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Guide to Collection

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The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project

Guide to the Collection

Project Summary

The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project set out to solicit, collect, transcribe, preserve, and then to make available 15 to 20 oral history interviews which document stories of the intersection between housing insecurity and higher education as told by students and staff members at St. Catherine University . It was conducted from May 2012 to April 2014 in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The term “homelessness” is broadly-framed for this oral history project. A wide variety of situations and factors that contribute to housing instability are documented in the collection of interviews. We paraphrased the **definition of homelessness** devised by the United States Congress in the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act (2009) as,

Individuals and families who **lack a fixed, adequate night-time residence**, which includes persons who stay in the following situations:

- In a shelter, motel, trailer, campground.
- On the street, in an abandoned building, vehicle or other inadequate accommodation not meant for habitation.
- Doubled-up with friends or relatives because they cannot find or afford housing.

There is no set duration of homelessness needed for inclusion in the project. Our narrators describe situations that ranged from about a month to others that lasted for many years. At times the word ‘homeless’ was itself problematic for narrators to identify with, so the more neutral term ‘housing insecurity’ is used synonymously to homelessness.

Patterns emerge when the interviews are considered as a whole. These are women’s stories mostly. Twelve (12) of the fourteen (14) interviews come from students and alumnae of

St. Kate's. Male staff members rounded out the remaining two narrators. That young women's stories of homelessness predominate also reflects recent trends in the United States economy, especially for those with limited education. The Wilder Foundation's *Report on Homelessness in Minnesota*, indicated that of 10,214 persons counted as homeless in their census undertaken on October 25, 2012, almost half (46%) were youth, aged 21 and under. Further, among the population of homeless children and youth, over half (55%) was female. (2013)

Our sample of narrators is reflective of St. Kate's, the institution under study. Founded in 1905 by the Catholic Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (CSJs), St. Catherine University educates diverse students and has a baccalaureate College for Women at its heart. The narrators ranged in age from 19 to 54 (average 27) at the time of the interviews, which took place from July 2012 to July 2013. Some narrators are lifelong Minnesotans, while some are immigrants. A number of the narrators are single-parents, others were themselves kids. Many are from multi-heritage families and some identify as LGBTQ. Today several narrators own their own homes and some recalled experiences that dated back a decade or more. Others conveyed persistently precarious housing situations. The interviews tell us about foreclosures and predatory lending schemes and a little about life in the foster care system. They report on episodes of food insecurity, mental illness and substance abuse. Domestic violence plays a devastating role in many narratives in the collection.

A great disconnect remains between the firsthand accounts of the SCU Voices of Homelessness oral histories in contrast to the images of homelessness in mainstream media and the misconceptions that they perpetuate. This project demonstrates how homelessness affects people in our immediate campus community: our students and colleagues. For those with stable housing, there can be a reluctance to recognize that housing insecurity affects people who do not

conform to the stereotypes of panhandlers carrying signs that proclaim their lack of housing. Overall our narrators are visually and otherwise, indistinguishable from their peers. Along with stories of hardship, the interviews demonstrate that individuals are not defined by their housing status and how often with time, hard work and some luck, they are able to improve their situation and even pursue higher education. This collection contributes to a paradigm shift, one which complicates and elucidates our understanding of the issue of homelessness and those who experience it in the twenty-first century United States.

It took tremendous courage to tell these stories. They can be difficult to listen to and to read. They are articulate first-hand accounts, *historical evidence from the recent past and the present*, which show the consequences of the growing disparities in wealth. Beyond income and asset gaps, the interviews reveal how other inequalities -- gender, race, nationality, sexuality— are embedded throughout the stories. Early on in the project, a narrator paused after her interview and remarked, “You know, I have never said these things out loud before.” She and others gave willingly and shared their stories of ingenuity, persistence, resiliency and resourcefulness. They tell how actual individuals have dealt with profound adversity and instead of letting it define them, they went on in their roles as students, parents, friends, siblings and employees; by different means they navigated their way to this institution of higher learning. We can celebrate their achievements and acknowledge their struggles.

The immediate historical context for the project is the Great Recession from 2008 to 2012. Its origins however and the onset of the ‘epidemic’ of homelessness began in the early 1980s, as a perfect storm brewed. Policy changes included massive cuts to social welfare

benefits and widespread failure in public housing, the de-institutionalization of the chronically mentally ill, and a major shortage of affordable housing. Organized labor suffered setbacks, union influence declined in these years along with well-paying blue collar jobs. Since 1980, the wage and wealth gap widened dramatically. As a result, it's become extremely difficult for low-wage workers to earn enough to support themselves, not to mention those with dependents. A 2013 study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition shows that currently in no American state does the minimum wage afford a worker enough pay to afford a two-bedroom apartment. For Minnesota, it would take 89% of that worker's fulltime income to cover the Fair Market Value of a one-bedroom apartment.

Project Personnel and Output

Louise Edwards-Simpson, Assistant Professor of History is the Project Director. Luci Russell and Helen Garcia, undergraduate student research collaborators from the SCU/UST School of Social Work, provided extensive help and input at every stage of the project.

The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project completed fourteen oral interviews plus the collection includes an additional account written by an SCU staff member. The interviews are available in broadcast-quality WAV audio files and include written transcripts. They vary from 30 minutes to 75 minutes' duration with an average interview lasting 53 minutes. A few of the oral history files include supplementary materials such as photographs and written accounts.

At each stage the project worked to honor the human dignity of each participant. It went through a full Institutional Review Board (IRB) process before initiating the interviews. Project

narrators could place restrictions on the availability of their interviews; four participants opted to restrict accessing their oral history for a period of either 5 or 15 years from the date it was recorded. A couple narrators donated only the written transcript and not the audio recording of their interviews. In the end, one of the fifteen total narrators chose to withdraw from the project altogether and her interview was not deposited in the archive.

An Index of the Collection follows and it contains an abstract for each interview. Once the digital archive is launched on Sophia in summer 2014, the abstracts will be tagged. Researchers then can pinpoint key populations and an array of issues and filter them across the collection. Additionally, the Minnesota Department of Health's list of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) factors each oral history are analyzed in the abstracts; this tool is used to better understand how multiple traumatic events occurring in childhood can contribute to compromised health in adulthood.

Grants and Aid

The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project was made possible in part by a grant from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4, 2008, and is administered by the Minnesota Historical Society.

The project benefited also from a good deal of support from St. Catherine University, including a professional development grant to purchase broadcast-quality audio equipment, Summer Scholars program support for myself and two undergraduate student research collaborators in 2012, as well as a course release in Fall 2012 funded by the School of Humanities, Arts and Sciences as matching support for the Legacy Grant.

Portions of the project have been presented publicly. Poster at Scholars at the Capitol, Civic Engagement Conference in Iowa, and most extensively in the public event “What does homelessness have to do with St Kate’s?” on March 31, 2013 (see program and other documents).