Giving Voice

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Bricks and mortar can crumble, but memories may last more than a lifetime. This is the story of how a graduate student and an anthropology professor helped a community resurrect its past.

There is a sort of storytelling tradition among African-American peoples, because so little of their history has been written down," says Eric Chrisp, USF master's degree student in anthropology. "Not many poor people, in general, could afford a camera. But almost everybody can tell their life story."

Two years ago, Chrisp and his USF faculty mentor, Jay Sokolovsky, began collecting these stories as part of the Olive B. McLin Community History Archive Project—a collaboration with neighborhood residents, civic leaders and two African-American-owned multimedia companies from the south-central area of St. Petersburg. The project, named for a beloved local educator and historical figure, culminates with this summer's release of a CD-ROM, "Bus to Destiny," and a parallel site on the World Wide Web (http://www.nelson.usf.edu/mclin/). Both the CD-ROM and the Web site address a key question. "What is a community’s identity if not its history?" asks Chrisp, the project's coordinator. "Those are the kinds of things that make a place important to a person."

The loss of history has been a perpetual threat to the residents of St. Petersburg's oldest African-American neighborhoods. A baseball stadium, interstate highway construction, so-called "white flight," shrinking economic opportunity, high crime and poverty have resulted in the deterioration and destruction of landmarks in communities like the Gas Plant area and the 22nd Street business district. Neighborhoods such as Bartlett Park, Harbordale, Thirteenth Street Heights, Campbell Park and Cromwell Heights are also facing changes due to economic changes and, in certain cases, neglect.

Widespread civic unrest in the area two years ago also hastened the disintegration of visible symbols of the area's past. Federal grants awarded to the city in the aftermath, promising a burst of renovation and restoration, may erase the last vestiges of some old neighborhoods. Gone from sight and the memory of all but the old-timers are such historic settlements as Methodist Town and the Gas Plant, long-lost links to a history usually traced to the 1868 arrival in St. Petersburg of former slaves Anna Germain and John Donaldson. The timing was critical to record what remained.

Chrisp, a 1992 anthropology and psychology graduate of Eastern Michigan University, came to USF in 1994, following an extended stay in San Francisco, where he worked with anthropologist Susan Lobo. There, he helped document the history of a community descended from the more than 40,000 native Americans that had been relocated to the area in the 1950s.

He sought an internship at the St. Petersburg campus with Sokolovsky, an urban anthropologist with experience studying communities in Baltimore, New York, Mexico and Croatia. The student and the teacher, inspired in part by USF anthropology professor Susan Greenbaum's work on the history of Central Avenue in Tampa, brainstormed with community residents and settled on an oral history project.

In February, the project sponsored the first Community History Fair at the Enoch Davis Community Center. The turnout
Hands on: Professor Jay Sokolofsky, left, and Project Coordinator Eric Chrisp leave their mark on the community. Photo was taken at the Sanderlin Center.
"The history of the black community in St. Petersburg is like the glimmer of a darting sunflake, seen clearly only for a short while and quickly flickers away" — Ernest Ponder

oral histories, with the help of more than 45 adult and youth volunteers (trained by the USF student) who collectively spent 60 hours per month making audio and videotape recordings, taking still photographs and researching the St. Petersburg Times archives. The Community Advisory Board, established to facilitate resident involvement, provided a strong direction for the project.

Chrisp also organized a Saturday afternoon program, called "History is Now Expedition," designed to directly involve teenagers in the project. The group conducted 10 interviews, including a session with longtime area pianist and educator Al Downing, who had served as a Tuskegee airman during World War II. He was interviewed in front of the building that once housed the Manhattan Casino, a segregation-era nightclub whose history included performances by swing great Count Basie.

The inspiration and hard work behind the project has resulted in the still-under-construction Web site and CD-Rom, the latter to be distributed free to St. Petersburg's community centers, public museums and city libraries. Alan Buchanan and Rochelle Lewis Lavin, respectively, provided their expertise for those separate but related endeavors. The CD-Rom is packed with audio and visual information gleaned through the gathering of oral histories.

The site includes two museum collections, a guide to doing oral histories, a library with primary historical records, and activity center with history quizzes and games. It will advertise upcoming events, as well as hyperlinking to related Web sites, including one established by the local Council of Neighborhood Organizations. The CD-ROM includes a virtual heritage trail, a quiz game on local heroes, photo galleries and a guide to collecting local history.

"At the time, even a couple of years ago, I didn't realize the power of these two kinds of multi-media programs not only to store history, but to really make it come alive and engage the community," Sokolovsky says.

"The department at USF was the first program in applied anthropology. This is the kind of thing we try to initiate and help make happen in local communities, to train students to connect up with real communities and facilitate something that communities want to happen, and contribute some of the skills of the university.

"It really wasn't until the actual fair that the community saw the depth of commitment that USF had to this project and to working with the community. We were overwhelmed in a very positive way."