter was arrested, tried and in April 2025 was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Panelists Claytee White and Stefani Evans recounted two mass shootings that affected their Las Vegas community.

The first occurred in October 2017 when a shooter with a large stockpile of weapons and ammunition opened fire on an outdoor music festival from the 32nd floor of a hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. Sixty people were killed and more than 800 injured either from gunshot wounds or in the melee that ensued. The shooter was found dead in his hotel room from a self-inflicted gunshot.

More recently, in December 2023, a shooter at the University of Nevada Las Vegas entered a campus building and killed three faculty members and seriously injured a fourth. The shooter died following an exchange of gunfire with police, in which two officers also were injured.

In all three communities, conducting interviews to document the tragedies didn't take place until a year after the incidents. Panelists emphasized the importance of working with trusted community leaders, respecting narrators' needs and deferring to narrators' choices on interview access. Also, the Uvalde panelists noted, some families simply aren't ready to participate, which must be respected.

Projects in all three communities also relied extensively on local mental-health resources, although the Uvalde panelists noted that the term "mental health" isn't popular in Texas. The panel members all emphasized the importance of seeking training to conduct trauma-informed interviewing. In Highland Park trauma-informed services also were available at the public library, including training and re-training for library staff as needed.

But beyond interviewing, panelists said, everyone involved in such projects needs access to mental health support, including interview transcribers. Techniques to provide such support included: allowing transcribers to work from home to assure their privacy; conducting interviews in pairs, allowing for interviewers to de-brief and share their self-care plans.

Highland Park panelists described a three-stage process for their oral history work, initially focusing on documenting experiences of first responders. Coordinators then reached out to the community to invite participation, followed by holding a workshop for individuals interested in participating.

Documenting the Las Vegas music festival shooting began with a mental health meeting and an initial focus on collecting oral histories from first responders. Later, local architects built a healing garden, which became a place for people to gather and a point for supporting mental health needs.

The Las Vegas panelists noted that after the campus shooting, a pop-up mental health service was established on campus. The campus community coalesced around healing and decided to create a memorial garden to honor the slain faculty members. In Las Vegas, oral history interviews focused on a life interview process rather than focusing only on the narrators' reactions to a traumatic event.

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## **Fired federal employees, contractors telling their stories, but aren't victims, panelists say**

Jason Chernesky was the lead historian for the Food and Drug Administration. Until he wasn't.

On Valentine's Day this year, he involuntarily joined hundreds of other federal employees who were informed by the Trump administration that they were out of a job.

Within weeks, though, his social media outreach had amassed a list of several hundred fired federal employees who were willing to participate in oral history interviews to describe their experiences. And Chernesky had become the director and lead oral historian of the Federal Employees and Contractors Oral History Project, housed at the Organization of American Historians with early oral history advice from OHA Executive Director Stephen Sloan and others.

So far, Chernesky told an OHA conference session, 30 interviews have been completed and 119 people have signed up for a pre-interview. The project aims to have 20 to 30 interviews online by Jan. 20, 2026, with a goal of completing 300 oral histories by the end of three years, aided by an \$852,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation.

It's incorrect to think of the fired federal workers and federal contractors as victims, Chernesky emphasized. And while the interviews capture their experiences related to losing their jobs, the more important contribution of the oral histories is in capturing everyday experiences in federal workplaces.

Project oral historian Liam Kingsley said the interviews are about more than people who lost their jobs. They're also about documenting the work of the federal government. The interviews, he said, focus on "what is it that you actually did?" And the information that emerges documents how the nature of federal government work has changed over the years.

So far, narrators have ranged from people who have six months to 40 years of government service and range in age from 27 years old to people in their 70s.

Chernesky described one interview with a U.S. Forest Service employee who started clearing brush as a GS 1, the lowest civil service rank, and retired as a GS 15 engineer, whose college education was paid for by the forest service.

Panelist Molly Graham is a contract employee who is the oral historian for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Voices Oral History Archives. With some 2,600 oral histories, it is the largest repository dedicated to documenting environmental change. Graham said interviews she is conducting with NOAA staff who have left this year will become part of Chernesky's project collection.

Graham said the project interviews are turning out to be "a self-portrait of the federal government."

For many narrators, their role in the civil service played a major role in their identity before it was summarily torn away, Kingsley said, adding that one of the questions he asks narrators is what they would want people to know or remember about their work.

Often, he said, their answer is: "I just want people to know that this mattered."

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## Academic, community oral historians share challenges of losing federal funds

Facing dramatic cutbacks and outright cancellations of federal funds for humanities, 15 oral historians from academic and community settings gathered at the OHA conference for an informal roundtable discussion about their financial challenges.

Tea Rozman, co-chair of the OHA Development Committee, urged participants to get creative and diversify their sources of income. Grants are just one source of funding, she noted. Oral history programs can develop items to sell, including niche publications that initially can get off the ground with crowdfunding options, Rozman said.

She described her experience as founder of Green Card Voices, a nonprofit in Minneapolis that focuses on using multimedia storytelling to document immigrant and refugee communities. Rozman, herself an immigrant from the former Yugoslavia, turned to Kickstarter and reached out to community supporters to fund Green Card Voices' first book of local immigrant high schoolers' stories. So far, the enterprise has published eight books and produced videos and podcasts featuring interviews with some 500 first-generation immigrants from 150 countries.

Some of the roundtable participants from academia described complications associated with creative funding efforts at universities. One said a faculty colleague started a successful Kickstarter campaign to support a project, but the university wouldn't let her colleague take the money. Participants were skeptical about working through university foundations, in part because of entrenched practices that tend to limit openness to new ideas.

Rozman said long-term success, which takes time, relies on building successful ongoing relationships with donors. "They want you to come back and see you grow," she said.

She encouraged participants not to get discouraged as they seek to replace federal funding for their work.

"We have been through difficult moments in our country's history," she said. "We will get through this."

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## Panelists describe wide variety of place-based oral history

From delving into long ago memories to documenting memories people want to forget, OHA panelists who focused on community-based oral histories emphasized the importance of developing trust with local people when engaging in place-based oral history.

Molly Graham, oral historian with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Voices Oral History Archive, described challenges associated with documenting the aftermath of a 2023 mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine. A heavily armed man killed 18 townspeople and injured 13 more in a shooting spree, first at a bowling alley and then at a neighborhood bar. Victims included members of the Somali immigrant community and members of the local Deaf community. After a two-day manhunt that terrified the Lewiston area, the shooter was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The aftermath of such community tragedies tends to follow a pattern, Graham said. First comes the event, followed by a media swarm, updates on the survivors, politicians arriving and then everyone moving on, leaving the community to deal with the results, she said.

A year after the shooting, oral history interviews began, focused initially on first responders. Project planners emphasized the need for engaging in interviews with a "culture of care," using trauma-informed interviewing practices, she said. The project also collected memorabilia and mementos from the day.

In contrast with the Lewiston oral history project that sought to document the aftermath of a recent event, Scott Cowin of the Sophienburg Museum and Archives in New Braunfels, Texas, described how archived interviews conducted decades ago can illuminate a community's history when they are mined for specific themes.



For example, the museum's newly digitized oral histories with long-time area residents revealed vivid memories of when then-new technologies emerged, he said. One narrator described the 1910 purchase of a family's first car, made by the E-M-F Co., a precursor to the Studebaker. Another recalled the purchase of a Model T in 1910 for \$50. Other narrators recalled the first time they saw an airplane flying over the community and remembered that interest in aviation also stemmed from seeing airplanes in movies.

A third panelist, Kim Kennedy White, associate curator of oral history at History Colorado, described the state historical society's Colorado 150, America 250 project, in which the state will celebrate its sesquicentennial next year when America celebrates its 250th birthday.

The project aimed to collect interviews from throughout the state with a particular focus on filling gaps in the historical record, including interviews with Black, Indigenous and LGBTQ narrators, she said. Project planners focused on community involvement by developing an online toolkit and other online trainings, distributing audio recording kits, and providing for scanning of narrators' photos.

Community oral history engagement takes time and trust-building, White said, noting that while resources were limited, the project documented new perspectives and illustrated differences among Colorado communities.

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## **College students' oral histories, archival research document Lumbee Tribe history**

Student research in North Carolina's Lumbee Indian community and at the Library of Congress has led the Lumbee Tribe and the University of North Carolina Pembroke to agree to co-ownership of oral histories and other tribal history materials at the university archives.

The university traces its origins to 1887, when it was the Croatan Normal School, which became the Pembroke College for Indians in 1941 and then part of the UNC system in 1972. But the data-sharing agreement is a first for the state university system, English professor Michele Fazio told an OHA conference roundtable session.

Fazio directs the university's REACH program, which stands for Research Engagement Action Community Humanities. Funded by the Mellon Foundation, the program aims to prepare undergraduate students for graduate study in the humanities through faculty mentorship, financial support, and hands-on research. Eleven REACH fellowship students attended the OHA conference.

Student panelist Jacob Worriax, a Lumbee tribal member, described working with the Lumbee Warriors Association to document veterans' experiences. The data-sharing agreement was important, Worriax said, because it helped calm veterans' concerns about their information being stolen from them.

At UNC Pembroke, the REACH fellows' research has focused on documenting various aspects of Lumbee history, including oral histories with Lumbee military veterans as well as uncovering details about New Deal-era work in the Pembroke area, among other matters, in an effort to reclaim Lumbee history.

Mason Schwenneker, who graduated from REACH last year, described digging into Library of Congress files of Farm Security Administration photographs of homes, schools and other buildings put up in the New Deal years, using web technology to map their locations and then asking community members what they might remember about the people who once lived there.

The process, he said, "returns power to the community."

Fazio said long-term goals for the project include having the students develop alternate captions for the archived photos, many of which refer to "Indian (mixed breed) family," with no names attached.

And student Sheena Holbrook described finding mislabeled files with references to "Croatian" instead of the correct term "Croatan," the name given to the Lumbee community in the 1880s.

Christopher Woolley, assistant director of REACH, said the students are making important scholarly contributions. "I'm always being asked about what is the value of the humanities?" he said, adding: "Well, here it is."

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## **If you want to know how the Senate works, ask the lawmakers' staff, panelists report**

You probably don't know their names, but if you want to know how the Senate really works, talk to the Senate staffers, who often become on-the-job experts about complex federal policy and politics.

That was the takeaway from three OHA conference panelists who described oral history projects focused on indispensable but behind-the-scenes players who make legislation happen. Louis M. Kyriakouides, director of the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University, shared excerpts from interviews with some of the 100 staffers of former U.S. Sen. Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican who served from 1995-2007. Frist, a cardiothoracic transplant surgeon defeated longtime Democratic incumbent Jim Sasser.

When political consultant Whit Ayres, who was interviewed for the project, recalled that when Frist told him he was thinking of running for the Senate, “I thought it was the dumbest idea I’d ever heard.” Ayres recalled Frist telling him he wanted to run because “transplanting hearts and lungs had become a bit mechanical.” So, Ayres said, “We launched a campaign and [political] professionals around Tennessee rolled their eyes.”

Frist’s main goals during his years in the Senate focused on health care, including work on establishing the President’s Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and Medicare Part-D, which helps Medicare recipients pay for prescription drugs.

Frist staffer Dean Rosen, who developed expertise on complex health issues in a variety of Senate staff positions, described the challenge of devising legal strategies to balance both Republican and Democratic senators’ goals to create winning coalitions on the Senate floor. Kyriakoudes said the oral history interviews with staff make clear that while senators are the leaders, it is staffers who do the work. As one former staffer said: “Staffers are the glue that holds Congress together.”

Ashton G. Ellett, director of the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University of Georgia, said the library’s oral history collections stemmed from efforts by friends of Georgia Sen. Richard B. Russell to capture after his death in 1971 what they called “living histories” of the Democratic lawmaker who served in the U.S. Senate for nearly 40 years.

The library’s diverse holdings now include more than 2,000 oral histories and 600 manuscript collections relating primarily to Georgia politics and public policy.

Ellett said the library’s Senate Staff Oral History Project started in 2022 with interviews of mostly senior staff members of Herman Talmadge, a Democrat who represented Georgia in the Senate from 1957-1981. Talmadge died in 2002. Ellett said developing good relationships with former chiefs of staff helped contribute to the oral history project’s success.

Takeaways from the approximately 40 interviews, Ellett said, include: a behind-the-scenes peek at how government works, details about legislative processes and how things change over time. Oral histories help humanize the institution and also illustrate the varied career paths that lead to and from public service, he said, noting: “The important work that offices do is done for the most part by 20-year-olds.” While a lawmaker’s name is on everything, he added, “you can see staffers’ fingerprints on everything.”

“I prefer to talk to the staff rather than the members,” he said. “The office can run without the member.”

Donald A. Ritchie, U.S. Senate historian emeritus, chaired the panel but also substituted for scheduled panelist Katherine Scott, the current Senate historian whose participation at the conference was prevented by the federal government shutdown.

Ritchie spent 40 years in the Senate Historical Office, serving as historian from 2009 until his retirement in 2015. In 1976, Ritchie began conducting oral history interviews, mostly with senior staff members, which he called “one of my great pleasures in life.”

Interviews with Senate staff have illuminated the back stories of key legislation. Ritchie noted that in one interview, Stewart McClure, who served as chief clerk of the Senate Committee on Labor and Education, described how the Soviet Union’s successful launch of Sputnik in 1957 led to passage of the 1958 National Defense Education Act.

The Senate had repeatedly passed legislation providing federal funds for education, only to see it killed in the House. But McClure described in an oral history interview how he had suggested to his boss, Committee Chair Lister Hill, D-Alabama, that maybe if the education aid bill was called a defense bill, they could get it passed. And they did. The bill established loans, scholarships, foreign language programs, curriculum development funds and other education resources, representing the first significant federal funding for education.

Ritchie said interviews with Senate staffers generally are more informative than interviews with Senators can be. “People on the periphery give better interviews,” he said, adding that people in the center too often don’t know there’s anyone else in the room.



## **In memoriam: Arthur A. Hansen, OHA past president**

Arthur August Hansen, history professor emeritus at California State University, Fullerton and the 2002-03 president of the Oral History Association, died peacefully of cancer in his home in Los Osos, California, on Oct. 29. He was 87.

Hansen spent much of his professional career studying Japanese American history and was among the early scholars who interviewed detainees and officials at the Manzanar internment camp. He founded the Japanese American Oral History Project at Cal State, Fullerton, which contains more than 300 oral histories he and his students and colleagues conducted as well as photographs, memoirs, books and other archival documents.



Hansen's oral history work contributed to the professionalization of the field. He held various leadership roles in the Oral History Association, including serving as editor of the Oral History Review from 1981 to 1987.

Hansen was born on Oct. 10, 1938, in Hoboken, New Jersey. His father, Haakon Hansen, was from an immigrant Norwegian family, and his mother, Anna Stover Hansen, was the daughter of garment factory workers in Troy, New York. He lived with his parents and older brother Roy in Little Ferry, New Jersey, for the first decade of his life. In 1949 the family moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he lived until adulthood. Hansen earned bachelor's and doctorate degrees in history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and in 1966 was hired as a history professor at Cal State, Fullerton (CSUF), where he taught U.S. and Asian American history for the next 37 years.

At CSUF, Hansen worked to develop the Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History and served as director for many years before retiring in 2008. It is also where he met his wife, Debra Gold Hansen, who was an oral history project editor.

A prolific scholar, Hansen wrote or edited 12 books, 23 articles and essays, several encyclopedia entries and numerous book reviews for scholarly journals and the Nichi Bei Weekly, a San Francisco-based newspaper focused on the Japanese American community. He also received more than 25 honors and awards, including a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Asian American Studies.

In retirement, Hansen continued researching and writing and also enjoyed watching sports, playing golf, and reading both fiction and nonfiction books. He and his wife, Debbie, also traveled extensively taking cruises and tours around Europe, the U.S. and Canada. Besides his wife of 48 years, Hansen's survivors include in-laws, nieces and nephews.

A memorial service will be held at Cal State, Fullerton in January 2026. Donations in his memory can be made to CPH's Hansen Lectureship and Fellowship Endowment

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# Annual meeting roundup

For the second consecutive year, Oral History Association members gathered via Zoom for the annual business meeting. The Sept. 30 meeting included the following highlights:

- Members approved a bylaws change to add a History Committee as one of the OHA standing committees. The proposal grew out of a task force that reviewed how OHA handles its own historical materials, which are archived at the University of North Texas.
- OHA's 2024 IRS Form 990, which was included in meeting materials, showed the organization reported total assets at the end of last year of \$1,020,492 and net assets of \$945,683.
- Reporting for the Law and Ethics Task Force, chair Guha Shankar said the task force held three meetings and two webinars this year focusing on emerging topics in oral history law and ethics, including a focus on Indigenous issues, and is developing its final report. The task force aims to develop a bibliography of resources related to oral history and the law and would like to offer more webinars on various topics.
- *Oral History Review* Managing Editor Molly Todd reported that online readership is increasing. She identified several challenges the OHR has faced including difficulties finding reviewers and production quality control challenges. She recommended that emerging crises grant award winners return something to the OHA by contributing articles following their research.
- Finance Committee Chair Mark Cave reported that the OHA Endowment for the first time has more than \$1 million, which, he said, reflects a sustained effort by many people over a long period of time. He said an endowment of \$5 million would make the OHA self-sustaining. Executive Director Stephen Sloan said OHA is focusing on "being good stewards of resources" and aims to restrict spending to \$250,000 annually, noting that endowment growth is key to OHA becoming independent.
- In an OHA website update, Associate Director Steven Sielaff reported: 173 members have signed up for the Find an Oral Historian tool; a calendar feature has been added to the website and members are encouraged to send in events to be listed; all issues of the **Newsletter** have been digitized and are available online as are programs for all the annual meetings, except for the third meeting held in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1968. He noted that the member only page includes recordings of OHA webinars, symposia and OHA business meetings.
- Membership Chair Katherine Barbera reported a low response to a 2024 membership survey. As a follow-up, an OHA Action Plan Survey was created to identify member needs that will inform OHA Council priorities.
- President Troy Reeves summarized various accomplishments for the year, including: donating \$8,200 to the International Oral History Association to support scholarships; exploring development of an online, asynchronous Oral History 101 course; holding several community support events and meet-ups that allow members to be in the same room together; development of an accessibility document by the Diversity Committee; plans to start a Campus Oral History Leaders Caucus. He also urged members to volunteer for committees.

- Sloan reported that 80 applications have been received to fill the position of **OHA Newsletter** editor, which incumbent Mary Kay Quinlan has decided to leave after more than 30 years. The new editor will be responsible for the member newsletter and for a new quarterly publication beginning in 2026 aimed at engaging audiences in kindred organizations.
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## Get a jump on next year's oral history events

It's never too soon to mark your 2026 calendar for upcoming OHA events:

- A virtual symposium on trauma-informed interviewing, scheduled for three days during the week of June 22, 2026. Registration details will be available at [www.oralhistory.org](http://www.oralhistory.org).
  - Annual conference set for Oct. 14-17, 2026, at the Hilton Portland Downtown hotel. The conference theme is: Landscapes of Memory. Watch for details at [www.oralhistory.org](http://www.oralhistory.org) on how to submit program proposals.
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## Editor's Endnote



Thank you, Oral History Association!

When I first solicited, edited and wrote articles for the OHA Newsletter in the spring of 1993, I hardly imagined I'd still be doing the same thing more than 30 years later. It has been three decades of enjoying the privilege of watching—and being part of—the Oral History Association's evolution into an ever more active, vibrant and diverse association of people who are passionate about documenting the world we share.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to have served as Newsletter editor, chronicling the evolution of OHA and of oral history itself, through the willingness of uncounted numbers of OHA members who have eagerly shared their work with fellow oral historians.

While I will no longer be soliciting, editing and writing Newsletter stories, I will keep reading what the next editor produces and will be reminded with every new issue how grateful I am for having the chance to be part of this remarkable group of talented, hard-working and just plain fun people.

Many, many thanks,  
Mary Kay Quinlan

*thanks to our*  
**PARTNER MEMBERS**



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[Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training](#)

[Audio Transcription Center](#)

[Baylor University Institute for Oral History](#)

<https://www.sos.ca.gov/archives>

[Canadian Museum of Immigration](#)

[Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage  
- University of Southern Mississippi](#)

[Center for the Study of Southern Culture U of MS](#)

[Center for Oral History and Master of Arts  
Program at Columbia University](#)

[Chicago Dance History Project](#)

[Duquesne University History Department](#)

[Eastern Michigan University Archives](#)

[Getting Word African American Oral History  
Project at Monticello](#)

[HBCU Radio Preservation Project | WYSO](#)

[Historic New Orleans Collection](#)

[IEEE History Center](#)

[Institute of Oral History](#)

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University](#)

[Minnesota Historical Society Oral History  
Program](#)

[Museum of Civilian Voices](#)

[National Cultural Foundation \(Barbados\)](#)

[National Public Housing Museum](#)

[North Carolina State University Public History](#)

[Oklahoma Musicians](#)

[Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library,  
University of California](#)

[Rakow Research Library](#)

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[Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive - Texas Tech  
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