

## **Invisible Houston: Recording Oral Histories with Middle School Students**

*James T. Sheridan*  
KIPP 3D Academy Middle School

*Only by caring, each for other, can the barriers that appear to divide, without actually dividing, the visible from the invisible city be broken down and the pathological divisions healed... We must learn how we are mutually interdependent and responsible. We must get to know each other, to identify our common problems, and to devise mutually beneficial solutions.*

~ Robert Patten from  
"Reading the City," 108.

*'[C]an you see the sunset real good from the West Side?'*  
*She blinked, startled, then smiled. 'Real good.'*  
*'You can see it good from the East Side too,' I said quietly.*

~ S.E. Hinton from  
*The Outsiders*, 129-130.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In his preface to his award-winning volume *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II*, Chicago researcher and author Studs Terkel posits that "A suggestion, softly offered at lunch by my editor...sprang forth the idea for this book" (ix) indicating how a casual conversation inspired him to create a definitive oral history from World War Two soldiers and victims, families and reporters. Terkel's work has great power because he has sought out the unheard and untold stories. He looked past what already existed in history books. Through talking to everyday people, Terkel found the voices and experiences that truly enrich an understanding of an era of American life. Finding stories and family/community history has been something that I wished I had appreciated earlier in my life. My grandfather, Maurice Clifford Kelly, passed away in February at the age of 91. My response to this has been to try to collect pieces of information about his life and create a story. That's what I do; I'm the person in my family who writes everything down. In chronicling his life and experiences for my own family history, I have gotten closer to his brother Willy, his sister Mary, my own mother, my aunts and uncles, and my father. Everyone has a story about the events of his or her life; everyone has memories carried inside of them. At my grandfather's funeral, the family had each set of cousins create a photo bulletin board capturing his life in all of its fullness: from marriage to old age; from birth to death; and from the West Side to visiting the Rose Bowl in California. We talked, laughed, and learned so much about him as we came together as a family. My aunts and uncle had different photographs of my grandfather, ones that I had never seen. I feel emboldened to remember the stories, the love, and the details of where he lived, how his father immigrated to the United States from Waterville, Ireland, and how he lived his life and found his way. That search for understanding is my search; his life is my life. I am haunted by it. I carry it with me.

In a way, learning about your neighborhood, your community, your church, and your personal family history enriches you as a person. There is something powerful about preserving history, reflecting, writing things down, and explaining what you have learned to others. I thought for a long time that I was the first member of my family to ever work in Texas, but after starting some research with my aunts and uncle, I found out that my grandfather worked in Fort Worth for a time as a young man. However, I never had a chance to really ask him about it and hear about his experience in Texas. I have found no pictures of this time, which would make sense, given his position as a furnace-builder and the high cost of cameras in the 1930s and 1940s. Through my examination of my grandfather's life, I have wrestled with questions about what makes a life. Is your life about where you have lived? Is your life about the jobs that you have done? Is your life about the legacy and children, grand-children that you leave behind? It can be a difficult thing to sift through the photographs, papers, bills, and accumulated stuff of a life well-lived. My grandfather's pictures no longer have him to narrate them. A program from a baseball game that he saved may not immediately reveal to me why he saved it. When a person is gone, you really only have your best guesses as to what they thought about the world. I have realized that to write about my community and my family means to examine my own life choices. It has forced me to see where I am in the great narrative that is my life. Similarly, with this project, I want my students to feel empowered as chroniclers of their family and community history, and I want them to ask the questions, find the stories, and examine the photographs with the members of their community now, instead of always waiting to do it later. Later, as I know, can sometimes turn into never.

### **TEACHING OBJECTIVES**

In my six years of teaching in Houston, I have always worked in the northeast neighborhoods (McReynolds Middle School in Denver Harbor-Fifth Ward and KIPP 3D Academy Middle School in Trinity Gardens/Fifth Ward). As a result, I am always reading the paper and watching the news to learn what happens in this community. During my time, I have noticed that these neighborhoods rarely earn coverage in the news. In my conversations with Houstonians, I find that these neighborhoods are largely unfamiliar to many of them. Many Houstonians simply do not have a reason to drive through Denver Harbor or Fifth Ward. Instead, thanks to Interstate 10 and US 59, Houstonians can drive OVER these neighborhoods, en route to some other place. Of course, the construction of I-10 and US 59 are not the only barriers separating these neighborhoods from others in Houston. Some of these barriers are cultural, racial, and geographical. As Robert Patten points out in his paper "Reading the City," Houston has many neighborhoods hidden, nearly invisible to the average city-dweller: "we too have whole sections of the city that are obscured from the sight of most travelers: the barrio, Kashmere Gardens, Sunnyside, Acres Homes, Bordersville" (Patten 107). A broad goal of this project is to inform students and provide them with new information about Houston, so that they can investigate issues that strike them about their community. In addition to building a sort of cultural literacy about the city and its neighborhoods, the students will seek out and create oral histories that give a deeper, more focused look at life in Houston from the perspectives of their family members, neighbors, and community members.

One aspect of this project will be to challenge and involve students in the history of their community, touching upon issues such as bayous, railroads, and freeways. It is no secret in any major American city that there are neighborhoods that are bisected by backed-up highways, affected by polluting factories, and blasted continuously by noisy trains. As Stephen Fox noted in his work in the *Houston Architectural Guide*, published in 1990, "That railroad lines largely bypassed downtown and the South End accounts in part for their historic identification as high-status districts. The presence of rail lines...gave quite a different character to the parts of the city that they traversed" (Fox 164). By studying the placement and effects of railroads and freeways

in Houston, the students can begin to analyze how neighborhoods have been treated differently throughout the city's history. They will explain how lack of railroads and highways cutting through have left certain neighborhoods in Houston intact, while others remain carved up and fragmented.

Fifth Ward, Denver Harbor, and many other neighborhoods in Houston are vibrant places with rich history, but that history remains private in many cases and in danger of being forgotten. As stated earlier, many of the neighborhoods in Houston remain hidden from your average Houstonian. The ignorance of neighborhoods in Houston is no more apparent than when talking with my students. If I mention other parts of Houston (Sunnyside, Settegast, Port Houston, Montrose), the students have very little frame of reference. They cannot conceptualize the different parts of Houston and the borders between neighborhoods. Some have a vague sense of being from "North Side," but when pressed to explain what that means, where the North Side is, and what makes it different from, say, the East End or Denver Harbor, few can distinguish between the neighborhoods in any meaningful way. A few students have not visited parts of Houston outside of their neighborhood. Some students can describe rivalries with specific schools (mainly high schools) especially related to sports like football, but the majority of my students are only slightly informed about their neighborhood's dimensions and how they fit inside the larger portrait of Houston.

As an English teacher, I am constantly raising the bar with my students to get them to write clearly, argue effectively, use evidence wisely, and always explain their details. However, very few of my students have ever had an opportunity to use these writing skills in a meaningful, tangible way. In my curriculum unit for HTI, I will create a framework for studying the ideas of family, church, neighborhood, race, and community as they exist and interact in the neighborhoods of NE Houston that I teach in, but also in other neighborhoods around the city. One particular aspect I would like to study is the tension between particular neighborhoods. How are prejudices passed down from one generation to the next? What are realistic, positive solutions that can help neighboring communities co-exist? My project will be solution-based, focusing on gathering information, with minor emphasis on small, positive changes that can be made in these communities right now.

It will be both excellent and informative for middle school students to examine this topic because many students are reaching adolescence and beginning to question and closely examine the world around them. What are the boundaries between adjacent neighborhoods? What ideas, prejudices, and fears are passed down from generation to generation? Such examination will involve field work (interviewing, collecting oral narratives, photography), editing of writing for clarity, publishing a finished product for the public in that community (libraries, schools, businesses, politicians, churches), and enhancing computer literacy skills. I envision the students demonstrating their knowledge through a presentation to the communities studied in some meaningful way. The creation of a website could serve as one way to preserve this project.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY AND COMMUNITY STUDY**

Does oral history matter? This question is important to me because I sometimes get in trouble as a teacher because I think that the students are as interested in every novel, every book, and every unit as much as I am. Instead, I need to scaffold their expectations, goals, and experiences so that they have buy-in. Our opening unit that precedes this one highlights questions of personal identity. Students love to write about themselves and what they are experts on. Taking that interest in self, I hope to translate it to an interest in those around them, with the same kind of energy and curiosity. I think the examples I will show them about my grandparents and parents could help inspire them during this project.

While researching this question and my project in general, I came across this examination of why oral history has such an important place in our society from the Royal British Columbia Museum. It summarizes important points about the value of oral history:

#### Why Oral History?

Why not? Until western society became fascinated with the printed word a few hundred years ago, oral history was the main way information was passed from generation to generation. For many people, conversation is still the easiest way to communicate ideas and memories. Thanks to recent improvements in audio recording equipment, it's now relatively easy to create high quality tapes. Besides, everyone likes to hear a good story! (British Columbia Education History Project)

To a certain degree, I agree with the quotation from the website because I think everyone does like to hear a good story, a good joke, and a good explanation of how something came to be. Story-telling and listening connect us with the generations that have come before us. The myths and units studied in middle school are full of explanations about how the world came to be, what the stars mean, why weather happens. By tying this unit in with our literature, I think that I will have an increased chance of success. Of course, I will need to model this for the students, creating my own teachable lessons on my interviews with my grandparents and parents. If I can work on my own family history, then I can come to them with evidence of my own finished product from my interviews. The students will see my slides/pictures of my grandparents and parents along with my written pieces that tell the story about these people. With a little historical context and perhaps some music from the era, students will get a feel for how to go about completing this unit and the sense of fun that I had creating it. I am hoping that this idea will catch fire with them, and that some of them will take it in different directions. I think that the fieldwork aspect of it (going out into the community, working with family and friends, interviewing) will appeal to the students because it has an investigative quality. Who is someone you would like to know better? What person do you know has experiences living through history? Also, the presentation of the finished products at the end of the unit will be an opportunity for them to share with each other and their families the results of their hard work. Why oral history? Another website that I have looked at gives me a few reasons that I believe and support:

#### Why oral history?

1. Serves as a link from the immediate present to the immediate past in a very understandable and human way.
2. Fills an information gap when less and less information and reflections are recorded in written form.
3. Provides a natural opportunity to obtain information related to ordinary people. (Wysocki and Jacobsen)

What strikes me the most about this kind of project is the focus on being student-centered. If I have a student who is eager to interview an older uncle, aunt, or grandparent, then this project is a tremendous vehicle for preserving family stories. If I have a student with a smaller family, or with an adopted family, there are still opportunities to interview community members, church leaders, politicians, and various other persons. No one project must fit all students. There are multiple ways to modify and personalize the interviews.

As the students write their narratives after interviewing, a crucial part of succeeding will be achieved by looking at models of this kind of writing. One such example comes from a book I read last winter. In Alex Kotlowitz's book *The Other Side of the River*, the author creates a precise sense of the mood, the feeling, and the vibrations of two communities in Michigan. Although capturing a tragic story (the mysterious death of a black youth in a nearby white

neighborhood), Kotlowitz's techniques of weaving the interviews and the story together hold the reader's interest and create context to the events being depicted. I am interested in using some of his writing in this book and in his previous book *There Are No Children Here* to demonstrate to my students how to show history, how to show time and place in a piece of writing, while also giving a voice to people who have not been heard from. A few paragraphs and pages from each work will be turned into handouts and overhead transparencies, so that the students can dissect how an author cuts back and forth from a narrative to an interview.

## **TEACHING THE UNIT**

I imagine teaching this topic in the beginning by using personal examples from my own family history and neighborhoods, especially my grandfather. When teaching community, I plan on using small selections from feature films about neighborhoods and using various selections of music and poetry. Many resources exist preserved in newspaper, and I will have students scour newspaper archives, especially the *Houston Chronicle*, for information about Houston neighborhoods. In addition, I hope to speak with community leaders and elders for stories of a community's past, present, and future. Hopefully, a visit and brief talk by one such leader will be possible. I believe this unit will provide a way to have students explore their own family and community history in a meaningful, memorable way. I will use any resource that I have to show the students this.

Information will be gathered through personal interviews, research through the appropriate historical websites, close reading of books on Houston's history already collected in the classroom, studying photographs, and work with community members willing to share their stories. Students will learn proper techniques for recording conversations, and through practice, students will interview members of their family, church, or neighborhood and present a small piece on that person to the entire class. Teaching strategies include the following: current events, journals, artistic expressions, reading passages, I-Research projects, oral history practice, and film-viewing. Initially, students will interview each other, and then progress forward to a sibling or family member. Students will use Internet research to get any available information about their community, in addition to looking around with a pen and paper, writing down anything of interest.

In order to have a sharp focus for the interviews and the neighborhood studies, I believe that there are three essential questions (with a fourth question that swirls around all of them).

### **Essential Questions to Raise**

#### ***Beginnings***

Why were the neighborhoods created? Who originally settled there? What are the physical boundaries of this neighborhood?

To answer these questions, students will need to do background research on their particular corner of Houston and outlying areas. The students will be expected to identify the boundaries of their neighborhood, identify key streets and thoroughfares, and identify local businesses and points of interest. Once they have compiled this data, they will create a six-page folded brochure which includes a map with a scale, features of the neighborhood, boundaries, and any accompanying information that could be important (population, race and ethnicity, age breakdowns, income levels, graduation levels).

#### ***Now***

What are the defining characteristics of this neighborhood? What makes your neighborhood unique? Describe the present state of the place where you live.

How would you describe your neighborhood to someone who has never seen visited it? What are three excellent things about being from where you live? What are three things that you wish were better about your neighborhood? What would you improve about your neighborhood if you could?

At this stage, it could be important for students to think in terms of famous people, historical figures, or people from their family that are from that neighborhood. What is that neighborhood's claim to fame? What makes it stick out from other neighborhoods in Houston? I want the students to examine the uniqueness of their experience growing up at this time. How do their experiences growing up compare with their parents, guardians, or grandparents? Some students are the first generation to grow up in America. How do these families deal with the separation from other family members and other homelands that have significant meaning for them? Other important questions to look at examine social ties. What fun things exist in the neighborhood for young people? I think this question has great relevance for kids today that may be connected to their neighborhood through Little League teams, soccer clubs, scouting groups, music groups, and various other organizations. Such concerns have been relevant to Houstonians. Here is a look at what conditions city-dwellers were concerned about in the 1940s:

A 1944 report found similar living conditions in the barrios in the vicinity of Canal and Navigation Streets in the East End barrio. Not only were there poor living conditions and deplorable health conditions, there were also 'no recreation facilities, no playgrounds, no parks, no Boy's Clubs, nothing.' Only rampant juvenile delinquency could be found in this barrio. (San Miguel 13)

Students are particularly aware of what programs and groups exist for them, and this will be a good chance for them to make an inventory of these services. It may also serve as a springboard for them to think about what services and groups they think their community needs.

### ***Past Becomes Future***

What remains of the earlier time? What is the oldest building? What is the oldest business? What can be done to preserve the valuable institutions of the neighborhood? What are the things that you most value in your neighborhood and community? What do you think is in store for your community in the next ten, twenty, thirty years? What would you like to show your children about where you grew up?

This section of the project encourages students to notice the ways in which their neighborhood has changed and remains in a state of constant change and movement. Are there many older buildings? Are there many buildings that are being torn-down and turned into new apartments or houses? What businesses or what kind of families are the new additions to the neighborhood? Are problems in the community being solved or do they perpetuate? In addition, this question demands introspection and self-reflection on the part of the student. In one assignment, the students will write a letter to their children in twenty years describing the neighborhood and places of their youth. In this letter, students must consider what places and things do they think will still be in their community in twenty years. Will they still have family members in that community, or will they have left it for a new community? In order to model this, my personal experience works as a great example here.

When thinking about my childhood, many of the places that I loved have been destroyed or altered. My high school, York in Elmhurst, has been completely redesigned and there is little of it left that I remember from my time there. The circle drive that I ran thousands of miles around was demolished to make a new parking lot. All of the jungle gyms that I grew up playing around have transformed from wood and metal into plastic playgrounds. The Jewel food store where I worked my first job was torn down and rebuilt in the same location; now it is bigger with more

aisles and parking. Most of the stores and shops that I frequented have disappeared: Bruegger's Bagels, Kid's Heaven, Keeler's Candies, Anderson's Books, the Yummy Armadillo, the \$1.50 York Theater, and Baskin-Robbins. I have at least one story about each one of those places, and those stories serve as the only markers that I have of these places. Once I forget the stories, the places will no longer exist for me.

### ***Education***

What has the role of education been for the neighborhood and the citizens who live there? What is the history of education in your neighborhood? How old are the schools, and what kind of condition are they in? How have the schools changed to meet the needs of the community? How have they remained the same?

I find that my students have little understanding of how education in Houston has transformed over the course of several generations. To familiarize them with the differences, there will be several mini-lessons describing the history of education in Houston, especially focusing on African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. From a very basic standpoint, it makes sense to supply the students with basic facts and figures about educational institutions in Houston to inform them and jump-start questions that they could have during their interviews. Marguerite Johnston notes in her work *Houston: The Unknown City, 1836-1946*, "Free public schools at last opened in Houston in 1876...Tuition was abolished and attendance was compulsory for four months a year for all children aged 8 to 14. Pupils older or younger were charged four dollars or less a month" (Johnston 90). Such facts may seem preposterous to students today, but the idea of schools struggling with class size and building-space should hit closer to home:

But as always, the growing city had more children to teach than it could house. However substantial the neighborhood, each new permanent building soon sprouted temporary one-story school-rooms on the property. 'The shack' became a familiar part of growing up in Houston. (Johnston 252)

One area of focus will be the time immediately following the Civil War. Houston suddenly found itself with thousands of freed slaves and studying the educational system set up at this time is important. As part of studying the history of schools in Houston, students will identify the location of specific neighborhoods, the official city-limits, and the areas acceptable for African-Americans and immigrants during this time. I have purchased a map of the Houston Wards from 1900 from the Texas Room of the Houston Public Library, and with a few other resources, groups will analyze the maps, pulling information from them about boundaries, the bayous, and businesses. Schools serve as a large part of adding to those initial map studies, and the segregated Houston schools will be a part of the study as well.

Johnston outlines the history of African-American education in Houston after the Civil War, emphasizing the tremendous gains made by several civic leaders: "Houston's most respected leaders shared Thomas Jefferson's belief that public education is essential to democracy and worked to provide it in their city for all children. The three Negro schools that had been opened in 1866 by the Freedmen's Bureau were replaced in 1870 by the Gregory Institute, housed in a new eight thousand dollar building at Jefferson and Louisiana" (89). Learning about the challenges of creating a school district in the Reconstruction-Era will lead to examining historically African-American schools in Houston, such as Jack Yates High School and Phyllis Wheatley High School.

Yates High School in Third Ward and Wheatley in Fifth Ward serve as two examples of schools located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods. Robert D. Bullard points out in *Invisible Houston* that, "the black housing patterns in Houston can be traced directly to the long-established segregated and often isolated neighborhoods in the inner city and on the

suburban fringe. The city's black population expanded outward from the Third, Fourth, and Fifth wards" (36). He cites Sociologist Henry Bullock who mentions the importance of the main street in each of these communities: "Dowling Street of Third Ward; West Dallas of Fourth; and Lyons Avenue of Fifth Ward," (Bullard 36). For students living in those neighborhoods, those streets can be examined for their historical significance and for their present-day importance.

### ***Schools and Neighborhood Growth***

In order to understand the history of schools in Houston neighborhoods, students must explore issues Mexican immigration to Houston as well. Historically, the developments in Houston such as the railroads, the ship channel, and the oil industry "created an increased need for cheap labor" (San Miguel 4) precisely at the same time that "large numbers of landless peasants, political exiles, and religious exiles left Mexico in search of better opportunities" (San Miguel 4). Not every neighborhood in the city was available for Mexican-origin individuals. Barrios grew as Houston grew, although San Miguel points out that "racist real estate and bank policies undoubtedly played a key role in the formation of barrios. Security, cultural cohesion, sense of community, proximity to work, and affordable housing also helped the neighborhood take shape" (San Miguel 5).

Two neighborhoods that served as the original Mexican-origin barrios in 1900 to 1910 were Second Ward (El Segundo Barrio) and Denver Harbor (El Crisol). A story that I heard many times about the name of Denver Harbor involves the close tie to the railroad line, the line that divides Denver Harbor from Fifth Ward near Lockwood Street: "El Crisol was close to the Southern Pacific Railroad yards. Its name was derived from the Spanish term describing the pungent chemicals used to preserve railroad ties—creosote" (San Miguel 5). Three other barrio neighborhoods mentioned as developing in the 1920s include North Side, the Heights, and Magnolia Park:

During the post-World War II period the barrios expanded further. El Segundo barrio pushed southwest of Commerce Street and extended into the area known as the old Third Ward. Magnolia Park likewise grew and eventually merged with El Segundo barrio. The merged communities came to be recognized as part of the East End barrio. (San Miguel 5)

By using maps and street names, students will understand these lines of demarcation in old and current Houston. They will share their own experiences with the names of the communities. What have they heard about the name of their community? By looking at the lines of the community and the schools designated for each part of Houston, students can then see the way education has affected the lives of the people in these places.

Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. noted these issues in his remarkable book about on Houston school integration *Brown, Not White*. Professor San Miguel outlined the challenges that a young Mexican-American in Houston faced attending and graduating from a local high school in the 1920s. Student Edna Luna "managed to graduate from Jefferson Davis High School in 1928," despite "structural barriers of inequality and the subtractive curriculum," (San Miguel 26). I believe at this time, Jefferson Davis was an all-white school. He cites the handful of students who began to attend and graduate during this time period. San Miguel also notes that in the beginning, Houston schools were ill-equipped to assist Mexican-American students:

Most Mexican-origin individuals, however, did not succeed. The experienced much failure in the schools. Poverty, ignorance of American laws, the need for child labor, and severe overcrowding and inadequate attention to the cultural and linguistic needs of these children encouraged most of them to drop out of school after several years. (San Miguel 26-27)

Such information has crucial power in demonstrating the roles that schools have played in the development of neighborhoods in Houston. Schools that have not served their neighborhoods and their population do not prepare students for all jobs available to them in society. Instead, a poor educational system can track students towards fewer options and lower-paying work, making it more difficult, though not impossible, to better their community and their own lives. Also, schools can mirror the demographic changes in neighborhoods. One example cited by San Miguel shows how local high schools have changed in the twentieth century: “the majority of secondary schools did not become primarily Mexican institutions until the post-1960 period” (219). Students can use the Houston Independent School District’s websites and current enrollment to study how neighborhoods have changed. One example would be Austin High School, located in the East End, which San Miguel writes, “Less than 1 percent of the student population at Austin High School as of Mexican origin in 1940” (219). Today, I would estimate that number to be closer to 85-90% (perhaps more). Such statistical information also exists about Marshall Middle School, Hogg Junior High, Deady Middle School, as well as Milby High School in the footnotes of *Brown, Not White*. His conclusion is a damning one: lack of education equals lack of opportunity. “The concentration of Mexicans in low-paying working-class jobs meant that there was much suffering. The population continued to have higher rates of poverty and fewer opportunities than the general population” (San Miguel 17).

At KIPP 3D Academy Middle School, my students and I talk every day about the importance of college and being able to have multiple options and a variety of choices as an adult. By pursuing a college education, most of my students are setting a goal that few of their family members and community members have achieved or have been able to achieve in the past. In the not too distant past, many students like them were directed towards vocational education, not college-rigorous curriculum:

Evidence...suggests that vocational education was used by educators to limit the educational opportunities of Mexican-origin students by placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on the vocational aspect of instruction in the barrio schools at the expense of academic subjects. (San Miguel 31)

By identifying barriers that kept Mexican-American students and African-American students from challenging curriculum and academic advancement, the students can obtain a clearer sense about how crucial education can be to transforming a person’s life and their community. Improper education leads to students not reading and doing mathematics on grade level at a young age. The obstacles then become greater and greater for a student to succeed academically.

### **ACTIVITY ONE**

When looking at our Oral History Projects, I realize that two things will have to happen first. The students will need to look at primary and secondary sources of Houston as they learn how to be researchers that will locate important details and find untold stories from those around them. Secondly, the students will need to examine and critique successful models of similar projects. To do this, I will need to write family members that I do not know very well (my grandfather’s remaining siblings), and use correspondence and phone interviews to piece together what I can learn about his parents and their life together as a family. The pressure will be on me to model how to go about this project and create a finished project in a meaningful way that I can share with my class. My narrative must be new material that I have learned, and it should contain all of the elements of the Oral History Project that I expect to see from the students.

In the first week, our objective will be to learn more about each other and to establish a sense of trust within the classroom. A project such as this requires students to be able to succeed in an academic environment away from fear of being made fun of or humiliated.

To do this, I envision teaching a mini-unit on self and understanding others. One part of this unit will involve allowing students to choose a name out of hat, select another student in class, and then have to work on a presentation about that student. In addition, the students will use chart paper and trace the outline of their partner's body. Then, the students will create a visual collage of images based on interviewing that person with a small twenty-question handout. These questions will be basic, such as age, birth-place, family, heroes, and hobbies. However, several questions will be about values and world outlook: if you could change one thing about this world, what would it be?, who would you go back in time to meet?, and where do you see yourself living and working in twenty years? Such questions are designed to elicit thoughtful, personal responses that can be used to understand a person's character. They are also conversational and easy to follow-up with additional questions.

To complete the initial stage of this project (2-4 days), students will present their collages of their partner to the class. Their speeches will be 1-2 minutes, focusing on very basic presentation skills: eye contact, volume, use of note cards, and visuals. Through modeling and honest discussions of areas that need improvement, the students will improve their presentations and speaking personas. By allowing students to work in partners and present on each other, I feel this will build class culture and a sense of team. In addition, a project like this builds trust among teammates as we provide a supportive environment for each presenter. Some students will find this more natural than others. The focus will be on improvement and showing students the best techniques. Then, we will move forward towards our Oral History projects.

## **ACTIVITY TWO**

Initially, students will construct detailed maps and then brochures of their neighborhood or community. The maps will deal specifically with the following goals: geography, community, and items of interest. In the geography segment, students will be able to identify the major streets and highways that allow people to enter and exit their communities. Students will consult Houston maps in addition to taking notes on what they see in their community. To do this, we will start at a very basic level: on the street.

### **The Street**

For a middle school student, a neighborhood starts out with the simplicity of the street on which he or she lives. Before being able to drive, students become familiar with the areas that they can explore close to their house (or within bike-riding distance). Instead of overlooking the street, we will narrow our focus pretty strongly on it. What does the street outside your window really look like? How many houses, apartments, or trailers are located on that street? Does the street flood? Is there a sidewalk where people walk? Is there a ditch alongside the road? Does the street look well-kept, or is there trash on the road and surrounding areas? In his essay "Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston," writer Phillip Lopate contends that examining the street has great importance when looking at the city:

The most basic unit of public space is the street. Has the populace been made to feel it has the right to stroll the streets and that the streets belong to it? Try walking in most neighborhoods in Houston...If you are lucky, you will find a semblance of a sidewalk...Even single file, you cannot advance very far without being stopped by a giant puddle, ditch, wall of weeds, and vines. (10)

By getting students to focus closely on the small details of their corner of Houston, they will begin to see things that they may not have noticed before. Perhaps the dates on the sidewalk reveal that it was poured in 1920? Maybe they notice that all the houses on the North side of the street get rain pooled up in front of their driveway after a storm. Lopate's statement also mentions the difficulty of walking in Houston. How easy is it to walk on a street in a

neighborhood? Lopate cites a litany of impediments that could keep one from walking around and enjoying a neighborhood. How does a person deal with these obstacles? Such questions will elicit responses useful for creating a narrative about the block, street, neighborhood, and community to which a student may unwittingly belong.

### **The Neighborhood Inventory**

For the community section, a sheet of basic initial information will be collected and called a “Neighborhood Inventory.” In a Neighborhood Inventory, the students will record the following data: names of any parks nearby; schools, elementary through college; businesses, such as food stores; government agencies such as police departments, fire stations, and hospitals; libraries and other places to obtain books; places of religious worship; and lastly, nearby bayous or bodies of water. Since a long-standing nickname of Houston is “the Bayou City,” it will be important for students to note how close they live to any of the bayous in the city. In Houston, bayous have winded their ways through history in various ways, some positive and some disgusting: “For generations, they [Houston residents] had used Buffalo Bayou both as sewer and source of drinking water,” (Haley 450). In several of the photographs that I have researched for this unit, the bayous served also as places of religious significance for baptisms, as well as commerce and business. Of course, by studying and noticing the bayous, the students will have more awareness of flooding in Houston. Students will be asked to consider why certain neighborhoods seem more likely to flood than others. What neighborhoods are elevated and protected from flooding? How can living near the bayou be a liability during the tropical storms, hurricanes, and violent rain that frequently pummel Houston? Are there any benefits to living near the bayou? Just as the street will serve as the focal point of the geography section, the community section will focus upon the places (especially the bayous) that bring residents of the city into contact with each other.

### **Points of Interest**

Lastly, the students will focus on items of interest to them in their neighborhood. These items could be as official as a statue or historical marker. These items could be as informal as a really pretty tree that they like, a memorable place to see the sunset, or a great empty field where they play soccer. What is important to stress to them is that neighborhoods and communities are indeed formed of tangible pieces such as businesses, streets, parks, and institutions. However, the pieces, the glue that often times holds neighborhoods together in the minds of kids, can be small, specific things that carry great meaning for them (and maybe only them).

After creating a finished product about their neighborhood to share with the class, the students will analyze an overview of the history of Houston, focusing on neighborhoods, schools, buildings, and points-of-interest. Using William Dylan Powell’s book *Houston Then and Now*, the students will critique photographs from different eras in Houston, studying the differences between before and after photographs of the same location in the city. All of this advance preparation leads into the selection of a person to interview and the writing of their narrative.

### **INTERVIEWS**

I envision students selecting a community member, a family member, a teacher, or a religious leader to interview. I will encourage them to create a web and pre-writing map of all possible interview candidates. Who are people that spring to mind right away? What are a few names of other people that could be considered? Then, using some more writing strategies, students will select the three best candidates, exploring reasons why these subject will be the most interesting and most helpful. Students will seek out advice from fellow teammates about what sorts of people to talk with during this project.

I imagine using Studs Terkel’s books as a template of sorts. What I like most about Terkel’s collections is the way that they preface the interview with background material (i.e. what does the

person's home look like, what books do they have lying around, and family details). Then, he digs into the conversations with small questions sprinkled throughout. Obviously, with a middle school level student creating this project, the format will be slightly different. However, I like the idea of introductory essays/paragraphs before the actual interviews. Terkel's book does not have any photographs, and I think that this kind of project could involve digital cameras and photographs, incorporating new, cheap technology in a tangible way.

Once they have selected a person to interview, the students will plan how this will happen. A location and time must be set. Papers and pens should be ready. It is important to set this time in advance with the interviewee because it will give that person a chance to locate any pictures or items that he or she may wish to share with the student. It also gives them a chance to prepare anything that they might want to focus on during their time with the student. Students will create lists of questions that interest them, starting with a few shared ones that the entire class uses. During the actual interviews, students must take notes, ask for clarification, and double-check with the interviewees to make sure that they have the facts. There are no time-limits for interviews. However, one requirement of this project will be that students must present a copy of their finished product to the interviewee.

Once the interviews are completed, students will bring their notes and drafts to class. We will have mini-lessons with examples from successful writers on how to weave what you have learned about that person into a story built on their answers to your questions. The drafting process on this will take approximately five days with editing and revising and making sure that the information is accurate. The students should look for other things beyond just the questions that they have written down in preparation. "Listening between the lines. This can help to identify what is being left unsaid and to assess the significances of pauses or silences" (Slim and Thompson 76). It may be necessary to follow-up via phone call or a second interview to ensure clarity.

## CONCLUSION

The spoken word cuts across barriers of wealth, class and race. It is as much the prerogative of ordinary people as of those in positions of power and authority...it gives voice to the experience of those people whose views are often overlooked or discounted. (Slim and Thompson 1).

Part of this unit will allow students to research schools in their neighborhoods by writing letters, checking resources at the library, and speaking to members of their community. Students will document what schools are located in their community, and then trace the feeder patterns of these schools up to the high school level. Understanding which schools feed into which high schools leads to discussions of neighborhood lines, boundaries, and possible tensions. This project cannot answer every question that may arise, but I think that it can serve as a necessary and vital connection between life at home and life at school. By writing something meaningful and personal, the students will understand themselves and their communities better. A possible ending/publishing activity for this project could be to create some sort of online repository for these projects. I am inspired by the work that I have seen on the *American Century Project* website ([www.doingoralhistory.org/in\\_classroom/exemplary\\_projects.htm](http://www.doingoralhistory.org/in_classroom/exemplary_projects.htm)) because a number of middle and high schools have their work available as an online resource. I am also looking into the chances of publishing a small document with photographs (a classroom book of sorts) that chronicles all the work that the students have done. A presentation night could be set up at our school, with students, families, community members, and local politicians/religious leaders invited to hear the students present on their interviews. Media members could attend.

In closing, this unit has been designed in a way that combines careful writing, note-taking, researching, interviewing, and presenting to culminate in a finished product of high quality work.

Students with different perspectives, backgrounds, and from different neighborhoods in and around Houston will take the reins and feel free to explore aspects of their communities that they have never examined. I think that this project is a chance for students to really empower themselves and learn about their community. Students will leave behind a written record of their interactions with a community or family member for future classes to study. By doing so, they can make “Invisible Houston” more visible for the next class of students.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan One: Photography and Storyboarding**

#### ***Objective***

Students will be able to identify photographs that are eye-catching and stick out. Students will be able to recognize common errors and flaws in student photographs.

#### ***Lesson***

For a Do-Now, students will have three photographs on their desks face-down. When the timer is started, students will flip the photos over and write on post-it notes what their impressions are of the photographs: do they make sense?, what are the pictures telling us?, and how were the photos taken? These questions will fuel the discussion afterwards, and we will try to talk about the following aspects of photograph: lighting, angle, shading, foreground, background, composition and arrangement, and focus.

#### ***Guided Practice/Independent Practice***

Students will create a drawing of a photograph with a caption that tells a story. We will analyze the newspaper to discuss how captions and headlines help tell the story.

#### **Key Questions**

1. What does the headline tell you?
2. What are the action/power words that grab the reader’s attention?
3. How would you re-phrase the headline?
4. What important information does the caption tell you that the photo alone could not?

#### ***Assessment***

Students will draw five photographs that they want to take of something or someone in their neighborhood that connects to their Oral Interview Project using angle, light, shading, foreground/background, and clarity to storyboard what they want to express in a photo. This project will segue into a unit where students will use cameras to take their own photographs of their neighborhoods and homes. Ideally, fewer mistakes will occur due to these rough drafts of photographs.

***Rubric for Photo Assignment***

Criteria	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1	Points
Photo #1	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/15
Photo #2	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/15
Photo #3	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/15
Photo #4	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/15
Photo #5	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/15
Captions are written using complete sentences and proper punctuation.	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/15
Captions and photos are neatly written with pen on clean sheets of notebook paper.	-Excellent	-Very good.	-Adequate	-Weak	/10

Final Score = \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

**Lesson Plan Two: Mock-Interviews with Teammates**

***Objective***

Students will be able interview each other, using thought-provoking questions, and recording quality notes for use in their presentations.

***Lesson***

For a Do-Now, students will come up with three questions to ask Tracy McGrady of the Houston Rockets if he were visiting our classroom. After about 3-4 minutes, the students will share their questions with each other. What do we notice?

**Key Points**

What is the difference between a well-written question and a poorly-written question? Why do we want well-written questions when interviewing?

*Answer: A well-written question opens up a discussion, cannot be easily summarized. A poorly-written question is a Yes or No question. It goes nowhere, and doesn't allow for extension and follow-up questions.*

Students and teacher will write a few examples on the board:

i.e. Poor = Where did you grow up?

Excellent = What were some of your favorite things about growing up where you did?

Poor = How much money do you make?

Excellent = How have your choices been affected by how much money you have earned?

How would your life be different if you had chosen another occupation?

### ***Guided and Independent Practice***

Students will observe me model this with a student (play-acting) in front of the group, with oral response for questions and answers. Then, students will break into groups with their partners to write quality questions (five to ten) before interviewing each other. Students will leave space on their paper for the answers; they will not be searching for paper or where to write. It will be clear to them where each answer goes (to increase organizational skills). Once answers have been collected, the students will use the steps of the Writing Process and do a Rough Draft of an essay introducing their partner to the class. After peer revision and editing, the students will turn their Final Drafts into a presentation to the class.

### ***Assessment***

Students will do a brief oral presentation on each other, giving key information, discussing what they learned about each other.

### ***Rubric for Oral Interview Projects***

Name	Oral Presentation Projects			
Clarity	1	2	3	4
Voice	1	2	3	4
Level of Detail	1	2	3	4
Quality Effort	1	2	3	4
Eye Contact	1	2	3	4

Final Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Lesson Plan Three: Wards and Early Houston**

### ***Objective***

Students will be able to locate 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> Ward in Houston and demonstrate why wards were originally needed. Students will be able to create a record of problems common in early Houston and possible solutions.

### ***Lesson***

For a Do Now, the students will have to write down anything that they have heard or know about Houston's six original wards. Then, we will discuss as a class and add notes to an overhead on what we have heard about them.

Sample Question: Who in class knows that he or she lives in one of the wards? How do you know this?

### ***Guided Practice***

Take notes from the board about the significance of the wards and their leaders. Close reading of "Pride Lives on in City's Six Historical Wards" by Jeannie Kever to gain additional insight into what these designations mean.

### ***Materials***

Close examination of "Map of Houston Wards circa 1900"; *Chronicle* article from 2004.

### ***Independent Practice***

The students will role-play living in the different wards in Houston. Upon entering class, they will be given a note card that indicates what kind of person they were in Houston (race, class, occupation) and in which ward resided. I have yet to determine the historical date for this exercise, but there are many reasons to show the students examples of Houston's infancy as a city. In *Passionate Nation*, James L. Haley observed wryly about Houston, that there are terrifying things beneath the surface:

[T]he reality of Houston beneath the cravats and fans and curtsies was that it was filthy. Street sanitation depended upon the appetite of feral hogs, drinking water came from the bayou, which was also the sewer, and typhoid and dysentery began to take their toll. When the first epidemic of yellow fever hit in 1839, one in eight died, and the visitation was repeated every three to five years. The ambient level of street drunkenness hardly had a modern counterpart, and violence was common. (213)

One goal for this project is for the students to analyze the problems that existed for Houstonians in order to understand the causes and effects of these issues. "The lines were drawn along natural boundaries: Buffalo Bayou, Main Street, Congress Street. (Each ward elected two aldermen, and the mayor was elected city-wide" (Kever 1). By using real-life examples and having students elect aldermen, the students will question the needs a community has for sanitation, water treatment, efficient hospitals, and police enforcement. After receiving an outline of common problems faced in their community, each of the six wards will have to elect a ward leader. These ward leaders will receive a series of challenges that they will have to work through with their community.

#### **Examples of Ward Challenges**

Dangerous fire that tears through your neighborhood; raw sewage in the street; lack of clean drinking water; no schools for the young people in your part of town; influx of new immigrants from Mexico, Europe, Africa, and Asia; and flooding.

#### ***Assessment***

Ward Leaders will have to issue a report on the state of things in their ward. Ward community members will write a small newsletter or two-sided newspaper describing the conditions of life in the ward.

#### ***Extension Activity #1***

Real estate agents were reluctant to sell homes to Mexican-origin individuals in the 'better' subdivisions of the southwestern and northern sides of town. However, homes in areas already designated as barrios by the real estate industry were affordable for these individuals. (San Miguel 17)

What role did Houston real estate agents have regarding the shaping of the Houston neighborhoods during the twentieth century? How does access to equal housing across the city relate to a family's sense of belonging to a neighborhood? How difficult was it to "relocate" one's family from one neighborhood to another? Write a 1-2 page paper thoughtfully examining these key issues from Houston's history.

#### ***Extension Activity #2***

By 1970 the ethnic character of Houston changed so that it was now a tri-ethnic city. This changed character implied that blacks, who were beginning to make economic, social, and political gains as a result of the civil rights movement, had to compete for public awareness of their needs with a group of 'newcomers.' (San Miguel 208)

This competition was not limited to the political arena but also extended to housing and jobs. Mexican Americans tended to live in neighborhoods adjacent to African American ghettos or in neighborhoods that overlapped with historically black wards. They also were employed in low-wage jobs and competed for similar types of occupations in the various industries throughout the city. (San Miguel 208)

How do you think race relations affect neighborhoods in Houston today? What do you think of Professor San Miguel's observations? Using information gathered from your interviews, write a 1-2 page paper analyzing these issues. Using web resources, such as the *Chronicle*, and any information gathered from your interviews, how do you think racial relations are in Houston among African Americans, Mexican Americans, Whites, Central Americans, Asians, Africans, etc.? How does this come into play every day in your neighborhood?

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### **Supplemental Resources**

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