



## Elders as Resources – Oral History Project

Oral histories, or tape-recorded life stories, offer valuable insights. They show diverse personal and historical memories of the same events. An oral history interview is unique because the person being interviewed shares personal information. Young interviewers gain significantly in this personal and interactive process. Suggested activities include the following.

- Introduce and teach students interview techniques for an oral history (see Oral History Interviewing in Elders as Resources Lesson Plan).
- Ask each student to select a subject. Each subject should be broad enough to encourage interviewees to tell their stories, but narrow enough to focus on themes relevant to the class project.
- Assign students to identify older men and women to be interviewed.
- Ask students to conduct tape-recorded interviews. Stories are recorded, not only to provide valuable factual information, but also to document unique points of view.
- Use interviews as documents for a history paper or other project. The tapes and project materials also may be donated as historical documents to the collections of local historical societies, museums or libraries.

Example: At Ridgefield (Conn.) High School, the subject of aging is incorporated in the American studies curriculum in various ways. In one project activity, students write a biographical research paper. Student techniques for conducting oral history interviews are structured around questions devised by social studies and library media teachers. Students then identify older persons and ask them about their lives, careers and adjustments in earlier and later life.

### Community History Project

On a more ambitious level, teachers, students and elders could work together on an intergenerational historical research project in the community. A focus might be on the history of selected neighborhoods, ethnic or religious groups, or historic sites. Classes might write a history of their own school, or trace the community over several generations.

This kind of project generates an understanding of history from the point of view of everyday people, their families and communities. It promotes mutual respect and understanding among young and old students as they conduct research together. Just as important, it strengthens ties between school and community. Suggested activities include the following.

- Familiarize young and old participants with resources offered by local libraries, the historical society, museums, the town hall, and archival resources such as back issues of local newspapers and city directories.

- In pairs or small research groups, have young and old participants investigate different historical documents that describe community life. Examples include local occupations, schools, transportation or entertainment.
- Conduct oral history interviews with people in the community.
- Assign a term paper, an exhibit or a public presentation. An exhibit might include the words of people who were interviewed, with photographs, scenes of the neighborhoods in which they lived, and documents that represent their experiences. The final product might be developed into a slide program or video.

Example: Students in social studies classes at Rockville (Conn.) High School documented the history of the school. Students did preliminary research in the library archives and in town newspapers, and interviewed community residents who attended the school.