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Making their voices heard Schlesinger accepts oral history project

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From left, Linda B. Rosenlund, Maureen Ryan Doyle, Kathryn A. Jacob (manuscript curator of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America) and Charlene L. Martin are pictured in the library at the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University in Cambridge. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

By Pamela H. Sacks SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

“ (College students) are hearing Worcester history, and it’s amazing they don’t know what it was like for women of the previous generation. ”

-- CHARLENE L. MARTIN, OF THE WORCESTER WOMEN’S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Kathryn Allamong Jacob was intrigued the moment she heard about the Worcester Women's Oral History Project.

As the manuscript curator of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Ms. Jacob oversees some 50 oral history collections. Worcester's was a good deal larger and broader in scope than most of them. It did not take Ms. Jacob long to conclude that the interviews would be a valuable addition to the holdings at the Schlesinger, which is located at the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University in Cambridge.

"Scholars definitely see the value of oral history," Ms. Jacob said recently, noting that such material is used carefully because the reminiscences are often recorded after the passage of many decades. "With that in mind," she added, "oral histories are a wonderful window to time and place and movements and unique lives."

The Worcester collection currently includes 165 interviews and will continue to grow. The common denominator is that all of the women have a connection to Worcester County. They are 18 or older, and each of their stories falls into one of four categories intended to reflect the spirit of the National Women's Rights Convention, which was held in Worcester in 1850: work, education, health, or politics and community involvement.

The collection is diverse. It features such women as Shirley Carter, the first African-American nurse in Worcester; Thea Aschkenase, a survivor of Auschwitz; and Jill Williams, an Episcopalian priest. There are mothers, professors, students, activists, teachers, doctors, nurses, nuns and politicians. They speak candidly about their achievements, as well as the challenges and disappointments in their lives.

Members of the Worcester Women's History Project had discussed the idea of an oral history project as early as 2000. It became a reality in 2005, under the leadership of Linda B. Rosenlund.

"We had become a resource," Ms. Rosenlund said, noting that the WWHP had hosted Women 2000, a three-day gathering of women from across the country at the turn of the 21st century. "We kept trying to brainstorm and bring attention to women's contributions," she said.

In 2008, Ms. Rosenlund turned the project's leadership over to fellow members Maureen Ryan Doyle and Charlene L. Martin. Late last year, the dedication of the three women and the work of scores of participants came to fruition when 150 interviews were delivered to the Schlesinger, which is widely viewed as the most prestigious repository on the history of women in America.

The Schlesinger maintains collections such as the Black Women Oral History Project, containing 70-plus interviews with women born within a 15-year span of 1900; Women Trailblazers in the Law, interviews with 37 senior women lawyers from across the country; and 50-plus interviews with men and women from the International Association of Culinary Professionals.

The breadth of the Worcester interviews particularly interested Ms. Jacob.

"Asking women to speak to family and civic life is wonderful," she said. "They speak largely to the post World War II years, and there is an increasing interest in that period. I think this collection will be rich in a lot of different areas."

Historian Lisa Krissoff Boehm, a professor of urban studies at Worcester State College, served as a professional consultant on the project and made the initial contact with the Schlesinger.

"Having the Schlesinger as the repository of the collection means a good deal of exposure for the undertaking," said Ms. Krissoff Boehm, who conducts oral history interviews for her own research. "This is one of the most successful oral history projects in the nation."

Amassing a useful set of oral histories takes planning and attention to detail. Ms. Jacob emphasized that the Schlesinger accepted the collection because it had been gathered in "a careful and systematic way."

On a recent afternoon, Ms. Rosenlund, Ms. Ryan Doyle and Ms. Martin sat down together in a conference room at Assumption College — all three are graduates — to talk about the evolution of the project.

Ms. Rosenlund recalled that it took a year to formulate the plans. A focus group helped set the overall goals and made it possible to arrive at a set of common questions.

A higher education collaborative was formed, and Ms. Krissoff Boehm became the project's official consultant. Students from Assumption, Worcester State, the College of the Holy Cross, Clark University and the University of Massachusetts Medical School began conducting and transcribing interviews, often as part of their course work.

"It's a win-win situation," Ms. Ryan Doyle remarked.

"We are amazed at how much the students get out of it," Ms. Martin said. "They are hearing Worcester history, and it's amazing they don't know what it was like for women of the previous generation. They are astounded that Want Ads were separated by gender."

"One interviewer asked, 'How could that be?' " Ms. Ryan Doyle added, drawing laughter from around the table.

Early on, those involved developed an oral history toolkit and started to conduct free community workshops so that anyone who wants to volunteer to interview could do so. The next workshop will be held on May 27 at the Worcester Historical Museum.

Finally, a committee spent much of 2008 reviewing each interview to be sure that it included a signed consent form and deed of gift so that the information can be used by researchers even after the interviewee has died. Without those documents, researchers could not use the interviews in publications, and the Schlesinger would not have accepted the collection.

The project is open-ended. The intention is to deliver a set of interviews to the Schlesinger once a year. When Ms. Rosenlund started the project, one of her goals was to make Worcester and the Worcester Women's History Project proud. In Ms. Jacob's view, she and all those involved have succeeded admirably.

"It is a model that we are using, and we are referring other people to the forms they used and the way they conducted the interviews," Ms. Jacob said. "A lot of our collections continue to grow and we'll be happy to add to this one."

To read interviews included in the Worcester Women's Oral History Project, go to www.wwhp.org. If you are willing to be interviewed contact info@wwhp.org.