Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Heather Bidzinski, Canadian Museum for Human Rights
Jodi Giesbrecht, Canadian Museum for Human Rights
Rhonda L. Hinther, Brandon University
Sharon Reilly, retired, Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Introduction

Oral history is an important thread running through the story of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR). The CMHR Oral History Program and oral history research serve as a core foundation of the Museum's research and collections, informing the creation of content for exhibitions, related programs, and publications. The development of a well-rounded collection of national and international oral history interviews on human rights sets the CMHR apart in a world of outstanding museums. As the collection continues to develop, and as the CMHR evolves its inaugural exhibition and develops its temporary and traveling exhibitions program, oral history will continue to inform the Museum's research, curatorial and museological practices.

This article explores the development, methodology, and current state of the Museum's Oral History Program. At the CMHR, we had the rare opportunity to build the Oral History Program from scratch. Here we share our successes and challenges: what worked, what did not. We describe how we worked through issues and seized opportunities during the program's creation and evolution within the context of inaugural exhibition development and the Museum's official opening. Parties interested in pursuing oral history initiatives at other museums, non-profits, and community organizations often approach us for insight and advice. We are writing this article in the hopes that the Museum's experiences with oral history program development might prove informative and helpful to others looking for a way forward with their own projects. As the CMHR marks two years of operations, this seems to be an especially appropriate time to reflect upon the accomplishments of the CMHR Oral History Program, its role in the development and operation of the Museum, lessons learned, and future directions.

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights opened its doors to the public in September of 2014. Located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the new Museum has been a great success, acclaimed for both for its iconic architecture and for its powerful

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

1

ISSN 1923-0567

exhibits.[1] As the Museum's mandate explains, its role is *"to explore the subject of human rights, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, in order to enhance the public's understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others and to encourage reflection and dialogue."[2]* Key to supporting the realization of this objective is the Museum's Oral History Program.

Oral history is the act of interviewing individuals about historic events and activities to which they were witness or involved in order to gain a more comprehensive – and personal – view of the past. It is as critical as other sources such as newspapers, government documents, and personal papers researchers might consult when conducting rigorous inquiry. In fact, oral history offers something other sources lack – perspectives from often-marginalized groups and individuals, including many who have suffered human rights violations. These stories are often excluded from the historical record. "Through oral history interviews," Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson explain, "working-class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities, among others, have inscribed their experiences on the historical record and offered their own interpretations of history." [3] An important goal of the Oral History Program, like the CMHR more broadly, is to present and preserve an array of voices and experiences. Essential to this is a commitment to inclusivity – in terms of gender, age, language, ability, economic, ethno-cultural, religious, sexual identity, and other intersecting subjectivities and categories of oppression – which can support and facilitate complex and meaningful dialogue about human rights. The potential for a diversity of voices is one of the greatest strengths of oral history; indeed, it is what makes it crucial to fulfilling the CMHR's mandate in promoting respect for others.

Heather Bidzinski is Head of Collections, CMHR. Jodi Giesbrecht is Manager of Research, CMHR. Rhonda L. Hinther is Associate Professor of History, Brandon University; museum consultant; and former Director, Research and Collection, CMHR. Sharon Reilly is former Oral History Program Coordinator and Curatorial Advisor at CMHR.

[1] The Museum has won more than 30 local, national, and international awards for innovation in digital media, accessibility, interactive exhibits, design, engineering, documentary, and short films, including the 2015 Muse Award for innovation in digital media (American Alliance of Museums), the 2015 Jodi Awards for innovation and excellence in the use of digital media (Jodi Mattes Trust), 2016 Best Scenography for a Permanent Collection (International Design and Communications), 2016 Gold Award (International Association of Universal Design), and many others (see https://humanrights.ca/about/awards-and-honours)

[2] "Establishment of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," Museums Act (S.C. 1990, c. 3), http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/m-13.4/index.html, accessed 10 June 2016. See also "Mandate and Museum Experience," CMHR Website, https://humanrights.ca/about/mandate-and-museum-experience, accessed 10 June 2016.

[3] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), i. RTA Oral History Program, accessed 30 September, http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/environment/heritage/rtaoralhistoryprogram/index.html.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

2

ISSN 1923-0567

Oral history is also important for its ability to expand the historical record to include not only lived experiences but the meanings ascribed to these experiences – knowledge that might otherwise be lost were explicit efforts not made to ensure its recording. Interviews, too, allow researchers the opportunity to engage in active dialogue with their 'sources' – in this case, their narrators or interview partners, as interviewees are best described. The conversation an oral history generates – as collaboration between narrator and interviewer – can round out and even challenge perspectives on the past. Thus, as Perks and Thomson note, "oral history complements the formal written record by giving in addition the personal, intimate, human and social account of events."[4] Whether we set out to examine violations or victories in the history of human rights little can compare to what these first person narratives can bring to our understanding of the past and present.

The Roots of Oral History at the CMHR

Storytelling and story gathering has been integral to informing the Museum's development from its earliest days. Early on, in keeping with current international museum trends, organizers made the decision that the Museum would endeavour to explore human rights concepts, issues, and events through the lens of personal stories and experiences. Instead of amassing large collections of artifacts to draw upon for exhibit development, the CMHR would instead borrow objects from other repositories for display as determined by exhibition objectives, and focus its own efforts on building digital collections, especially oral history interviews about human rights.

The first research interviews conducted for the CMHR were not oral histories, but recorded conversations and short, targeted interviews carried out as part of the Museum's formal Public Engagement process. In 2009, the Museum embarked upon a cross-country story-gathering mission that included 19 cities "for the purpose of developing the content of the museum."[5] During this formative stage, the Museum invited groups and individuals to share their opinions about what the new museum might and could include. Recordings made of these sessions laid the groundwork for the Museum's digital collection of personal anecdotes and helped to establish contacts for future oral history interviews. The use of oral history as a primary research methodology for developing CMHR exhibit content emerged from the success of these early recorded conversations, a key point that speaks to the important potential uses of oral history in a variety of contexts. The Museum soon moved forward with plans

[4] Ibid.
[5] Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) and the CMHR Content Advisory Committee, *Memorandum of Understanding* (Winnipeg: CMHR, January 2009), 1.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

3

ISSN 1923-0567

for more formal, in-depth oral history interviews documenting people's human rights experiences to support its exhibitions and collections development.

To do so, we had the benefit of being able to draw upon a wealth of knowledge from the fields of both museology and oral history theory and practice. For the past several decades, with the advent of affordable and accessible technology, museums have actively engaged with oral history for a number of purposes. Oral history enhances programming, inspires scripts for plays, acts as 'food for thought' to stimulate discussions, and provides a focus for outreach activities like community workshops. Museums, then, use oral histories to re-tailor the visitor experience to be more engaging, interactive, and contemporary.[6] At the CMHR, as at other institutions, oral history informs exhibit content and – with its inclusion in text panels, films, digital installations, and other exhibition elements – functions *as* content.

Oral history is also fundamental in many museums for collections development, an area in which the CMHR is striving to become an international leader in the field of human rights research. The CMHR enshrined this explicit goal early on in its *Collections Development Policy,* which frames oral histories as the foundation to our archives:

> The Oral History Program plays an integral role in establishing and shaping the digital collections at the CMHR. Interviews, along with their accompanying documentation and related materials, enable the Museum to present inclusive and diverse human rights stories in accordance with its commitment to provide dynamic and accessible human rights content while becoming a trusted and reliable source of human rights information on a global level.[7]

The CMHR recognized that institutions with robust oral history collections could better facilitate in-house scholarship; this is especially critical for the CMHR where ideas, and not objects, are the focus of curatorial attention. Oral history

---

[6] For a few recent examples of some of the many ways museums and other sites of memory have engaged with, exhibited, and built collections of oral history, please consult Mireya Loza, "From Ephemeral to Enduring," *Public Historian* 38, 2 (May 2016): 23-41; Andy Greene, "The Rock Hall's Secret Oral-History Project," *Rolling Stone* 1236 (June 4, 2015): 28; Ken Clavette and Robert Hatfield, "Workers' Oral History: Recording, Preserving, and Promoting," *Oral History Forum* 35 (2015): 1-4; Neil Shea, "A Tale of War and Forgetting," *American Scholar* 83, 4 (September 2014): 72-79; Jovan Byford, "Remembering Jasenovac: Survivor Testimonies and the Cultural Dimension of Bearing Witness," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 28, 1 (April 2014): 58-84; S. Y. Choung, "RECALLING 1993," *Oral History Review* 40, 2 (Fall 2013): 364-66. See also Stuart Davies, "Falling on Deaf Ears? Oral History and Strategy in Museums," *Oral History* 22, 2 (1994), 74-84; Ron Chew, "Collected Stories: The Rise of Oral History in Museum Exhibitions," *Museum News* (Nov/Dec 2002); Willa Baum, "The Other Uses of Oral History," *The Oral History Review*, 34, 1 (2007), 13-24.
[7] *Collections Development Policy* (Winnipeg: CMHR, 2015), 5. The initial version of this policy, enacted in 2011, first included this statement; it has remained through further policy revisions.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

4

ISSN 1923-0567

collections that museums create or acquire are essential for attracting and retaining existing research staff and drawing in outside scholars and others looking to engage with critical sources to further their own research pursuits. Teachers can direct their students to a museum's collection to develop term papers, for other educational activities, and to generate excitement and facilitate preparation in advance of a planned visit. Activists can look to these collections as a source for inspiration and understanding.

The Champions Oral History Pilot Project

To begin cultivating this potential, the CMHR's official foray into oral history commenced as a one-year project entitled "Champions: An Oral History Pilot Project."[8] As personal stories were a key means through which exhibitions would be shaped and focused, supporters for oral history as a research methodology included the CMHR's senior management, the CMHR Board of Trustees, its Content Advisory Committee, and a host of external consultants the Museum had engaged for the inaugural exhibitions development. Run during the 2010-2011 fiscal year,[9] the Champions Project, then, reflected the CMHR's commitment to developing a broader oral history collection while carefully exploring how best practices around oral history might apply specifically or be tailored to suit to the CMHR's situation. The project committed to conducting 10-12 interviews with 'human rights champions,' people recognized for their contribution to the advancement of human rights. The initial interviews met with success and support enough from the Museum to become the key to developing an Oral History Program, and serve as the foundation of our digital collections.

The project team and methodology were carefully selected. Rhonda Hinther, an experienced oral historian and curator, acted as project lead. This complemented her larger research management responsibilities at the Museum at the time. Given the initiative's commitment to collections building, an archival eye was essential on the team's leadership. Heather (Pitcher) Bidzinski, the Museum's archivist (now its Head of Collections), acted as the project's co-lead. Bidzinski supervised all aspects of the collection's documentation and preservation. Hinther and other members of the CMHR research team acted as interviewers. The leadership team collaborated to develop an original, state-of-the-art infrastructure from scratch. This included the production of decision-making procedures, the development of documentation and related processes,

---

[8] The Champions Project was known as both the Icons Project and the Notables Project in early documentation. As the project evolved, "Champion" was deemed the most suitable name as it embodied both action and actor.

[9] The Government of Canada's fiscal year runs from 1 April to 31 March. As a federal Crown Corporation, the CMHR follows this fiscal year.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

5

ISSN 1923-0567

equipment selection and purchases (carried out in close dialogue with members of the Museum's Design and New Media staff), and staff training. A great deal of preparation went into getting us to our first interview.

To make the collection as useful and flexible as possible, we decided to shoot all interviews in 'born-digital' broadcast quality video, so long as our narrator was willing. In collaboration with several other CMHR departments, we purchased a professional grade camera, lighting kit, and audio equipment. We also bought a black backdrop curtain to provide a consistent "look and feel" in all interviews, thus maximizing the flexibility of the resulting collection for use in numerous situations. We also acquired professional grade digital audio recorders to ensure our capacity to conduct audio-only oral history interviews as required, in case a narrator preferred not to be video-recorded.[10] A Media Production Artist from the Museum's Design and New Media Department joined the project team to act as videographer.

Staff training was a priority – only Hinther came to the project with prior training in, and experience with, oral history practice. We carried out several workshops on oral history methodology and practice. Hinther and Bidzinski conducted the first workshop, which focused on oral history interviewing techniques and interview documentation.

Next, we engaged staff from the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University to lead the team in a more expansive workshop. Mindful of the fact that team members might be interviewing survivors of traumatic events, we staged two half-day workshops on oral history and trauma with trauma specialist, Holly M. Lowe. At the first session, Lowe focused on responding to signs of trauma or re-traumatization in an interviewee. She also highlighted the ways in which a researcher might best approach the development of their questionnaire to avoid, or mitigate, the potential for a narrator to re-experience trauma during the course of an interview. Lowe's second trauma workshop considered critical issues around interviewers' self-care should issues arise from listening to difficult narratives in interviews.

Before any interviews could occur, we needed to develop appropriate documentation procedures. Among the most important was the creation of informed consent and interview release forms that reflected the philosophies of collaboration, relationship building, and ethical practice. The development of these forms is an ongoing, iterative process. We created our initial forms based on pre-existing CMHR consent forms from the Public Engagement Process, in order

---

[10] The initial equipment that was purchased included a professional grade Sony video camera that captured footage in ACVHD at 23.98 fps, a Nikon D5000 (DSLR) for capturing b-roll footage and still images, a shotgun, conference, wired and wireless lavalier microphones, LED lighting kits, and Tascam audio recorders. We later added H2 Zoom recorders and Canon Powershot (Point and shoot) cameras for portable audio-only kits.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

6

ISSN 1923-0567

to facilitate immediate interviewing and avoid additional time delays in getting the oral history process going. We modified these forms based on feedback from the research team, our narrators, and others, in order to bring them more closely in line with best practices in oral history and human rights based research.

The team also participated in the development of general guidelines and protocols with regard to research ethics. This was done with careful consideration of the need for sensitivity and conscientiousness when working with human subjects in research contexts where an oral history methodology is employed. We needed to operate in accordance with best practices, but believed that, as a Museum for Human Rights, we should strive to go beyond those standards. Through our development of processes, procedures, and documentation, ethical practice defined and shaped program development. We were guided by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, and the Oral History Association publications, Oral *History Evaluation Guidelines*, *Principles for Oral History,* and *Best Practices for Oral History.* At the same time, the Museum collaborated with the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs to specifically define Museum needs and identify particular challenges to develop research ethics guidelines and informed consent templates. We developed strategies for the use of interviews guided by the philosophy of shared authority.[11] This early developmental phase laid the groundwork crucial for rolling out the Pilot Project and commencing our preliminary interviews.

In terms of interview style, we chose – and endeavoured where time and schedule permitted – to take a life history approach to all of our interviews. The life history approach is especially beneficial when working with lesser-known participants, yielding a wealth of information where little may have existed on public record. In this regard, the project served an important 'recovery' history function, helping to document lives and experiences underrepresented in formal research repositories. We also favoured longer, life story interviews since they could often elicit a wider array of information and introduce potentially more varying perspectives into our budding collection. This could enhance their applicability across a number of the Museum's galleries, including yet-to-be determined future activities, while also speaking to a diverse of array of potential external researchers' interests looking to engage with the Museum's collection. To support this, we developed a general life history questionnaire that interviewers would tailor according to individual narrator's backgrounds. Unless a narrator explicitly requested it, interviewers generally did not share their specific questions prior the interview (in order to keep the conversation as natural as possible). Pre-interview conversations – via email, telephone, and/or (where

---

[11] In his article "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," Steven High speaks to the incorporation of shared authority in the practice of oral history as the "cultivation of trust, the development of collaborative relationships and shared decision-making." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, 1 (Winter 2009): 13.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

7

ISSN 1923-0567

possible) in-person – helped to establish rapport and provide our narrators with a good sense of what would happen when the interview occurred.

Choosing our narrators was a challenging process. The broad and complex theme of human rights underpinned our work, but other than that, our focus was relatively wide-open. We developed a set of selection criteria to guide and centre us as we proceeded to work to build our collection. Based on this, we approached narrators who were known for their contribution to the advancement of human rights locally, nationally, and/or internationally; would stimulate debate and shed new light on human rights topics (in keeping with the Museum's mandate); and would help to inform planned exhibit content. Inclusivity and balance also were critical within this particular project – we sought narrators whose presence would help to ensure a diversity of perspectives on human rights; gender balance; and the representation of other subjectivities, positionalities, and categories of oppression[12] to ensure cultural diversity. We endeavoured to interview equitable numbers of Francophone and Anglophone narrators, while also seeking to include speakers whose first language was one other than French or English. Finally, we also prioritized individuals whose availability might be limited due to distance, schedules, age, or health.

Recommendations for possible narrators came from a variety of quarters. We were informed by suggestions from the public (many of which came out of discussions at the CMHR's Public Engagement process), the CMHR's Human Right's Advisory Committee, our academic partners, Indigenous groups, and external human rights organizations and activists. As well, the CMHR's research team, composed of scholars possessing extensive human rights expertise and experience, played a crucial role creating and shaping the list of potential narrators.

We carried out our interviews across the country, travelling when required to meet our narrators in their home communities, typically carrying out interviews with multiple narrators on a single trip. When it was cost prohibitive to send the interview team to certain locations, but our narrators were willing and able to travel, we sometimes brought them to Winnipeg to be interviewed. In several instances, we were fortunate to secure interviews with prominent human rights activists who happened to be in Winnipeg for other purposes. Interviews took place in a "neutral" space that would be easily accessible for our participants – conference rooms or suites in local hotels, then, typically served as our 'studio'. As our camera and lighting set-up was extensive (to ensure broadcast quality production), working out of a hotel saved us travel, setup, and tear-down time. We reimbursed our narrators for their travel costs to the venue and provided refreshments.

---

[12] Included were class, ethnicity, racialization, sexual orientation, ability, and gender identity.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

8

ISSN 1923-0567

The result of the Champions Oral History Project was a distinguished and diverse collection of interviews. Thanks to careful resource management and budgetary oversight, the team completed more than twice the ten to twelve interviews to which it had committed at the project's inception. We managed to conduct our interviews in our narrators' preferred language, using translators and interpreters as required. Interview length varied, running anywhere from ninety minutes to nine hours (the average interview was approximately two hours in length). These conversations covered topics as wide-ranging as women's rights, LGBTTQ* experiences, international human rights activism, Indigenous rights, labour issues, and the experiences of persons from a variety of marginalized groups. The Champions Project proved itself a boon to both collections' development and exhibitions research for the CMHR. It built critical relations with a varied array of individuals and communities, solidified further support for the Museum across the country, and raised awareness of the Museum around the world. It also allowed us to expand the Museum's relationships with oral history practitioners and institutions across Canada. The project's overwhelming success laid a strong foundation on which the CMHR could build its permanent Oral History Program.

From Pilot Project to Long-Term Program

As the Pilot Project reached its successful conclusion, a longer term, Program shape emerged. Processes we had put in place continued, and were refined as necessary. The team remained largely the same although contract production artists were occasionally hired when in-house staff was unavailable. From 2011-2012, with the team leadership on concurrent maternity leaves, Sharon Reilly joined the team, first as Acting Director of Research (overseeing both the Research Department and Co-leading the OHP), and later remaining with the museum as Curatorial Advisor and Oral History Program Coordinator after team leadership returned from their respective leaves. From 2011-2013, the program had administrative support – assisting with scheduling, travel coordination, booking equipment, hospitality arrangements, and studio reservations. This support, which continued until the most intense period of interviewing ended in 2013, was invaluable. It ensured the smooth facilitation of the complicated logistics involved in organizing our interviews and enabled the program to run more efficiently. This freed the researchers to focus on their most critical tasks – relationship building with interviewees and interview preparation.

Our selection criteria for interviews remained the same, with one important addition. As we moved toward the Museum's opening, it became

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

9

ISSN 1923-0567

crucial for the research team to focus almost exclusively on the development of content for the CMHR's inaugural exhibitions. As such, all oral history interviews carried out starting in the 2011-12 fiscal year, and continuing until the museum's opening in September 2014, focused on individuals whose stories had a direct application to particular (and sometimes multiple) exhibits. Fortunately, most of the interviews we had carried out as part of the Champions project fit this criterion as well. Even with this additional selection criterion, we still left room for the project to carry out what we call "Opportunistic Interviews." These are conversations with human rights activists who happened to be visiting Winnipeg or who were available in another community where we happened to be conducting interviews.

The CMHR Oral History Program requires close cooperation between several Museum departments - including Research & Curation; Collections; and Design & Production, and is grounded on the following methodology and work processes. The researchers initiate and prepare for interviews with careful research, negotiations, and relationship building with interview subjects. As the interviewers, the researchers dedicate considerable time to primary and secondary source research and engage in informal conversations with potential interviewees. When this important groundwork is complete, the researchers turn toward handling the interview's logistics, including booking interview space, organizing hospitality, scheduling the videographer, and arranging for the interviewee to get to and from the interview venue.

The interview itself is conducted based on standards that the program's leaders have developed, in accordance with oral history best practices. The Production Artist prepares the space for the interview, setting up equipment, arranging furniture, and ensuring uniformity and high quality sound and picture for an excellent final product. The completed raw footage is managed by the Collections Department, acquired, reviewed, and described in accordance with archival standards, and processed for preservation. Raw footage is uploaded from recording media using a write-blocking device and the Bagit File Packaging Format. Access copies are created using Adobe Media Encoder. All archival masters are stored on a secure, separate file share only accessible by the archivist and IT security team. The CMHR's Archivist oversees transcription, with contractors completing most of this work. The Design and Production Team facilitates any postproduction work required to utilize oral history content in exhibit or other Museum products. The Museum aspires to create a fully accessible oral history collection and is beginning the monumental task of preparing interviews for accessible transcription, closed captioning and public access (where appropriate and in accordance with participant restrictions).

After just 14 months, we had met a number of key milestones, including:

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

10

ISSN 1923-0567

- The establishment of project infrastructure and framing of team organization and roles
- The development of documentation procedures and materials (including story release form)
- Staff training (Oral History workshops; Trauma workshops)
- The successful completion of Champions Pilot Project (2010-11 Fiscal Year) – 23 interviews (an additional 13 interviews over and above the 10 interviews committed to in the project proposal)
- The establishment of key partnerships with other Oral History centres and practitioners
- The completion of important research for inaugural exhibition development
- The receipt of extensive positive feedback and encouragement from the broader scholarly oral history community and project participants for our comprehensive and ethical approach to oral history
- The foundation of a robust collection of human rights-based narratives for broader public and researcher access

By that time, too, exploration of outside opportunities commenced for project funding and partnerships. The hope was to establish a collaborative national network of individuals and institutions interested in pursuing oral history initiatives focused on human rights activities. Likewise, the CMHR also continued to build bridges with academics and others engaged with communities conducting their own oral history projects, to offer reciprocal support in the form of training, recording, archival consultation, and even to participate as interviewers.

Lessons Learned

We faced many exciting challenges and considerable opportunities developing the Champions Pilot Project and the Oral History Program from scratch. From our experiences emerged a number of lessons learned, which we share here in the hopes of that we may help others who are planning or are in the midst of projects of similar scope.

Lesson One: Informed Consent is an Organic Process

One of the first (and ongoing) lessons learned was that the process of informed consent is an ever-evolving work in progress. It can be a complex journey full of pitfalls and wrought with legalese. We agreed that the goal of creating a solid informed consent process should accomplish three things:

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

11

ISSN 1923-0567

- Reflect the philosophy of shared authority
- Rely on paperwork grounded in clear language
- Go beyond the bare minimums – exploring the concept of truly collaborative interviews

Theoretical discussions aside, these goals pose an ongoing challenge in the quest to set new precedent in accessibility and collaboration.

Our initial consent forms relied heavily on the forms developed by Steven High and the team at Concordia Centre for Oral History and Digital Story Telling (COHDS). This Canadian leader in oral history had in common with the CMHR digital content, a collaborative approach, and experience dealing with vulnerable communities. We were grateful for their permission to use and modify the forms they used in their oral history practice. After incorporating Museum specific language/clauses, and using the resulting paperwork in the field, we discovered gaps in the process specific to our type of organization. We developed version two of our form in collaboration with Sheila Brown at the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs. In consultation with the Project leadership and the research team, she offered a number of improvements to our existing documents, including reducing the package from two separate forms (one for consent, and one for release) into a single document.

The consent forms have undergone additional revisions to clarify language further, ensuring ample and clear opportunity for participants to express conditions. We also improved the format. During this revision stage, we identified a major gap pertaining to copyright. Although the Program operated under the premise that the interviewee maintains copyright, we had not clearly documented details of copyright terms in the existing consent form. While we had originally considered that the use of Creative Commons' (CC) licensing language would remedy the problem, we had concerns due to the irrevocable nature of CC licensing. The CMHR preferred the flexibility of developing its own copyright statement. During the revision process, we also learned that, vis-à-vis Canadian Copyright legislation, the creator of the interview (i.e. in the case the Museum) automatically holds copyright to the interview and related materials. We are currently exploring language that will protect participants (both the CMHR and narrators), uphold Canadian Copyright legislation, and reflect the philosophies that the Program is built upon.

The revisions and evolution of our consent forms has been a result of field-testing and feedback we have received from both our participants and our team. Recently, we have also incorporated an introductory package for our narrators that better and more clearly explain the Project, its goals, and the process of consent the Museum uses. It is highly recommended that a good deal

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

12

ISSN 1923-0567

of thought be given to the long-term impact of language used in consent forms and releases. If at all possible, project planners should engage the help of an intellectual property advisor at the beginning of the process to avoid the pitfalls of complicated agreements.

Lesson Two: Contract Transcription without Compromise

Understanding that the CMHR was working with sensitive subjects and intensely personal stories, we took steps to ensure that the transcription process did not compromise the protection of participants and any restrictions they may have placed on their interviews. Because the CMHR relies heavily on outside independent contractors to transcribe all oral history interviews, to maintain control of the process, we developed an agreement that documented security and confidentiality requirements with respect to the sharing, use, storage, and destruction of materials with contract transcribers.

An introductory script for new contractors provided an overview of the contract requirements, and included this text with a copy of the CMHR *Transcription Guidelines*. In addition to these documents, all contract transcribers are required to sign a detailed confidentiality agreement. This agreement includes a general clause that requires the maintenance of full confidentiality with regard to all recordings and documents. It also covers the production or retention of copies, storage of files while in the possession of the transcriber and the secure destruction of files from computer devices. The agreement requires contractors to use a secure digital shredding program recommended by the CMHR archivist.

We share video footage with transcribers using the program Bit Torrent Sync because it affords us a greater degree of security than Drop Box or other file sharing programs. It also allows the CMHR to control when and for how long the file is accessible. We provide access to the interview for a finite period, typically one week from initial access. In cases where the participants request or require various degrees of anonymity, transcriptions are done in house by the either the Head of Collections or the Archivist. Adherence to these requirements is strict, and they are in place in order to protect participants, the collection, and the Museum.

Lesson Three: The Challenges and Ethics of Access and Accessibility

One of the advantages of working with born digital materials is the ability to provide broader access to collection. Through digital collections, CMHR is not reliant on analog recordings using analog machines that require onsite consultation. The double conundrum with born digital collections is how to provide access, and is access too readily provided? The Museum has always

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

13

ISSN 1923-0567

intended to leverage the accessibility of the oral history collection in order to amplify voices of the under-represented in our human rights history, but how can this be accomplished?

The benefits and challenges of providing full access is an ongoing conversation among oral history practitioners everywhere, including at the CMHR. The result of our in-house discussions has been the identification and implementation of a modified model of access. In this model, the Museum attempts to balance access, control, and protection of our participants in order to maximize collection use and usability. Our model is one that provides online access to short clips of the unrestricted interviews and their relevant documentation (abstracts, tape logs and transcripts) while providing onsite-only access to full interviews.

An additional perspective to the access question is that of accessibility for persons with disabilities. Beyond the matter of providing access to the oral histories, the Museum is committed in all ways to providing the highest possible standard of universal accessibility. A collection that is born digital and heavily weighted in audiovisual materials poses numerous challenges, ranging from the choice of media player, to document formats, to hardware and software choices. The Museum is currently exploring a multitude of solutions that will provide the best level of accessibility to the oral history collection while maintaining the ethics of access.

Lesson Four: Shared Authority in Theory is Easier than Shared Authority in Practice

At the heart of the CMHR Oral History Program is the principle of shared authority. The first component of this principle is free, informed, and ongoing consent. We founded the program on that idea of ongoing consent with the intent to develop ongoing relationships of trust and reciprocity with our participants. We envisioned the interview itself as a continuing conversation, equal partnership, and collaboration.

Our hope was to implement shared authority through a step-by-step process that would involve:

- Informing participants of our intent to use their interview in exhibits or online programs
- Providing to participants a detailed proposal for use, including intended design concepts
- Facilitating discussion and negotiation that would result in the participant's permission to use their content in the ways outlined

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

14

ISSN 1923-0567

- Involving participants in ongoing discussions on how the final products would be manifest in the Museum

We quickly discovered that the practice of shared authority was more complex than we ever could have imagined. In the first four years of oral history practice at the Museum, we conducted over 180 interviews. We intended to use many of these interviews in our inaugural exhibits, and obtained permission for their use at the time of each interview. When possible, we involved our narrators in the process of exhibition development. As the process of contacting participants commenced, we realized how involved the continued conversation could become. We faced the realities of limited resources and challenging deadlines as our work continued at a breakneck pace towards the finish line of the Museum's opening. In this challenging context, we adapted our approach, in keeping with the spirit of shared authority. We opened up conversations with our narrators by seeking their permission to use specific parts of their interviews for specific exhibits, carefully informing them as to how we would like to use this content. Where narrators had any concerns, we respected their wishes and did not use their interview.

Lesson Five: A Lengthy and Flexible "Wish List" is Essential

Conducting an oral history interview is not simply a matter of deciding on a person to interview and doing it. Even with financial and human resources firmly in place, it can be difficult to secure a desired narrator for an interview. The reasons, we found, are many and complex (but perhaps not surprising):

- It can be difficult to track down some individuals. While their stories might be well-known, even in the age of the internet and social media, it can be difficult to find current contact information. We can rely on our extensive collective professional and activist networks to assist in some instances; in others, we simply have had to accept that we faced a dead-end.
- Even with contact made, convincing a potential narrator that their story has the significance to warrant an interview can be a challenge. This is often a common issue for any oral history project.
- Some of the people we contacted simply refused to do an interview for any number of reasons.
- Poor health or advanced age made it impossible for some individuals who were interested to participate.
- In the case where we had a willing and able participant, we needed to ease many narrators' fears about doing a recorded interview, particularly those

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

15

ISSN 1923-0567

with little to no media experience. Telling their story to us was acceptable to them, but telling it on camera gave them reason to be concerned.

- For some more-vulnerable individuals, an interview (and its resulting outputs) might pose a threat to their safety, their family, or their community's safety, making the interview impossible. Some refused an interview on this basis, or were very specific about the nature of the discussion that could take place on camera and/or how the interview could be accessed and used.
- In some communities, complex ethical issues must be resolved before an interview with an individual can take place, especially in the case of collective stories. Many Indigenous communities, for example, have strict protocols around engagement with researchers and sharing stories.
- The Museum hoped to interview a number of well-known human rights activists as part of both the Champions Pilot Project and the Oral History Program. It was especially important, we learned, to manage our expectations carefully when it came to people who were in high demand. In some instances, we spent considerable time and energy trying simply to reach a potential interviewee, often without success. In other cases, despite an enthusiastic willingness to participate, we were unable to secure an interview because of their challenging schedules.

Given these challenges, had the CMHR Champions Project stuck by a rigid list of ten individuals, it is likely that a mere two to three interviews, instead of the 23 we completed, could have been carried out during its term. We recommend that for every one person a project seeks to interview, an additional four to five names be included on the project list as potential alternates who may still satisfy the objectives and criteria established for the original interview. It is also important to expect that an initial narrator list will naturally grow as more interviews take place. Additions to the list will come through associated primary and secondary research processes and based on recommendations from those interviewed. Often, during or after their interview, a narrator will insist something along the lines of, "You must interview so-and-so. They have a lot to say on this or that issue." A narrator's shared knowledge, then, can lead to other unexpected interviews, resulting in deeper and richer research materials than first imagined.

Likewise, even if it were possible to do so, attempting to follow a rigid narrator wish list would preclude a project's ability to take advantage of unexpected interview opportunities that arise. Their participation in programs and lectures in Winnipeg or other Canadian cities made available a number of key human rights actors and advocates with whom it would generally have been difficult for us to secure interviews. Moreover, sometimes we are in a city for interviews and have space in our schedule that will allow us to engage with

someone fitting the Program's mandate but who might not have otherwise been on our immediate list.

In this respect, partnerships are also important. Partnerships have been extremely beneficial to the Oral History Program and allowed us to explore a number of interview opportunities that would not be available to us otherwise. Through our connections with the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling in Montreal, for example, we were fortunate to establish an important collaboration with Equitas, the Montreal-based International Centre for Human Rights Education. Each year, Equitas hosts their International Human Rights Training Program, bringing human rights defenders to Canada from around the world.[13] In the summers of 2011 and 2012, Equitas facilitated contact with their program participants, many of whom agreed to do an oral history interview with us. This provided us access to a diverse array of international human rights activists that would have been out of the realm of possibility given our limited resources, time, and budget. These abbreviated interviews followed a standard set of questions, explored a number of short themes, and provided rich resources for research, exhibit content, and networks for future interviews. Our nimble methods and openness to seizing opportunities presented to us was critical to the success of the Museum's Oral History Program.

In any oral history project, then, adaptability is important. It is for this reason that the Oral History Program at the CMHR has maintained an open-ended and flexible list featuring multiple individuals under consideration for interviews, some of whom we may never interview. We add new names as the Museum responds to the realities of research, communities, individual experiences, and potential opportunities.

The CMHR's Oral History Program Today

As of May 2016, the CMHR passed the 200th interview mark – a notable milestone. Among these are conversations with a diversity of human rights 'champions,' lesser-known human rights activists, and individuals who have experienced or are concerned about human rights violations. We have completed interviews in English, French, Spanish, Hungarian, Serbian, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. Most, but not all, narrators are Canadians. Interviews range from one to nine hours in length and explore a wide range of human rights themes. These interviews can be categorized loosely as follows:

---

[13] For more information on this exciting program, consult "International Human Rights Training Program | International Human Rights Training Program | Equitas - International Centre for Human Rights Education / Centre International D'éducation Aux Droits Humains," accessed June 14, 2016, https://equitas.org/en/what-we-do/human-rights-defenders-and-educators/ihrtp/.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

17

ISSN 1923-0567

- Human Rights 'Champions' Pilot Project Interviews: People recognized for their contribution to the advancement of human rights.
- Oral History Program Interviews: These interviews provide print, audio, and audio-visual clips for inclusion in built and digital exhibits. Most take the form of life history interviews (though some, for a variety of reasons, had to take on the form of more topically-based conversations). These interviews form the foundation of the Museum's collection; they are invaluable research resources.
- Targeted Interviews: To meet exhibition development objectives, staff have conducted shorter, more directed interviews with selected interviewees to generate specific content for the Human Rights Defenders exhibit in the Museum's Human Rights Today Gallery. While incorporating a life history flavour, these interviews are significantly shorter than our regular program interviews and focus on defined themes in order to produce the content for this specific exhibit.
- Corporate History Interviews: These interviews constitute an ongoing corporate history collection documenting the Museum's origins and history. Since 2015, staff have conducted four corporate history interviews, including interviews with the two archaeologists who oversaw the dig at The Forks site prior to the CMHR's construction, an interview with one of the first CMHR Human Rights Advisory Council members, and an interview with the Museum's founding CEO, Stuart Murray. This ongoing project will continue to interview individuals who have played a major role in the conceptualization and realization of the CMHR before their memories fade.

The first three categories of oral history interviews above have shaped the curatorial approach of much of the content and text throughout the Museum. Many of those interviews themselves appear in the Museum's exhibitions:

- Written quotations from interviews are included in built exhibits (a key example of this can be found in the "Indigenous Perspectives" Gallery's exhibit entitled Indigenous Voices).
- Video clips are included in a number of the galleries' digital kiosk stations (such as those in the "Indigenous Perspectives," "Canadian Journeys," and "Inspiring Change" Galleries).
- Video clips from interviews with local Holocaust survivors are featured in the Personal Story Monitors in the "Examining the Holocaust" Gallery.
- Video clips also appear in the Study Carrels in the "Breaking the Silence" Gallery, the "Human Rights Defenders" exhibit media in the "Rights

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

18

ISSN 1923-0567

Today" Gallery, and in some linear productions in the diptychs located in the "Turning Points for Humanity" Gallery.
- We also used our oral histories to help select the narrators for the media productions shot for the diptychs in "Turning Points for Humanity" and the Interactive Media Exhibit in the "What are Human Rights?" Gallery.

Conclusion

Moving beyond the exhibits, the Museum's Curators work closely with staff in other departments, seeking possibilities for using the oral history interviews the Museum's programs and tours.

As the Museum continues its evolution from a start-up project to an operational institution, so too is the Oral History Program defining and redefining its broad priorities. Team Leadership is exploring possible new directions for the Program to move into as the Museum defines itself in operations.

Museum staff involved in the Oral History Program engage with the oral history practitioner community through participation in various conferences. They have spoken on the Program's work at major events including Concordia University's Oral History Conference, the Canadian Historical Association's Annual Meetings, the International Oral History Association, Human Rights and Vulnerability Conference, University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg and the Oral History Association Annual Conferences.

The Oral History Program delivers a wide variety of mandate-supporting value to numerous Museum activities. Through partnership and collaboration, the Program is able to access and participate in a number of networks and communities, building resources and capacity. It also provides key support to the development of original research to support our exhibitions and other outputs. It demonstrates the Museum's commitment to human rights research and documentation. The interviews preserved as a result of the Program enable the CMHR to contribute to, and participate in, the dynamic and evolving dialogue on human rights research. Individual stories, as presented within the Museum's exhibits, serve to engage museum visitors profoundly.

Heather Bidzinski, Jodi Giesbrecht, Rhonda L. Hinther, and Sharon Reilly, "Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017)

19

ISSN 1923-0567