

Westview Oral History and Ephemera Project

The Idea:

The mission of this project is to preserve and share the stories of long-term Westview residents and really document the changing landscape of the community. We want to collect oral histories, important documents, and other community mementos, and make them available to you, the residents, so you can engage with these histories online and in person. We hope to inspire future interest for historical work in this community.

This project is meant to be for your community, by your community. The GSU Historic Preservation program is a founding partner and are here to get the ball rolling and to help as much as possible, but the goal is to involve as many community members as possible from the beginning so that the project is fully prepared to thrive on its own. The committee for the Westview Oral History and Ephemera Project includes representatives from GSU, the Westview Community Organization (WCO), youth organizations, the community, and other volunteers.

So what is an Oral History?

An oral history is an audio recording of an interview with a person (or persons) who have personal knowledge of past events. Often they focus in on specific neighborhoods or communities with rich stories to tell. They are focused on getting the personal side of history, the stories the history books do not always tell.

And how do you do one?

We have prepared a step-by-step guide (attached here) to performing oral histories within the Westview community. We've included sample questions to get you started as well. All of this has been developed over time, through readings and across conversations, but mostly it's been tested by us. We have been successful, and you will be too.

Anything else I need to know?

We will also be including a protocol for editing and uploading your oral history when you're finished, with the goal of creating an easy-to-use, consistent platform for people to listen to voices of their community members whenever they'd like. While what's uploaded will be a shortened version, the entire interview will be part of the WCO archive. This is in the works, and will be available shortly.

Who can I ask for help?

You have several contacts you can reach out to if you want support in this process. We've included their information at the end of this document.

The How-To: Before the Interview

1.) Identify a person you want to interview.

Maybe you already have someone in mind who you know would make a great candidate, who never lets you go without one more story or piece of advice. That's great: ask them if they'd be willing to be interviewed and recorded. Or maybe you're interested in making new connections within the community. The WCO has a list of people who have been nominated for interviews or who have expressed interest in the project. They can connect you.

2.) Set up a time and place to meet.

You'll need to make contact with the person you want to interview, either through email or by phone, and arrange a time and place to meet. You want to make them feel as comfortable as possible, so offer to go to them or follow their lead in deciding where they want to meet. All you need is a place where you can avoid too much ambient noise, for the sake of the recording.

Again, you want them to feel comfortable, so see if they want someone else to be present for the interview: a family member or close friend, or authority figure within the WCO, whoever they might want. Who knows where the conversation could lead? You want the person you're interviewing to feel supported, and that might be a difficult job for just you.

3.) Prepare for the interview.

Have a list of questions you want to ask. You can use the ones included in this booklet, or edit them to fit the person you're interviewing. Do some research on this person so you know who they are and what types of questions might be important to ask. As you select or craft your questions, remember that they should be open-ended, meaning not able to be answered with just a yes or a no. You want to get the person you're interviewing to talk as much as possible. Also consider a structure to your questions. Begin with more basic ones, move into harder ones, and then end on lighter ones again, so your conversation goes full circle. See our question guidelines for more.

Make sure you have a recording device, and that it is charged. Your phone will most likely serve this purpose, but if this is not an option for you, ask around to borrow one or rent one. If you cannot find anything, the WCO will make sure you have a device that will work—just ask.

4.) Get the interviewee to sign the release form.

Do this either before the interview or at the beginning of it. A sample one will be uploaded to this website; feel free to use that. It covers all of the legal requirements and makes sure they understand the purpose behind the project and what their recording will be used for.

The How-To: During the Interview

1.) Make sure you're in a quiet place where you and your interviewee can hear each other.

You want to get rid of as much ambient noise as possible. If you meet at a restaurant, consider sitting outside, if there's music inside, or asking for a table away from other guests. If you're at their house, try and go into a room with no other people in it and where the televisions, etc., are off. Place the recorder somewhere central between you so that it can pick up everything clearly.

2.) Don't get too caught up in your questions.

You've done all of this work preparing questions, and it's easy to get stuck in them, especially if you're nervous. But remember, they're there to guide you, not rule you. If the conversation starts going somewhere interesting that you could not have predicted and is relevant to Westview, let it go there. Ask follow-up questions in the moment, instead of shutting that conversation down to refer back to your list. The list is to help you if there are silences, or if you get too far off-track, but being able to adapt is important.

3.) Make sure the person feels heard.

Make eye contact. Listen actively. If you want to take notes, that's fine, but remember that the recording device is there, so you can take notes or write down other reactions later. Stay present in the moment. This also means that your phone should be a recorder, nothing else. Turn off all notifications and noises so it cannot distract you.

4.) Pay attention to the needs of your interviewee.

These interviews could go on for a while. Make sure you take breaks if you need them. Do you both have water? Tissues? Do you need to stop recording at some point? This is part of being in the moment: being attentive.

5.) Check-in with the recording device.

You want to make sure it's recording throughout the entire interview. Quick check-ins with it—that don't distract from the conversation—are good to make sure nothing has interfered. It may be a good idea to bring a charger, if you're recording on your phone, or, if you're worried about something going wrong, have more than one person record the interview or more than one device on which to record. Be prepared.

6.) Don't be afraid to push, a little, sometimes.

Definitely read the situation, but if they're not fully answering your questions, perhaps because they don't seem to understand it, don't be afraid to bring it back to your question and try to keep

them on a productive track, even if it's not the one you planned. Judge carefully when to push and when not to.

The How-To: Writing Questions

1.) Ask open-ended questions.

You'll start with a few more basic questions, but the majority of your questions should require more than a yes or no answer. Use question words like "How" and "Why" as you form your questions.

2.) Structure your questions so that you start light, get deeper, and then end on a light note.

You want to get to the hard stuff, the deep questions, but you also want this experience to be a positive one for both you and the interviewee. Get to know each other at the beginning. This is a conversation, so don't be afraid to tell them about yourself, too. Ask them how long they've been in the neighborhood. Compliment their house or something about them. Do not underestimate the power of small talk in creating a comfortable atmosphere. Once you both feel comfortable, you can start asking the harder questions, but always judge the situation as you go. Also, don't end on a harder question. Bring the conversation back to something light, perhaps something previously mentioned. Leave them laughing, so to speak.

3.) Avoid leading questions.

Think about how you phrase the questions you write, and prevent yourself from writing the answer you think you'll get into the question. This might mean broadening the questions some, so that the interviewee feels called to answer them however they want to.

4.) Be able to adapt.

You could have a long list of questions and get to 2 of them. Or you could have a long list of questions and blow through all of them in the first 10 minutes. You have to be prepared, and able to adapt. Have more questions than you think necessary, and prioritize them. But also listen, and ask follow-up questions when needed that relate to what the interviewee says, not from the list.

5.) Remember: this is a conversation, and conversation is negotiation.

As mentioned before, you want your interviewee to feel comfortable. If a specific topic seems to make them upset and not bring out a lot of helpful answers, move on. Use your judgement. Before you even begin talking, make them know that they are in a safe space, and that they can stop at any point if they need to. Tell them they can refrain from saying things at their discretion, as well. It may be a good idea to mention that the audio that will be available to the public will be edited, so if they say something that they decide later in the conversation may have been going too far, then it can be edited out.

Sample Set of Questions

1.) How long have you lived in Westview?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: Where did you move from? What brought you here? How old were you when you moved in? How many houses have you lived in? What schools did you attend?

2.) What are your earliest memories of the neighborhood?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: Where did that happen? What are some other memories you have here?

3.) What are the biggest changes you've seen as you lived here?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: What do you think has brought on those changes? What are some changes you would like to see happen? How has the personality of the neighborhood changed due to those changes?

4.) What places within the neighborhood matter the most to you?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: What (restaurants/shops/other businesses) have been/are important to you and the neighborhood and why? In the past and today? Are there any community meeting places you frequent and if so, what are they? If not, where do you most often interact with the community?

5.) How would you characterize the spirit of the neighborhood?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: How would you have answered that question when you moved here and why? What changes have you observed? What stories best exemplify that spirit for you?

6.) Who are the people that have impacted the neighborhood the most?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: Who are the people within the neighborhood that have impacted you the most? Why/how?

7.) What are your hopes for the future of Westview?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: What are your fears or concerns? How do you think Westview can achieve those hopes? What needs to happen to avoid your fears and concerns?

8.) How would you want people from outside the neighborhood to understand it?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: What three words would you use to describe the neighborhood? How would you describe it to someone considering moving in?

9.) What are the most important events to this neighborhood?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: What are the most important events that have happened in this neighborhood for you? How do you see the community coming together in times of hardship? How does the community celebrate holidays or accomplishments?

10.) What other stories do you want to tell that express the spirit of the neighborhood?

-Potential Follow-ups, depending on answer: What other people have you not mentioned that are irreplaceable within this community? What is your favorite thing about living in Westview and why?