University Students and Local Museums: Developing Effective Partnerships with Oral History

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This is a descriptive paper that details the collaboration between a group of 21 DePaul University students and the Exhibitions Committee of the Chinese American Museum of Chicago (CAMOC) in the spring of 2010. The students were all junior and senior Anthropology Majors participating in a course on applied-anthropology, or the applications of anthropological methods and perspectives outside of an academic setting. CAMOC is a significant, volunteer-driven Chicago museum devoted to the collection, study, and exhibition of materials relating to the Chinese-Americans and Chinese-Canadians who settled in the regions between the coasts of these nations. The museum first opened its doors in 2005, and in 2008 suffered a devastating fire resulting in the loss of most of the collections and exhibits. DePaul students partnered with the Exhibitions Committee to collect, archive, and display oral histories of community members to assist in their rebuilding efforts. The presentation of this particular project focuses on three significant ideas: (1) the importance of developing a project that can be brought to fruition in the course of a single collaborative episode, (2) the types of infrastructure that should be provided by the partners in such a collaboration, and (3) the necessity of creating a project that can simultaneously address the needs of a small museum and the educational goals for student participants.

Oral history has become a common vehicle for collaboration between local museums and experiential classes ranging from elementary schools to the university level. Museums have found that such partnerships provide much needed resources (human and material) to staff an oral history initiative, and that such initiatives support a collection strategy that can at once preserve history, engage local communities, and involve the museum in the education process. Educators have also been drawn to oral history as a way to engage students with local communities, to create a sense of personal investment in history, and to enliven understandings of the past learned through more conventional means. Despite flourishing
partnerships, there are very few resources in publications for oral historians, educators, and museum professionals alike for developing a successful collaboration using oral histories. As a result, instructors and institutions continually have to reinvent the collaborative process. Oral histories deserve special consideration among the various possibilities of museum-student collaborations, as they involve students working with human subjects and engaging the broader community on behalf of their museum partner as an integral part of the collaborative process.

In the spring of 2010, a class of upper division anthropology students from DePaul University took part in a project with the Chinese American Museum of Chicago (CAMOC). This partnership proved to be a strong collaboration with mutually beneficial outcomes for both the students and the museum. A consideration of the structuring, development, and execution of this project offers insights on what makes a successful oral history project for both partners in the collaboration. While this presentation of the project engages the available literature to contextualize such a partnership, it is not a systematic review of oral history collaborations that offers a consensus on “best practices.” Rather, this is a case study that can be used by those seeking to develop partnerships using oral history as a collaborative vehicle, as a model to embrace, reject, or modify to their own particular circumstances.

FERmILE GROUND FOR PARTNERSHIP: ORAL HISTORIES, MUSEUMS, AND COLLEGE CLASSES

There was a time when historians, academics, and museum professionals viewed the collection, curation, and display of oral histories with little interest (Chew, 2002). Oral history was considered the domain of amateur historians: anyone with a tape recorder, a list of questions, and a willing subject could do it. Such a simple and accessible form of recording history was considered unsophisticated and not worthy of professional scholarship (Charlton et al., 2007). From the museum side, first-person narratives displayed in audio, video, or transcribed formats were at odds with the dominant ethos of object-focused displays and repositories that typified museum practice (Griffith, 1989).

Today, it is hard to imagine oral history not being an integral part of contemporary museums or college classrooms. Oral history has developed into a rich field of professional practice. A simple Internet search yields hundreds of thousands of results detailing projects and initiatives at institutions ranging from the StoryCorps project at the Library of Congress (Filene, 2011a) to volunteer-driven initiatives at small, local and /or specialized museums (see Chew 2002 for a very comprehensive “snapshot” of the diversity of museum-based oral history projects that were going on at that time). Similarly, the most recent publications on academic oral history showcase the variety of ways that oral histories are being used in university classrooms, both as the central topic of individual courses and as successful experiential learning projects integrated into courses of differing subject matter (Wilton, 2011). The popularity of oral history, both in university-level courses and at museums of all sizes and scopes, makes oral
history a natural vehicle for collaboration. Both museum professionals and university teachers have explored the use of oral history from their own professional perspectives.

**Oral Histories and Museums**

Contemporary museums embrace oral history as a part of “intangible heritage” which has become an important focus of curatorial practice. The display of objects and artifacts is no longer considered sufficient in the creation of displays. Finding ways to enliven individual objects (Svensson, 2008); curate and present non-material histories (Shouyoung, 2008; Shun and Chun, 2008); and create dynamic visitor experiences by pairing objects with narrative (Day and Lunn, 2004; Lubar, 2004; Pardue, 2004; Rassool, 2006; Smith, 2001); are all integral parts of museum practice.

In a practical sense, this generally involves developing museum displays that are interactive, particularly through the integration of audio and video installations, along with more traditional object-based and narrative-driven displays (Humphries, 2003). The incorporation of oral histories in such audio and video installations has been described as creating intimate spaces in a larger museum, as a powerful way to connect viewers and project participants, and as an exhibit technique that attracts a public who have become accustomed to viewing oral histories as a staple of television documentary programming (Humphries, 2003; Thomas, 2008).

Concerns with display and curation are paired with a widespread interest in using oral histories to build partnerships and connections with local communities. As Schwartz, (2010:82) has recently noted, “oral histories are integral to projects that create effective public history, community building processes, and learning possibilities by connecting local history and community to broader historical narratives.” Many local museums have found that oral history offers a way to personalize more abstract concepts and materials and to engage the local community in the production and consumption of museum displays and local history (Born, 2006; Filene, 2011b; McDonnell, 2003).

Oral history is situated at the intersection of many issues that are critical in contemporary museum practice, particularly for smaller, local museums that are often struggling to survive as surrounding communities change, economies fluctuate, and competition for people’s time and resources is ever increasing and diversifying. Cultivating community investment and developing exhibits that excite, engage, and attract visitors are all issues for small museums that can be addressed through oral history. Some of the earliest literature, in fact, describes oral history as a “survival strategy” for small, local, and specialized museums (Jones and Major, 1986; Whincop, 1986). These early publications also detail some of the fundamental issues that museums must address when working with oral histories. Particularly, authors cautioned that oral history inherently involves a change in resource allocation for staff and volunteers, and that this redirection of human resources must be taken seriously (Jones and Major, 1986). Others have noted that oral history requires an institution to develop broader vision for the collection, curation, and display of oral history lest the collection strategy become erratic, haphazard and inconsistent (Griffiths, 1989). And finally, others have noted that careful
consideration needs to be given to the display of oral history so that audiences do not come to see individual life stories as representative of entire communities or a particular time period, and so that museum visitors do not construe a first person account as one that is not subject to inaccuracies (Day, 1999).

**Oral History and the College Classroom**

Writing about oral history in education is far less common than in the field of museum practice, but oral history has moved from the fringes of educational experiences to a well-integrated practice in university courses (Nystrom, 2002; Wilton, 2011). Oral histories have been characterized as a means to get students invested in course material (Hudson and Santora, 2003; Kerrigan, 2003), as a type of learning particularly germane to 21st century students (Whitman, 2011), and an innovative pedagogical strategy of particular utility in the “digital age” (Benmayor, 2011).

Most oral history projects described in the literature are exercise-based and involve adding an oral history “experience” onto a more traditional classroom course (Wood, 2001; Nystrom, 2002), or the development of courses that pair the conduct of oral history interviews with a topical history course (Wilton, 2011). Specific course details are often lacking, but Benmayor (2000) describes a course she taught where each student designed, conducted, analyzed, interpreted, archived, and disseminated the results of oral history interviews. In her course, each student chose a topic of interest, defined a question, did background research, learned interview techniques, constructed an interview guide, identified interviewees, conducted field interviews, logged or transcribed the interviews, produced paper and presentation, and archived their research. Her role was largely as a mentor to these individual projects, and she characterized the course as a form of action research where memory and the investigation of the past are tied to community efforts for social change (Benmayor, 2000).

The decision to have each student develop their own project stems from a commonly voiced concern about “student investment” in oral history projects. Because such projects involve people outside the course and the university, having students committed to high quality work in the conduct of interviews at every stage is of considerable importance, but cannot be guaranteed. Having students develop their own project that speaks to individual interests is one strategy, while other instructors have taught courses where oral histories were used to study local university cultures, which allowed for techniques to be explored in a setting inherently familiar and meaningful to students (Smith, 2011). Other teachers have developed guides for teaching oral history at the university-level (Meyers, n.d.) and engaged curricular-level discussions that speak to cultivating student investment in oral histories over a series of courses (Wilton, 2011). These latter sources have provided useful ideas for developing single projects for a course, and cultivating interest on the part of all students through proper context and training.
MEET THE PARTNERS: THE CHINESE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF CHICAGO AND DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

The Chinese American Museum of Chicago (CAMOC) was founded in 2002 under the auspices of the Chinatown Museum Foundation as an institution wishing to present the background of historic and recent Chinese immigration to Chicago, Illinois, and the Midwestern U.S., to Chinese-Americans and other Americans. Most research and publications on the Chinese in America and Canada are focused on the immigrant populations who settled on the coasts of the continent. Recognizing the long and vibrant history of Chinese communities elsewhere in the United States, “The mission of the CMF is to maintain a museum in Chicago for the purpose of promoting exhibitions, education, and research relating to Chinese-American culture and history in the Midwestern United States” (http://www.ccamuseum.org/About_Us.html). The museum is run as a volunteer organization with its Board of Directors, Community Advisory Board, and many committees being staffed solely by a committed group of community volunteers.

The museum is located in Chicago’s Chinatown, a neighborhood that was first settled by German and Italian immigrants and later was the site where Chicago’s Chinese community was relocated in the early 1900s as a way of containing the population. The funds to purchase the museum building were donated by Raymond B. Lee, a successful wholesale food distributor, who purchased and donated the building where he worked and lived as a young boy when it was the Quong Yik Company—a neighborhood grocery store. The museum opened its doors to the public in 2005, but a devastating fire on September 19, 2008, destroyed much of the building’s interior and the majority of the museum’s displays and archives. The loss to the fledgling museum was in many ways incalculable. The materials lost in the 2005 fire represented the museum’s first wave of collecting, and many community members had shared irreplaceable items from the neighborhood’s history and objects from their own families’ immigration experiences. The need to rebuild the structure and to salvage, conserve, and replenish collections was paired with the need to regenerate trust, enthusiasm, and funds from a community that had already given so much in the very recent past. The local Chinese-American community and broader museum community in the city responded to the call, and the museum reopened to the public in the autumn of 2009 to great fanfare. Work on developing collections and exhibits after the fire is still a major ongoing effort for the museum volunteers, and the museum has worked to keep an active web presence while the brick and mortar museum continues to rebound.

One of the active exhibit projects of the museum in this time of redevelopment is entitled, “From the Great Wall to the Great Lakes”, which depicts the story of Chinese immigration to the Midwest in its many forms. The exhibit features installations of a grocery, laundry, and restaurant, and has displays of artifacts and documents relating to immigration stories from “paper sons” to recently adopted Chinese daughters. One exhibit feature the Museum wished to develop was a series of “life history panels” to be taken from oral histories that would be
archived at the museum and incorporated into present and future exhibits. This interest in oral histories formed the basis of the partnership with DePaul University.

DePaul University’s Department of Anthropology has a unique curriculum designed for its undergraduate students that is in keeping with the university’s broader emphasis on experiential and service-based learning. Rather than a traditional anthropology curriculum, the faculty developed a series of courses that engage students in the ethical and methodological aspects of anthropological fieldwork, and create community-engaged projects in the city of Chicago where students can apply their skills in real world settings (Baxter, 2008; Hofman and Rosing, 2008). The partnership with CAMOC was integrated into one such class in applied anthropology, and 21 juniors and seniors took part in the project along with a teaching assistant and the instructor (Appendices A and B).

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP USING ORAL HISTORY

It is no accident that all of the manuals, guides, and handbooks of oral history unquestioningly use the term “project” when characterizing the practice of recording first-person, historical narratives (Charlton et al., 2006; DeBlasio, 2009; Ritchie, 1995; Sommer and Quinlan, 2009; Yow, 2005). Oral history projects require extensive preparation to identify the goals of the project; to develop appropriate questions, forms and resources; to connect with individuals who are willing to be interviewed; and to create plans for the recording, preservation, and interpretation of the collected materials.

Collaborative processes and projects between museums and educators that involved oral history and students at the K-12 level have identified some core elements for success, which center on involving all partners as early in the project planning process as possible.

   It is clear the way forward is to weave the three strands [students, teachers, and museums] into a full circle through understanding, sharing, mutual respect, and collaboration. This involves an exciting challenge: listening to the needs, wants, and concerns of each group, learning from each other, and working collaboratively towards a shared goal of enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences (Griffin, 2007: 42).

When executed to its fullest, this emerges as committed partners and solid planning (Moisan, 2009). This advice, in our experience, translated well to developing our partnership between a college-level program and a museum institution.
The first critical element in the success of the collaboration between DePaul and CAMOC was the emphasis on developing a project that could be brought to fruition in the course of a single collaborative episode; in this instance a 10-week quarter. Students would have a clearly defined project with a concrete purpose and outcome, and the museum could expect a certain product to be delivered in a particular timeframe. This required developing a course structure that could support the expected workload, and establishing a clear component of a larger exhibit process that could be seen as a cohesive project on its own.

Ultimately, the project was to involve students working in teams, with each team interviewing a selected member of the Chinese-American community in Chicago. All the interviewees were community elders who grew up in the area prior to World War II. Each team would record their interview using audio and video recording technology, transcribe their interview for archival purposes, and develop the content for the “life history panel” that would represent their interviewee in the museum exhibit. Arriving at this project was the end product of collaborative discussions that began long before the course (Appendix B).

Initial exploratory meetings about developing a partnership started in the autumn of 2009, nearly 6 months prior to the time the course was to be taught. We began by exploring the partnership from the museum side, and CAMOC was able to share the goals, needs, and resources they had for the project. Our project was to be part of an ongoing interest and effort in what is termed “place-based” oral history (Chew, 2002: 3) that is designed to “capture the color and detail of the lives of pioneer elders whose stories can serve as an informational road map for newer residents and the younger generation.” The needs of CAMOC were like those of many small museums. Seeking quality oral histories meant the Museum needed trained and effective interviewers to support their already very busy volunteer staff, and specialized equipment to produce high quality audio and video recordings that were not otherwise available to the museum. Further assistance was needed to prepare the interviews for archiving and for exhibition in the form of “life history panels.”

The museum did not see our project as independent and understood that a collaboration meant resources needed to come from both sides. The class was not just a means to “outsource” oral history work that the staff was too busy to do. CAMOC had already created an established protocol for the conduct and acquisition of oral history. Forms that recorded basic interview information, obtained informed consent (in English and Mandarin), transferred the rights of the interviews to the museum, and set interview guidelines with topics to be covered, were already a part of the museum’s infrastructure and were given to us for the project. The committee members had identified members of the community who they wanted to have featured in their exhibit, and had made initial contacts confirming their willingness to be interviewed. Recognizing that while all interviewees spoke English, the museum knew that for many it was not their first language, and recollections of childhood would take many interviewees to a time in their lives when Mandarin, Cantonese, or Toisan (a southern dialect) was their only language. The museum wanted to arrange for volunteers to accompany our students to each interview to act as translators, and was able to coordinate a volunteer for
each interview based on the language requirements of the interviewee. All of these features allowed the museum to control aspects of their exhibit and collection, and to connect to the community with the museum being the party of record.

The development of a course to meet the needs of CAMOC had three critical imperatives. The first was to find ways to connect students meaningfully to an unfamiliar community and institution, and to develop student investment in a project where there was no inherent interest that could be assumed on the part of any given class participant. The second was to develop a process to train students with little experience into competent oral history interviewers in the time allotted by the academic calendar. The third was to create a course structure that would anticipate and address concerns students might have that could become impediments in carrying out their portion of the project effectively.

The decision to develop a single project in which all students would participate was not the typical model for teaching using oral history at the university level, and the common concern of student interest and commitment had to be considered. The first element of the project design to cultivate student investment was to infuse the experience with a consistent message of its authenticity. Students needed to know that this was a real project for a real museum with real importance to an institution and community, and not simply an exercise for their benefit. This strategy required exposure to the museum and its staff throughout the 10-week quarter so people from the institution and community, and not just the instructor and teaching assistant, conveyed the importance of the project. The second element of the project design was to inform students about the community through readings and direct experience. Learning about relevant issues relating to Chinese immigration to the United States, about the history of the Chinese immigrants in Chicago, and spending time in the community was another important design element. An additional aspect of course design was to place students into teams to complete their project, a strategy to create small units of mutual accountability.

The final element in design was the most straightforward of all: all project work done directly for the museum had two potential grades: an A or an F. While other course work would be graded on a traditional scale, project work could either be completed successfully, or not. This grading scheme placed the idea of genuine excellence in student terms. A museum, a client, or an outside group would not benefit if the work produced was simply “good enough.” All students in the class earned an A, but for some, excellence was easier to come by than it was for others. Each student put in the work needed to make his or her work of a caliber worthy of the museum. While this strategy was designed as a last resort policy for those students who would not be motivated by other strategies and elements of course design, it wasn’t necessary in this case, as students were motivated by the other design elements to perform with excellence for the museum.

This particular course was a course in applied anthropology where students were expected to use their skills and perspectives as advanced anthropology majors to assist a group in the
community with a project (see the syllabus in Appendix A for the curricular context of the course). Most students had participated in experiential projects in their methods training courses and had taken a course in ethics prior to enrollment, so students had theoretical and practical knowledge about conducting a project outside a class context. In a course designed around practical application, it was decided that a large part of student training would be to teach the skill sets specific to conducting, recording, archiving, and displaying oral history interviews. This type of training had to impart more than skills: it had to give students the opportunity to develop confidence in those skills so they could be effective in the project. The course design had to front a good deal of training, not only through the dissemination of abstract knowledge but also through hands-on exercises in uses of technology and conducting recorded interviews.

These concerns about investment and training meant that the museum staff and volunteers would have to be available for scheduled meetings with students, and that the museum could expect students working in groups to complete a single interview from start to finish in the time available to the course. This latter point required a good deal of explanation, as the museum staff initially expected a course with an anticipated enrollment of 21 to complete more than seven interviews. Educating the museum about the importance of training on multiple fronts to provide a quality end product was a critical part of our discussions on design.

**COURSE STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT**

The course began the first week with students meeting the Exhibitions Committee at the museum to learn about the history of the institution and the importance of the project to the community (Appendices A and B). Once divided into project teams, each team had to spend time in Chinatown and visit retail outlets, eat a meal, visit institutions and organizations, and walk the area. These experiences were augmented by lectures and readings, and these combined techniques helped to create student investment in the project at the very beginning and to allow students to develop some basic familiarity with the community that was to be the subject of their oral history interviews.

The students then read extensively about oral histories as an abstract idea and had several hours of class discussion on the issues identified by experienced oral historians as critical to appropriate practice from the beginning to the end of a project. The text selected for the course, among a variety of strong contenders, was Valerie Yow’s *Recording Oral History* (2005) which offers practical guidance for conducting an oral history project from beginning to end, provides scholarly and applied contexts for oral history, and presents ethical and quality standards for the practice of oral history. Students also took online human subjects training through the National Institute of Health (NIH) even though oral history projects are generally considered exempt from human subjects standards and oversight.
We collectively created a class contract that held all project teams to the highest standard of oral history practice. The concept of a contract came from our desire to instill a sense of shared responsibility for the project among all members of the class, and to have peer-set standards for the project as well as those determined by the course syllabus and presented in the readings. Students incorporated information from their textbook on “best practices” and considered ethical issues from the NIH training in an active discussion where core ideas that they believed were essential to a quality project were written on the board. These ideas were discussed and eventually amalgamated by consensus into a document with eight bullet points that detailed the ways each member of the class would work to insure a high-quality oral-history interview experience for participants, and excellent outcomes for the museum. Students all agreed to uphold the standards created collectively by the class by going around the room and each giving verbal assent.

The project teams then learned the tools of the trade with a video workshop. Students had to learn about how to stage and evaluate an interview space for sound, light, and background, and set up and operate the recording equipment to be used in their interviews. Each team had to check out the equipment, and set up and conduct a practice interview with a subject of their choosing. The class critiqued these practice videos, and we evaluated each against our collective best practices. We also had a professional actor come into the class who had been directed to enact a series of scenarios of “problem interviewees”- the over-talker, the under-talker, the nervous fidgeter, and the challenging/inappropriate storyteller, among others. Students had to take turns at the front of the class interviewing the actor and had to get through four questions while trying to create effective repartee with their challenging interview subject. The class offered feedback, suggestions, and posed questions after each scenario.

Finally, students visited two different institutions to learn about the curation and presentation of oral history. The first of these was a visit to the DePaul University Special Collections Library where staff showed students the various ways (audio, video, paper) that oral histories are recorded, presented and curated. The staff also described some of the ways researchers and classes have used oral histories, so students could consider how oral histories may be adapted and used long after they are stored in a repository (Frisch, 2011). Second, students visited the Chicago History Museum and had a special meeting with curator John Russick, who had developed the oral history-based exhibit “My Chinatown” in the museum’s rotating neighborhood exhibit series (Appendix C). Students were able to see oral history come to life in an audio-visual based exhibit, and to talk to the curator about how he took large interviews, created a story, and then excerpted the participants’ voices in a way that effectively presented the diversity and unity of the community. Or, using the metaphor developed by Michael Frisch (2011), students learned how the “the raw” (recorded and archived interview) becomes “the cooked” (the public presentation of oral history data). This on-site museum visit was paired with students reading Amy Levin’s (2007) Defining History: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities, which provided them with additional examples of how local museums create exhibits that address local community dynamics.
Being in a large urban area, such as Chicago, gives particular access to museum curators, special collections librarians, underemployed actors, and audio-visual experts. In smaller areas where these people aren’t available in person, Internet technologies such as Skype can make it possible to bring such expertise into classrooms in any area. These preparatory exercises helped students build confidence and gave them the background knowledge necessary to enter into an actual interview with the technological expertise, interview skills, and historical and cultural contexts to conduct a quality oral history interview on behalf of the museum.

The majority of our 10-week quarter was spent in these training and preparatory activities. Actual interviews were conducted in weeks five to seven as independently scheduled events in a location determined in consultation with the museum and the interviewees. During this time, class work involved not only external visits to aid in the steps of archiving and presenting interviews but also in-depth, independent consultations with the professor and teaching assistant to work out particular challenges and encourage particular successes each group was experiencing.

After the Interview
Once each group had recorded their interview, they began the task of transcribing it. Transcription guidelines were given to students (Appendix D) and all transcripts included time stamps that correlated the written transcription to the digital recording. Ultimately, the museum received the transcriptions digitally in a general text format (.rtf), as a hard copy on acid-free paper, as a digital audio file, and a digital video file. This approach to archiving the interviews facilitates opportunities for the museum to use the interviews in future exhibits and research in ways that could involve not only the hard copies of the interview transcripts, but also the audio and video recordings (Frisch, 2011). Subsequent courses in public history from DePaul have coded these interviews on behalf of CAMOC to facilitate the active use of the collection.

Each student team also had to create the content for a museum exhibit panel for “From the Great Wall to the Great Lakes” that integrated the life history of their interviewee into the exhibit theme. The exhibit is focused on the many processes of immigration Chinese people experience when coming to the United States, and histories of how families, communities, and identities become established in a new country. During the meeting with the Exhibition Committee the first week of class, students saw examples of museum exhibit panels used at CAMOC, and received instructions on how to prepare their panels. Students were given approximate word counts, were instructed that their English text would be paired with Chinese and Spanish translation, and were informed that the Committee had historic documents and photographs provided by each interviewee that also would appear on the panel. Using these tools, each group was given the parameters for how a panel should look, and what each panel needed to include.

Each group chose a narrative for their interviewee that spoke to the general theme of the museum exhibit in a unique and special way. This approach was designed to create a cohesive
theme to the panels, and also to make each panel a unique presentation of a personal experience around that particular theme. For example, Ton Lam, a beloved community elder, once lived in the building that is now the Chinese American Museum (Figure 1). His panel detailed not only aspects of his immigration experience, but also how he remembered the current museum as a home, storefront, warehouse, and tofu factory. The choice of this particular story was made because it gives museum visitors an immediate sense of how the museum building itself has a deep resonance and history for members of the community, and because it was a story only Ton Lam could tell (Appendix E).

![Ton Lam being interviewed by DePaul University students. This image is a still captured from the video recording of his interview. The interview took place inside CAMOC.](image)

Once all the groups had prepared their panel designs, the class took a second trip to CAMOC where each group presented interim drafts and working ideas to the Exhibitions Committee. Each group provided the committee with a proposed panel layout and the narrative text they had selected and written. As the members of the Exhibition Committee had not yet seen or heard the interviews in their entirety, they also reviewed the general contents of the interview and explained why a particular story had been chosen. Some groups had several narratives they thought would work for the project and consulted with the committee regarding which should be featured in the exhibit. The committee offered further suggestions on how to integrate all of the individual stories into the exhibit theme, and worked with each group to think about how the narrative they had selected could be supported by the visual materials acquired from each participant by the museum.
Armed with this feedback, students worked on revising their panels and had an additional group consultation with the instructor and teaching assistant. The final class meeting was devoted to the presentation of revised panel proposals and a sharing of the narratives selected from each oral history interview. In addition to all of the transcription materials, CAMOC received the finalized text and final panel designs from the students. These panels were then revised internally by CAMOC, integrating the multi-lingual translations and selected images. Finally, the graphic designer contracted by CAMOC produced the panels over the summer, and they became a part of the exhibit in the autumn of 2010 (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Ton Lam (left) stands by his interview panel in the exhibit “From the Great Wall to the Great Lakes” and talks to community members about his part in the project.*

**The Collaborative Element**

Ideally, a collaborative effort is greater than the sum of its parts, and there were elements of this project that brought everyone together at key times in ways that truly forged a partnership. Students went to the museum the first day of class to learn of its history, including the story of the fire and the rallying of the community to rebuild its local museum. They spoke with museum personnel who could convey the importance of the project from the institution’s point of view. Students worked with volunteers in each interview setting, and often the oral histories recorded included conversations among students, translators, and interviewees as they explored neighborhood history together. Students also had to present “mock ups” for each exhibit panel towards the end of the project, and incorporate the suggestions of the Exhibitions Committee in their final design. These meetings created an investment in the project by students and museum staff and volunteers, and kept a continued sense of purpose that reinforced the project design.
The final event in the partnership was a reception for the museum exhibit in the fall of 2010. The museum opened its doors for a special 2-hour event attended by more than 80 people: students and their families, interviewees and their families, museum staff, and DePaul faculty. People were able to celebrate the success of the project in an informal atmosphere that brought all the stakeholders and collaborators together. More than 80% of the students (most of the class had graduated) came to the reception, as did six of the eight interviewees: a testament to the meaning of this experience for all involved. This event pointed to the intangible human connections that can be created by an effective collaboration and that are an ideal for a small, community museum (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**: DePaul University students Ciara Brewer (left) and Benjamin Gappa (right) stand on either side of Dominick Lai. Ciara and Benjamin interviewed Dominick as part of our project and they are standing in front of the museum exhibit panel that presents excerpts of his life story. A close bond was formed between many student teams and their interviewee, and the event provided a chance for them to reconnect and view the finished products of their collaborations. Photo credit: Beth Gravalos, DePaul University.

**CONCLUSION: CREATING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SMALL MUSEUMS AND COLLEGE CLASSES**

This partnership was a very successful one and we wanted to share it as a model for others to engage, adopt, adapt, or react against when creating their own collaborations. In short, we believe this project worked so well because it was developed as an actual project from beginning to end with a process and a conclusion that considered the needs, resources, and goals of the museum, and the constraints and possibilities of a 10-week class with university
juniors and seniors with particular resources at hand. A second critical element was the active involvement of both sides of the partnership in the development and execution of the project. The museum staff and volunteers continually worked with the students, and the students reported to and engaged the museum staff. This personal investment and connection created a project that was deeply meaningful for the participants, and nurtured a group of students who are now skilled in the conduct of oral history and hold a genuine appreciation for community engaged work. The collective efforts of museum volunteers and students generated an audio, video, and transcription record of seven oral histories in the museum archive, and produced a museum display that shares the voices and stories of community pioneers that will educate and entertain the community as they celebrate their renewed museum.

**AUTHOR NOTE**
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