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Commentary

LGBTQ+ Oral History: The Power of Community and Individual Stories

—Aliya Sarris

As each year draws to a close, many of us reflect on the events of the year and how to improve the world in which we live. I believe many learned the importance of inclusion in 2020. In order to move forward as a society, we must include those who have been historically marginalized, such as women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, to name just a few. I believe that in order to make progress, whether it be for one specific group or society as a whole, studying history is more important than ever. History reveals not only the flaws of the past, but also how we can navigate similar situations in the future.

As a first-year student studying political science, women's and gender studies, and Spanish at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), I became interested in conducting independent research on the history of marginalized communities. In the summer of 2020, I received a grant from the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) to collaborate with Professor Holly Cashman on an oral history project. Oral history is a research method that entails the collection and study of recorded interviews with those who have personal experiences within the framework of larger historical events. Our project was created to address the lack of information surrounding the experiences of older LGBTQ+ folks living in the Seacoast New Hampshire region. Today's more accepting environment is a result of the struggles of previous generations, but the absence of historical records of their experiences has led to a lack of acknowledgment of that reality. Our ultimate research goal was to document the stories of local community members, and contribute to the larger NH Seacoast LGBT History Project from which our project was born.



Aliya Sarris

Background

In 2015, Tom Kaufhold started the NH Seacoast LGBT History Project to “research, document, and preserve the history of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people on the Seacoast of New Hampshire with emphasis on Portsmouth” (NH Seacoast LGBT History Project, 2021).

In 2019, the NH Seacoast LGBT History Project hosted an exhibit titled, "Seacoast LGBT History: 50 Years of Rainbow Reflections," at the Portsmouth Athenaeum, a local non-profit membership library, gallery, and museum. The exhibit showcased the ephemera, including posters, flyers, and newspapers, that Kaufhold had collected from various LGBTQ+ folks in the Seacoast region, and celebrated the history of national activism in the LGBTQ+ community. Above all, the exhibit honored the fiftieth anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which took place after an unjust police raid of a popular gay bar in New York City. The Stonewall Riots became a well-known demonstration of the power of LGBTQ+ community activism in response to systemic discrimination.



A map which was part of the "50 Years of Rainbow Reflections" exhibit at the Portsmouth Athenaeum in 2019. [Click to enlarge.](#)

The oral history project I worked on with Professor Cashman aimed to gather information surrounding the experiences of LGBTQ+ folks in the Seacoast New Hampshire region during the Stonewall Riots time period. Our goals were to collect personal oral histories from those who were born before the Stonewall Riots, represent individuals from a variety of backgrounds to the greatest extent possible, and create an archive of these oral histories for the NH Seacoast LGBT History Project.

Research Methods and Findings

When I joined the project, Dr. Cashman had already conducted numerous interviews. She recruited the interviewees, also referred to as narrators, by advertising through posters and visits to local LGBTQ+ social groups, such as Seacoast Gay Men. A key aspect of the search for interviewees was to give them the agency to determine how they would like to be identified (by their full name, only their first name, or to remain anonymous). Dr. Cashman intended to recruit additional interviewees before the summer of 2020, however the COVID-19 pandemic greatly restricted her search, in addition to impacting other aspects of our project. Accordingly, Dr. Cashman and I met with Tom Kaufold via Zoom in order to get a sense of the history behind his project and how our project would add a personal element to the objects he has collected over the years.

My role in the project involved transcription of eight previously recorded interviews and thematic coding and categorization of key information within them. In order to transcribe interviews, I watched each interview three to four times, comparing the dialogue to the transcription created by an automated transcribing service. Because the automated program was uneven in terms of accuracy, my work was essential to ensure the transcripts' accuracy. After finalizing the transcriptions, I read through each and noted common places, people, events, or questions that were mentioned in the interviews. I listed themes for each narrator, and made a master list of

themes from all the interviews. Themes included topics such as Portsmouth, Stonewall Riots, AIDS epidemic, and coming-out experiences.

I found that these oral histories revealed some incredible stories. The evolution of the LGBTQ+ community is not frequently discussed, and I was honored and humbled to hear the personal experiences of LGBTQ+ people who lived during a time of such radical activism. In particular, I was inspired by the stories of three individuals: Randa, Joseph Murphy, and Robert Stiefel.

Discovering Community

Although she now lives in North Carolina, Randa, originally from Manchester, New Hampshire, found solace in the Seacoast area in the 1960s. As a UNH alum, Randa spent many days in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, performing music at small cafés. She explained that before Stonewall, she was not out yet, and that many LGBTQ+ establishments or clubs were secret locations. In 1971, she became involved with Theatre by the Sea, a community theatre group in Portsmouth. According to Randa and fellow narrators interviewed by Professor Cashman, Theatre by the Sea was a space where creativity thrived and where LGBTQ+ folks could find their community. Randa explained that New Hampshire, particularly UNH, kept her and other LGBTQ+ folks sheltered from the effects of Stonewall, calling it a "white ivory tower." However, she also spoke about the Gay Students Organization which UNH officially recognized in 1973, but was then forced to withdraw recognition by its board of trustees and the New Hampshire governor. The case was decided in the Gay Students Organization's favor in December 1974, and this decision was upheld by the state supreme court in October 1975. Without a doubt, the Stonewall Riots in New York City led to more willingness for brave individuals to come out and stand up for their rights across the country, including in this precedent-setting case at UNH.

In the current political climate, Randa said she has become more active in advocacy work, and even held weekly rallies in front of the federal building in North Carolina after the 2016 election. Randa emphasized that although "good people are working hard" to prevent protections for the LGBTQ+ community from being overturned, she will not shy away from a political revolution if necessary in order to fight for justice. When prompted to provide some words of wisdom for today's youth, she said, "Who we are is our strength. Who we are is what we have to give to make our community stronger and stronger. And that's the magic . . . as hard as it is to be who you are, you're giving the greatest gift you can to others." Randa was the first narrator whose interview I watched, and her powerful words set a positive tone for the rest of my research experience.

Exploring Self-Acceptance

Joseph Murphy spoke about his alcoholism and how it impacted his journey of self-love and acceptance as a gay man growing up in the 1960s. At the time of the Stonewall Riots (1969), Murphy was in his late teens/early twenties. During this time, he started drinking, which he characterized as an "escape." His alcoholism worsened as he got older, and he began exploring his own identity. He also spoke about his membership in Seacoast Gay Men, a social group for gay men in the area formed in 1979, and Gay Alcoholics Anonymous. Murphy stated he attended these support groups "religiously," because he was able to meet other gay men with very similar experiences. After many years feeling alone in his struggles, Murphy explained that these groups became his "lifesaver."

Murphy's bravery to speak about his personal demons truly spoke to me, and his advice to future youth conveyed his philosophy of patience and self-acceptance, noting, "One day at a time. Every day is a new challenge. Always be hopeful. My new tenet or belief in life comes from a meditation book I read early in sobriety that said, 'don't fight evil, just do good.'"

Lost Love

Robert Stiefel has been a man of many careers: a retired UNH professor, priest, and licensed psychotherapist, just to name a few. But what stood out the most to me from his interview, perhaps because I am a college student myself, was Stiefel's time at Oberlin College during the 1950s. There, he met Michael, a man whom he loved very much. Unfortunately, the two never had an official relationship due to Stiefel's struggle to come to terms with his sexuality, which was made worse by the overwhelming homophobia of the time. They briefly exchanged letters after Michael transferred to a different university, but they gradually lost touch. Years later in 1991, Stiefel discovered that Michael had died of complications from AIDS. In 1997, Stiefel visited the AIDS Memorial in Toronto. On the memorial was a beautiful poem entitled "These Waves of Dying Friends," written by Michael, Stiefel's lost love. Stiefel later discovered that Michael was one of the founding fathers of the Canadian gay rights movement. Unaware of Michael's importance to the LGBTQ+ community of Toronto, Stiefel was completely overwhelmed with this knowledge and began to do more research about Michael's contribution to the movement. Although each narrator's story was unique, and I learned something new from each one, Stiefel's story of lost love moved me the most because it reminded me, as I hope it reminds readers, of how we are all connected.

At the time of the interview in the summer of 2019, Stiefel expressed grim sentiments about the progress of LGBTQ+ activism. In particular, Stiefel felt that, due to President Trump, much of the work for the LGBTQ+ community that he witnessed as a young adult was slowly coming undone. Stiefel conveyed his feelings of uncertainty for the future of the younger generations.

Research Positionality

Through this experience I learned the importance of researcher positionality, or the researcher's relation to the social and/or political context of the project. Our original research plan proposed that I would conduct at least one interview to gain a greater understanding of the process of recording, transcribing, archiving, and disseminating oral histories to the public. However, after discussions with Professor Cashman, I decided not to conduct any of the interviews with the narrators myself. I felt that as a college student who does not identify as LGBTQ+, I would not be able to relate to the narrators in a way that would be conducive to an organic flow of conversation, as seen in previous interviews conducted by Professor Cashman. I did not want to prioritize my professional goals over the authenticity of the project or the comfort of the narrators.

My experience working on the Seacoast NH LGBTQ Oral History Project has inspired me to create my own oral history research project involving a community with which I identify. I plan to focus on oral histories of the Asian-American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, our exclusion from many narratives in United States history, and how our identity and its associated stereotypes influence the media and society's perception of us. Because I am Chinese-American, this project would have more personal significance, and my experiences as a transracial adoptee would add more nuance to the layers of the project. The complex nature of this project most likely indicates that it will not be started until a later date during my undergraduate years. My experience listening to, recording, transcribing, and coding oral histories has given me a greater appreciation for oral histories as a research method to record the stories of those who are excluded from popular narratives.

Conclusion

A key aspect of my educational experience as a political science, women's and gender studies, and Spanish student is to understand the history of marginalized communities, including the LGBTQ+ community. A well-versed comprehension of these groups is essential to allyship and advocating for marginalized identities, as well as critiquing flawed governmental policy regarding marginalized groups.

The Seacoast NH LGBTQ Oral History Project is ongoing, with a goal for completion in 2023 to coincide with Portsmouth's 400-year anniversary. We hope that the completed transcripts and corresponding audio clips will be stored in a digital archive in the Portsmouth Public Library. In addition, I created an iMovie presentation that focuses on the LGBTQ+ history of Portsmouth. The visuals for the presentation include newspaper articles, posters, and flyers that the NH Seacoast LGBT History Project has collected over the years. The presentation serves as an accumulation of the work I did over the summer, and I hope to share it with others in the future.



The Portsmouth Athenaeum, 2020. Photo credit: Holly Cashman.

It might be surprising to readers to learn that many narrators were hesitant to join the project because they believed they had nothing significant to add, yet they had no shortage of beautiful personal experiences. The biggest lesson I want readers to take away is that they should never underestimate the power of their voice. Everyone has their own experiences and their own perspectives that are as powerful and as important as any other, and I guarantee someone will listen.

I would like to thank the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for their support and encouragement for students to pursue their own research. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have continued to aid students in whatever way necessary despite the unprecedented circumstances. I would specifically like to thank the REAP program, Mrs. Elizabeth Lunt Knowles, and Mrs. Kristen Butterfield-Ferrell for making my research possible through their generous funding. I would also like to thank Professor Holly Cashman, my REAP mentor and my Spanish professor for multiple courses. With Professor Cashman's support and guidance, I have been able to fulfill my goal to perform research in only my first year of college, an accomplishment of which I am very proud. Professor Cashman and the REAP program coordinators were incredibly helpful throughout the entire REAP process, from application through the final report. I have a deep respect and appreciation for UNH faculty and staff for all that they do. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, friends, advisors, and all those at UNH who have helped me in all of my endeavors, both academic and personal. My time at UNH so far has truly been life changing, and I can only hope to continue achieving my goals with the help and support of the incredible UNH community.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Aliya Sarris is from Southington, Connecticut, and came to the University of New Hampshire (UNH) to take on an ambitious triple major in political science, women's and gender studies, and Spanish. She is also in the University Honors Program. Aliya asked her Spanish professor, Holly Cashman, to be her research mentor for the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP), and she joined in helping with and building upon one of Dr. Cashman's research projects. Aliya notes that Dr. Cashman was incredibly supportive throughout her research experience, through which Aliya learned that qualitative research requires an "abundance of patience," especially when having to adapt to the restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. With Dr. Cashman's support, Aliya adapted to the situation, successfully met her goals, and was incredibly moved listening to the oral histories she transcribed: "I learned from my subject the power of individual stories and the importance of listening to those who have been historically silenced." After completing her rigorous undergraduate career in May 2023, Aliya first and foremost intends to pursue her life goal of traveling. After that, she feels that, thanks to her time at UNH, she will be prepared to tackle any challenge head-on.

Holly Cashman is a sociolinguist and has worked at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) since 2008. She specializes in multilingualism and in language and gender and is particularly interested in exploring the intersection of these two research areas. Dr. Cashman teaches Spanish language and linguistics at all levels and also teaches in the women's and gender studies department. With a background in sociolinguistic fieldwork, Dr. Cashman began contributing to the NH Seacoast LGBT History Project by collecting oral histories. She is enthusiastic about including UNH undergraduate students in this project on an ongoing basis; it was a pleasure to work with Aliya, she says. "Her intelligence, her passion for social justice, and her work ethic are all qualities that I admire. I look forward to seeing how the skills honed...might contribute to her success in carrying out a research project of her own design." Dr. Cashman says it was particularly interesting to see what Aliya found to be compelling in the oral narratives she transcribed, since the purpose of the oral history project is to record the experiences of members of the Seacoast NH LGBTQ+ community for future generations. Dr. Cashman hopes to hear from any community members who would like to contribute their histories to the Seacoast NH LGBTQ Oral History Project so that even more experiences are included in the archive she and Aliya have begun to establish.

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