Oral History Exercise

Purpose
To prepare students to take down oral histories from their families or neighbors about particular places that had personal or social significance to them or their communities.

Overview
Students hear an oral history about Virginia Key Beach, an historically “colored only” beach in Miami, then discuss and research techniques for interviewing and recording oral histories from family members or community figures.

Time
1 two-hour session for the reading of the creative writing piece given, and the initial brainstorming about their own piece. The students then develop their own oral history project over a period of weeks for presentation at the end of the term.

Key Concepts
The memories of older members of the community provide valuable insight into history, as well as social and environmental issues. Each individual in a community has unique experiences that are lost if not recorded for future generations in some form. Writing a good oral history requires developing a clear research plan ahead of time.

Skills
Making a research plan
Using the computer to do research
Note taking, making audio recordings

Procedure
1) Students listen to a speaker share her recollections of Virginia Key Park Beach during its history as a “colored only” beach and her current efforts to preserve this beach and construct a museum on the site.
2) Students use the worksheet to make a plan about how to identify willing subjects for their own oral history project. After identifying subjects, they will conduct a pre-interview to prepare for the official interview and determine the best way to record the interview and phrase the questions.
3) Students then record their subjects’ oral histories and present them to the class, either in edited written form or as a final video or audio format.
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Student Worksheet and Research Plan

The vast majority of people who experience historic events are not writers or do not keep journals and because of this, many of these people's stories are lost to future generations. As part of the restoration and redevelopment of the Virginia Key Beach Park, a museum is being planned and the oral histories of Miami residents will be part of this exhibit. Students' family members or neighbors may have stories of Virginia Key or other related vignettes from their past that are worth sharing and seeing preserved.

1) Identify three people as possible subjects for your oral history. Remember the qualifications: having experiences relating to Virginia Key or, more generally, segregation in Miami during the period 1945-1965, and that they are willing to be interviewed.

2) Plan your pre-interview. How will you approach your subject? In a letter? By phone? How do you plan to record the pre-interview? With written notes, a tape recorder or videocamera?

3) Develop five open-ended questions (i.e. not “yes or no” questions) that you plan to ask your subject in the full interview.
General Guidelines for Taking an Oral History

1. Make a plan ahead of time and stick to it. Have a set interview time and set questions. Practice gently bringing the subject back to the topic.
2. Do not plan to interview for more than one hour.
3. Begin your interview with asking your subject to state their full name and date of birth. State also your full name, the current date and the location of the interview.
4. Bring someone else to help you with the tape recorder, video camera, etc. Be sure to get your specific permission before taking photos or recording the interview. Some people may be comfortable with a notebook but not with a videocamera.
5. Expect to do a lot of editing of your transcript to make it readable. Spoken words do not make easily read text.