All history is local

UT historians take history back to where it happened

by Rick Cherwitz and Julie Sievers

I n the past, academic historians were known as a stuffy bunch. We imagine them squinting over dry books in heavily restricted archives, quibbling over historical minutiae.

But in some quarters of academe, scholars are beginning to reinvent what it means to do history. They are taking it back into the communities where it first happened and teaming with experts from other disciplines. Rather than imposing their expertise on audiences, they are learning, collaborating with local communities to tell important, untold stories in new ways. The resulting “citizen scholarship” not only brings scholars and communities together, but it produces new and more vibrant local histories.

At The University of Texas, there is an emerging breed of graduate students — “intellectual entrepreneurs” — who use their knowledge to promote social good in imaginative, concrete ways. Engaging in projects through the UT Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program (IEP), these citizen-scholars are making an impact in Texas communities via their work with museums and living history centers.

Martha Norkunas created the project in “Interpreting the Texas Past” (ITP) and for five years has taught two graduate seminars, “Cultural Representations of the Past” and “Oral Narrative as History.” As part of UT’s 16.8 graduate courses, funded primarily by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department with assistance from UT, these classes introduce graduate students from multiple disciplines to local citizens. Together, the two groups use their knowledge to bring Texas history to life.

Each year, Norkunas’ classes focus on a different site suggested by Texas Parks and Wildlife. Students survey area museums in the fall, asking critical questions about history. They visit, interview, and write. Because sites often lack resources, their interpretations can be outdated. Students analyze a site’s historic presentation in interdisciplinary teams and then develop project proposals to improve it. In the end, several proposals are funded. During the spring, students team interviewing, fieldwork, and documentation skills. Several additional proposals are funded at the end of the semester.

In 1999-2000, Cary Cordova, doctoral candidate in American studies, designed the first ITP project for Varner-Hogg State Park, a former plantation site where numerous slaves lived. Cordova’s research led to the Varner-Hogg Slavery Project, consisting of a database documenting the names and stories of more than 200 slaves and an interpretive tour focusing on Rachel Patton, the plantation owner’s black wife, who was never mentioned in any park exhibits.

In 2000-01, graduate students Antony Cherian (informatics) and Mark Westmoreland (anthropology) filmed a documentary of residents of Washington on the Brazos, a rural community where most are in their mid-forties. From interviews with 75 residents, the films were created and edited by the students and were shown to the community.

In 2001-02, Andrea Woody and Tracy Fleischman, graduate students in American Studies, produced interpretive activities for fourth and seventh-grade students at Penn Farm Agricultural History Center. The games focus on migration, ecology, farm technology, and labor class issues. “Giving voice to groups whose history has previously gone untold has huge impacts on our perceptions of an era, which in turn impacts our approach to the future,” Fleischman says.

Sarah H. Cross, a student in women’s and gender studies, edited a film along with Anne Glickman, interdisciplinary doctoral candidate in radio-TV-film, and Ryan Molloy, master of fine arts in design. They and four of their classmates produced a short video based on oral histories, intertwining stories from residents of Cedar Hill — where Penn Farm is located — with images of the farm and the town.

In 2002-03, the designated site for the class was Sauer-Beckman Living History Farm, the most ambitious series of ITP projects to date. Students actively engaged in creating an orientation film, a detailed historical Web site, a permanent exhibit at the site, teacher education materials, a public program on midwifery, and four booklets based on oral history interviews that will be published and sold by the park’s bookstore.

The success of ITP lies in its navigating across disciplinary boundaries, connecting with society, putting research to work, and making education more responsive and accountable. As universities and communities struggle to better connect and collaborate, programs like ITP are critical to the future of social research. They should be supported, celebrated, and recognized as both intellectual and community work.

Martha Norkunas’ UT History students in front of a slave cabin at Barrington Farm at Washington on the Brazos.

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