

Voice of **WITNESS**

AN OCCASIONAL MAGAZINE

Beginning Again

**A Conversation
on Migration
in Appalachia**

Oral History Education

Promoting Belonging and
Learning in the Classroom

Introducing the Storyteller Initiative

Spotlight on Country Queers



ISSUE #4 | FALL/WINTER 2023

About Voice of Witness

Voice of Witness (VOW) is an oral history nonprofit advancing human rights by amplifying the voices of people impacted by—and fighting against—injustice. VOW's work is driven by the transformative power of the story, and by a strong belief that social justice cannot be achieved without deep listening and learning from those marginalized by systems of oppression. Through programming and partnerships, VOW works with communities to amplify unheard voices, develop educational resources, and teach ethics-driven storytelling.

BOOKS

The Voice of Witness Book Series depicts human rights issues through the edited oral histories of people who are deeply impacted and whose lived experiences are at the heart of finding solutions to address injustice. Our methodology combines journalistic integrity and an engaging, literary approach to illuminate inequity through the lens of personal narrative.

EDUCATION

The Voice of Witness education program brings unheard stories and oral history to classrooms across the US, centering marginalized voices and connecting students and educators with training and tools for storytelling to advance social change.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Through our partnerships and consulting, VOW offers expert storytelling and program support to nonprofits, advocates, schools, foundations, and more. These customized projects and workshops use VOW's award-winning approach to promote empathy, build relationships, and amplify community voices.



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is going to teach YOU
e history, teach YOU YOUR
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CAUTION



A Note from Our Interim Co-Executive Directors

Dear Readers, We are proud to present the 2023 VOW Occasional Magazine—our first as co-interim executive directors. This past year has been a time of change and growth for Voice of Witness with the departures of Mimi Lok and Cliff Mayotte, our founding executive director and education program director. Mimi and Cliff's contributions to VOW are too many to name here; they built the foundation that will allow us to thrive as we explore new storytelling formats and methods to support educators and students in the coming years. The shared leadership structure they helped establish has ensured that VOW will continue meeting the needs of our narrator communities, even during this transition period. Meanwhile, with the support of DRG Talent, our search for VOW's next executive director is well underway with an impressive pool of applicants.

We are delighted to announce the Storyteller Initiative, a new program to support a cohort of QTBIPOC (queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, people of color) narrative changemakers to uplift stories from their own communities. Through this initiative, we will share our years of experience conducting ethics-driven oral history, documentary, and storytelling work, and leverage our resources and networks to amplify fellows' work. In this issue, you will find more details about how the Storyteller Initiative will re-center editors and project leads who are rooted in their communities, as well as an exclusive update from VOW's pilot Storyteller Initiative fellow, Rae Garringer, about their book *Country Queers: The Story of a DIY Oral History Project*.

Also in this issue, we look at how our work is responding to the current political climate, particularly the harmful and dangerous movements across the country pushing for book bans and censorship, and we explore connections between oral history and social action. Additionally, we're excited to share more information about the next two titles in the VOW Book Series, *Beginning Again: Stories of Movement and Migration in Appalachia* (slated for release in summer 2024) and *Not a Number: Global Stories from the Automated Welfare State* (upcoming in 2025). These projects demonstrate our commitment to centering marginalized voices and creating space for narrative change.

We would not be where we are today without the support of our community. Your contributions are the cornerstone of continuing the increasingly important work of illuminating systemic injustice and documenting diverse stories. We are excited to share the work we have accomplished together over the last year and look forward to what will come.



In community,

Handwritten signatures of Dao X. Tran and Erin Vong Limoges in black ink.

Dao X. Tran and Erin Vong Limoges

Introducing the Storyteller Initiative: **Spotlight on Country Queers**

The Storyteller Initiative is a new VOW program in development that will provide institutional support to a cohort of QTBIPOC (queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, people of color) narrative changemakers in uplifting stories from their own communities. VOW will share our years of experience conducting ethics-driven oral history, documentary, and storytelling work, and leverage our resources and networks to amplify fellows' work.

The initiative will provide financial assistance, project guidance, and skills and career development to people from marginalized communities who have some experience with oral history practices and a commitment to gathering and curating their communities' stories but lack resources and connections. VOW will support community editors and storytellers in producing nuanced, compelling, and engaging projects rooted in oral history.

In preparation for the launch of the full initiative, VOW conducted two pilot fellowships in a scaled-down iteration. One of these pilots was with Rae Garringer, founder and executive director of Country Queers, and ran from November 2022 to January 2023. Rae shared their reflections on the fellowship on the following page.

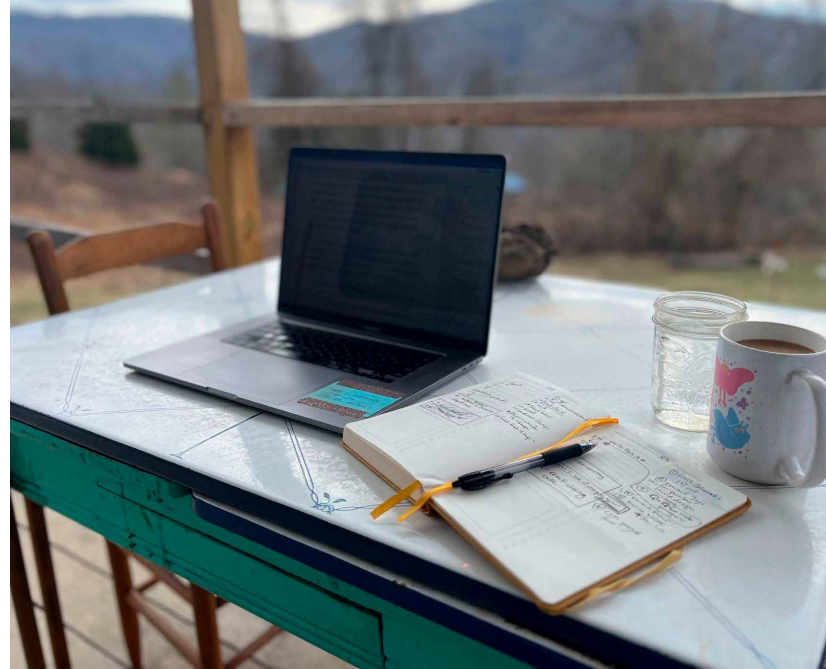


Rae Garringer (they/them) is a writer, oral historian, and audio producer who grew up on a sheep farm in south-eastern West Virginia, and now lives a few counties away on traditional S'atsoyaha (Yuchi) and Shawandasse Tula (Shawnee) territories. Rae is the founder of *Country Queers*—an ongoing, multimedia, community-based oral history project documenting rural and small-town LGBTQIA2S+ experiences since 2013. Since then, the project has grown to include a collection of over ninety oral history interviews, a traveling gallery exhibit, a podcast, and in fall 2024, a book.

For the past year, I've been working with VOW's editorial director, Dao Tran, on a book proposal and manuscript for *Country Queers: The Story of a DIY Oral History Project*, chronicling ten years of the *Country Queers* project. I am a largely self-taught, community-based oral historian, writer, and audio producer. I juggle multiple part-time freelance jobs and farm in rural West Virginia, and I have not previously had much access to publishing or formal oral history resources and spaces. Dao's initial email in June 2022, reaching out to see if I might be interested in discussing publishing possibilities for the project, was the boost of hope and energy I needed.

After several conversations about what a book about *Country Queers* could look like, VOW invited me to pilot the Storyteller Initiative as a fellow. We crafted a book proposal and submitted that proposal to Haymarket Books. Haymarket accepted the proposal and I signed the publishing contract in January 2023. Since then, Dao has supported me in the process of visioning, organizing, writing, and editing a manuscript draft. I've spent the past several months narrowing down the list of which narrator excerpts to include, digging through mountains of digital photos taken over the past decade, and working to thread a narrative of my own that ties it all together. The current draft combines writings about my own rural queer experiences and the process of running a minimally funded project from rural Appalachia, oral history interview excerpts from narrators, and photographs of people, places, animals, and ephemera I've encountered along the way.

Growing up in central Appalachia gave me first-hand insight into how journalistic, academic, and documentary work has the potential to be extractive and harmful to marginalized communities. I believe deeply in the power of rural communities reclaiming ownership over stories about our people and places, and this is particularly important for rural queer and trans people. We've been written out of national narratives about rural spaces, and thoroughly erased from local community narratives. The early and crucial support from VOW enabled me to work on a book aimed at uplifting rural queer histories and



Credit for photos: Rae Garringer

presents, while navigating the joys and challenges of my own rural queer experience.

I can't quite explain how grateful I am—after a decade of wandering through this work, fretting, obsessing, despairing even at times about how best to do this, and how to do it at all—to have the support of Voice of Witness. In addition to supporting me in the practical steps of drafting and submitting a book proposal, and developing a work plan for the book writing process, this pilot Storyteller Initiative also connected me to experienced oral historians and editors with whom I share ethical and political approaches to the work. It has been impactful to work with Dao, the larger VOW staff, and other practitioners to discuss oral history as a field, issues of power and ethics within this work, approaches to contextualizing narrator excerpts in a longer book, and how to edit transcriptions of spoken narration into written stories that flow with ease for readers.

I am so excited for *Country Queers: The Story of a DIY Oral History Project*, which will be published in fall 2024, to exist in the world—first and foremost as a gift and an offering to other isolated rural and small-town LGBTQIA2S+ folks all over. But I also hope this book helps add complexity and nuance to national conversations and conceptions of rural spaces and people, which often flatten our communities into monolithic stereotypes. I hold deep gratitude for the partnership with VOW that made this book possible.

Help us launch the Storyteller Initiative to support more individuals like Rae. VOW is looking to secure funding to launch the initial cohort of eight fellows in 2024. To learn more about this project, contact dev@voiceofwitness.org

Beginning Again:

A Conversation on Migration in Appalachia

Beginning Again: Stories of Movement and Migration in Appalachia is the next book in our VOW Book Series, scheduled for publication in 2024. In this collection, twelve narrators share accounts of their experiences (or their families') of migrating and relocating to and within Appalachia. These first-person stories of displacement, trauma, and community integration in Appalachia are complex, and the book counters monolithic representations of rural Appalachia as a region of poverty and strife. With a focus on shared resettlement experiences, *Beginning Again* presents an expansive and sober look at life in contemporary Appalachia. At the end of last year, VOW's then-executive director Mimi Lok sat down in conversation with project editor Katrina "Katy" Powell and narrators Elvir Berbic and Claudine Katete to discuss the book and the power of sharing one's story.

Elvir Berbic is from Derventa, Bosnia, and came to Roanoke, Virginia with his family when he was fourteen years old in 1995, after living for three years in refugee camps in Croatia. A student affairs professional in higher education for the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, he also volunteers with teenage boys through a local soccer enrichment program.

Claudine Katete spent most of her life in the Osire Refugee Camp in Namibia. Her family fled Rwanda in 1994 when she was two years old. She came to Roanoke, Virginia, when she was twenty years old in January 2014. Claudine received a degree in social work from Mary Baldwin College in 2020.

Katrina Powell is a professor of rhetoric and writing and director of the Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies at Virginia Tech. Author of *The Anguish of Displacement: The Politics of Literacy in the Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park*, her research focuses on narratives of displacement, human rights rhetorics, and social justice.

Excerpts from Claudine and Elvir's oral histories:

Claudine:



I want to open my own agency once I get my graduate degree, a place for social work but with high school students wanting to pursue education—like who I was when I was getting ready to go to college. I want to work with immigrants and refugees and I want to work

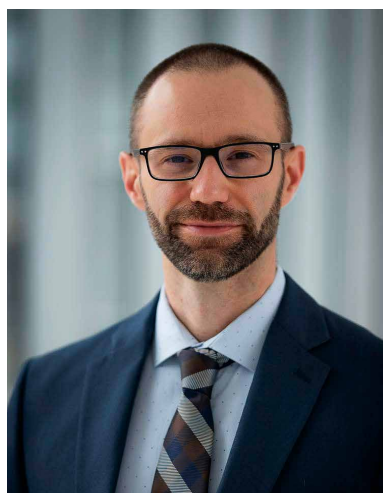
with students directly. After high school, there are many who rush to go into the workforce. Some are pressured by their parents and I know from personal experience that some parents have cultural beliefs and traditions that keep their kids from college, especially girls. Some girls, their fathers pressure them to get married. Also, this is a new country for them and they might not have access to information. There's so much more that we can achieve if we go to college.

I wanted to be a social worker from a very young age. My mother was a single mom with four children and when we came to the camp, we were the first Rwandans. There were Ethiopians, some Sudanese, Congolese, and Burundians. There were some resources for them, but nothing for Rwandans at first. There were no scholarships for Rwandans to finish eleventh and twelfth grade. So many others got help to finish, but my mother couldn't get help to send me to finish high school. So she grew her own vegetables and saved money to send me to the Paresis Secondary School in Otjiwarongo, a small town in Namibia. I finished high school there. I had to figure it out on my own.

Sometimes when I think about it, you know the saying, "It is what it is." You have to live with it. When you don't have control over something, what can you do? Stressing won't help you. I learned that living in the camps.

Elvir:

Right now, I live in the Cave Springs area of Roanoke; however, twenty years prior to that, we lived in a less prosperous area. I went to public schools. I was fourteen years old when we came here, and at that point in my life, I was the adult in the family because I was the oldest son and the most knowledgeable in English. I served as translator those first years, really throughout my time here with my parents. My role and my brother's was always to support them and others in the community like, "How do I use a credit card? How do I pay my bills and get a driver's license or secure a loan?" My brother and I had to help with all these things.



My brother and I witnessed our parents struggling, not only with language but to advance in their work and to have more money despite their lack of education and lack of language skills. Their social life was impacted too. They were limited, and they couldn't

really engage in a community. They knew that there are resources out there, but they never really strayed far from what they knew. There was security and safety within certain limits, and that's why I don't think they fully realized themselves here in the US. My father went back to Derventa in 2010. But my mom cannot go back there. She left last year to live in Croatia with her family. My parents were never happy here. They were just about work, work, work.

My brother and I both saw this, and we learned from it. My parents, especially my father, would always say, "You don't want to end up doing things I do," meaning, being a physical laborer all my life. When I saw that my parents were continuously having to do physical labor, I thought, I can't do that for the rest of my life. I wanted to make sure that they can look at my brother and me and say we did something with our lives.



Appalachian activist Margo Miller.
Photo Credit: Jessica Tezak

Mimi: Can you share a little bit about the history of resettlement in the region and what made you want to explore this topic using oral history?

Katy: I grew up in Appalachia myself, in a rural town in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. My dad's side of the family has been in Appalachia for generations, migrating from the Scottish Highlands in the mid-nineteenth century. When I was growing up, we hiked nearly every weekend in Shenandoah National Park, and I was always aware of the history of displacement and resettlement in and around that land. So my whole life, I've lived in a diverse community where movement, mobility, and forced displacement were routinized and historical.

In 2017, the Trump administration enacted a travel ban on Muslim countries, using racist and damaging stereotypes about refugees and migrants. As in many other communities in the United States, refugees and migrants were resettling in Appalachia from Syria, several countries in Africa, Central America, and other places all over the world. This wasn't a new phenomenon, but the media portrayal of the situation as a new crisis, then, in turn, placed blame on individual families and perpetuated stereotypes of refugees and migrants as victims or a drain on resources. I knew from living here, from teaching Appalachian students, from

researching displacement narratives, and from being a neighbor, that all those negative stereotypes not only were not true, but they were damaging. They influenced policymakers as resources were being distributed, and they precipitated many human and civil rights violations.

So I proposed the project to Voice of Witness because I wanted to place the diversity of narratives within Appalachia from families whose ancestors have lived here and from families who had just arrived. Placing those things together to highlight the region's diversity and the long history of movement, migration, and resettlement.

Mimi: Claudine and Elvir, you both play a crucial role in this project as narrators. Could you tell us a little bit about what it was like to share your personal stories and what inspired you to do so?

Claudine: What inspired me to share my story is—well, I talk about my story pretty much all the time. When I meet somebody who is interested in knowing where I come from, I'm always excited about it. For me, it's kind of a way of coping because I don't know my country. I was born in Rwanda. I don't remember, I have zero memory. So my whole life felt just make-believe. When somebody

is interested and wants to know my story, I want to share it with them. There are a lot of people who don't get a chance to have a primary conversation with somebody who was a refugee, so it excites me. I want people to know about my story so that they can learn from it.

Elvir: I think talking about one's experience, and particularly an experience that highlights the individual within the grand scheme of things, is very necessary. We tend to learn a lot from reading news or excerpts from TV or even the movies. So telling an individual's story, a truth, that is from the perspective of somebody who lived it is very important. Like Claudine, I find that there's a therapeutic way of telling your story. A lot of our history, and specifically in Bosnia, was lost due to the war. Things were burned and destroyed, and they're no longer there as something you could hold on to. So the story goes from one generation to another generation all through oral methods. I think that is very necessary to keep going, even if it's on this other continent.

Mimi: One of the things that defines the work that we do at Voice of Witness is the way we approach every project with a sense of discovery and a willingness to be surprised, to have our assumptions and biases challenged. Has anything surprised you about participating in this project? Who do you want to read these stories, and what would you like them to learn?

Elvir: I feel like the stories should be read by individuals who are trying to sift through information that is too wide of a lens. When you're reading the news, you're reading about experiences that are too broad. Within this bombardment of all this news, the individual stories are what make a difference. I mean, my wish in this whole world, is to not have refugees, for people to not have to leave their own homes, because nobody, I can tell you, nobody wants to leave their own home. Well, both of our stories, Claudine and I, are very much positive stories in a way, in terms of how we made our lives better through hard work and a little bit of luck and good health. Behind all of those stories is how we didn't really want to leave our homes, that we could have impacted our own countries and our towns and cities.

Claudine: The only thing I know about my country is from reading the news or from the magazine or from my mom telling the stories of how we lived. I'm now American naturalized, I'll have children with that possibility. But I don't want to forget that history, I want to pass it on to my kids so that they know. But I have the experience of growing up in a refugee camp, I used to think that was my country in fact. You know, like my mom was like, no, you have an actual country, you have an origin we came from.

*“I am telling this story,
I’m no longer a victim
in it. I am not an
antagonist or
protagonist. I am
just a truth-teller.”*

So it's really special when I get an opportunity to share that part of my life. It makes me feel fulfilled because somebody else knows and is informed about my story. I have met people who will ask me what a refugee looks like. Like here in the US. And I'm like, *Whoa, what?* It blows my mind and is very surprising because they have no idea. Like, anyone could be a refugee.

Mimi: What was the most reassuring thing about being a part of this project?

Elvir: I think the most significant part to me is just telling the story. I'm alive to tell it. The reassurance that I'm okay. You know, I am. I realize that as I am telling it, in this sort of therapeutic way, I am okay with doing this. I have control over it. I am telling this story, I'm no longer a victim in it. I am not an antagonist or protagonist. I am just a truth-teller.

Claudine: I know that that is my experience. Maybe somebody else, like a young person, will read it and relate to it, "Claudine actually went through a similar situation to me. I feel I can also do it." It is reassuring that it could maybe encourage somebody to do something positive for themselves.

Promoting Belonging and Learning in the Classroom

Today's educational landscape presents many challenges in engaging students in critical discourse around identity, diversity, and society. Recent legislation in cities and states across the country aims to prohibit classroom discussions of racism, homophobia, and oppression, banning texts that touch on related subject matter. In the face of these book bans and educational gag orders, there is an ever-growing need to support teachers in delivering engaging, culturally relevant content that affirms the identities of all students and speaks honestly about the history and current realities of injustice in America.

Voice of Witness was founded on the principle that we cannot achieve social progress and justice without deep listening and learning from those marginalized by systems of oppression. For nearly fifteen years, we have explored issues of race-, gender-, and class-based inequity through the lens of oral history and personal narrative. VOW's education program brings the process of learning through firsthand accounts to the classroom: Our lesson plans promote reading oral histories with a holistic, empathy-building approach that humanizes history, sparks critical discussion, and builds vital student skills.

VOW's education program can support teachers as they navigate educational gag orders and book bans by making our stories and lesson plans more accessible and centering students and their experiences within the curriculum. To challenge censorship, we've designed the new *Voice of Witness Student Workbook: Oral Histories of Displacement and Determination* that highlights two narratives from our series, with reflection activities embedded into the resource. In response to book bans, students and their communities can create their own "texts" through oral history and personal storytelling projects. These storytelling projects, like our Cookbook Guide and Podcast Toolkit, reflect students' identities in the class and create opportunities for them to learn from their own—and each other's—communities.

With our values, methodology, and curriculum development experience, we find ourselves uniquely positioned to develop culturally responsive, trauma-informed course curricula that highlight and honor individual voices while fostering a sense of community and civic engagement. We plan to continue responding directly to the needs of our educators and students by creating more accessible project guides on our website, embedding an Ethnic Studies framework into our book series curricula, hosting virtual gathering spaces and office hours for teachers across the country to build connections and learn, and leading more workshops to introduce these materials to new educators.

Blackout Poem

Use an excerpt from Soledad’s story to create your own blackout poem! Pick out the most important words and phrases in the excerpt, then use a marker to black out everything else. Use the words that are left over to create a poem: you can change the order of the words, and add line breaks or punctuation wherever you want. The only trick is that you cannot add any new words!

Excerpt:

When I was about to turn fourteen, my father decided to return to Honduras to see me. I waited by the door for him, wondering, What will he look like? How will I feel after all these years? My dad came in a car, and when he got out, I went and hugged him. He’s really short, like me. He cried when he saw me. I just felt happy. But I was mad at him because he had left me alone, you know? When my stepfather abused me, my father wasn’t there for me. But after seeing him, I started feeling something for him.

With Blackouts:

I was fourteen,
I waited by the door wondering
years came in a car,
short,
happy. But I was mad
alone
seeing feeling something

Finished Poem:

I was fourteen.
I waited by the door,
Wondering.
Years came in a car,
Short, happy.
But I was mad,
Alone:
Seeing,
Feeling something.

Excerpt:

We stayed in Guatemala for one day and then got in a van to go to Mexico. We went from van to van. We had to lie down with many people, one on top of the other. The coyotes put cardboard on top of us so La Migra wouldn’t see us if they pulled us over. It was hard to breathe, and we didn’t eat either. They didn’t want to stop. Finally, we reached a house, somewhere in Texas, a really nice place. A guy with his wife and their little daughter lived there, and they spoke Spanish. We were really hungry, and they gave us food. They just told us, “Don’t go outside.” After that, someone came in a van to take us from Texas to Sacramento. It was a long trip. They stopped to pick up other people at different houses, and the police stopped us twice. There was a hiding place under the floor where they put people in the van. There were air holes, but there were too many people. I was next to my father, and we were holding our arms in and we were curled up, and it was really hard to breathe. We had to stay quiet the whole time. They’d say, “Here come the police. Stay quiet, stay quiet!”

Finished Poem:

Blank lines for writing a finished poem.

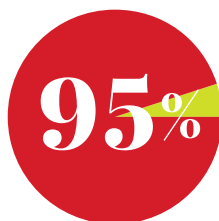
Building Empathy, Community, and Student Skills through an Oral History-based Course

After more than seven years of teaching the “Voice of Witness class” at Amos Alonzo Stagg High School in Palos Hills, Illinois, teachers Lisa Thyer and Chris Wendelin, along with VOW staff, have produced the report *Benefits of an Oral History-Based Course: A Case Study on Building Empathy, Community, and Student Skills*. This report analyzed qualitative interviews from eighteen alums and surveys from thirty-six former students with overwhelmingly positive results.

“It’s that active effort to just be more conscious of the people around you in everything that you do. It’s choosing to be empathetic not only when it’s convenient or when you have space in your schedule.”

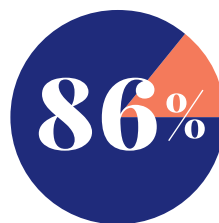
—former student
Mackenzie Kazin (Mac)

The evaluation affirms the need for courses like this has never been more urgent. Schools are experiencing an alarming increase in harmful rhetoric, harassment, othering, book bannings, censorship, and more. Students, teachers, librarians, administrators, and school board members are threatened for wanting to teach and learn in an honest, inclusive, and culturally responsive atmosphere.



95% of surveyed alumni reported that the VOW class improved their communication skills

Against this backdrop, students face dwindling opportunities to safely engage with multiple perspectives, diverse experiences, critical thinking, and social-emotional skills. The Voice of Witness class developed at Stagg High School nurtures all of these skills, which are crucial for students as they learn, grow, and navigate college and career choices to become engaged participants in society.



86% of alumni reported that the VOW class improved their reading and writing skills

A vital component of the success of the VOW class, and its impact on students and the school community at large, is the fact that it is structured as a yearlong course. The oral history foundation and emphasis on active listening, critical thinking, and community-building make up the core of the class, while the standard curricular skills are taught around it.



95% of alumni reported that the VOW class improved their critical thinking skills

“VOW creates a community. A lot of the time, the United States in itself is very individualistic, where everyone’s just surviving on their own. They just are focusing on themselves, what they’re doing. I think the VOW class breaks those barriers. It connects people.”

—former student Nadia Alyafai



Photo credit: Allison Shelley

The results showed that the VOW class positively impacted participating students across a variety of indicators, including translating the learned skills from the classroom into their everyday lives. Many alums chose to enter service-oriented careers that highlight their empathy and compassion, while others brought those critical thinking and social-emotional skills into their respective fields.

We hope that the lasting impact of this VOW course will encourage other schools and communities to adapt this oral history pedagogy into their own classrooms, nurturing students into becoming the next generation of thoughtful, empathic leaders, and history-makers.

Read the full report on our website.



90% of alumni said the VOW class helped them develop connections with new people



100% of alumni reported the VOW class had a positive impact on their lives

“In the short term, our school shined! I think it was the first time our community really looked at our diverse experiences with a more true and deep sense of pride. VOW participants were so proud of what they created and it was the most genuine pride and accomplishment I had seen come from a classroom or activity. In the long term, the course had lasting, positive effects on our VOW participants.”

—Principal Eric Olson



Photo Credit: Allison Shelley

Supporting the NYC Department of Education Hidden Voices Project

Last year, the VOW education team collaborated on a workshop series with the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) as part of their Hidden Voices Project, an initiative to help students learn about historically marginalized communities and the ways these communities shape New York's history and identity. The workshops taught educators how to use oral history to bring community stories into the classroom.

This year, VOW continued our partnership with NYC DOE and the Hidden Voices Project by developing a suite of lesson plans that center AAPI and Latinx oral histories.

These lesson plans are now widely available as grab-and-go resources for teachers to support social studies education and multilingual learners across the over 1,800 schools that make up the NYC school districts.

The lessons contain a collection of oral histories from AAPI and Latinx communities, engaging students in various reflective and creative response activities to grapple with the themes and emotional resonance of the stories. Featured in the lesson plans are oral histories from a few of VOW's human rights books, including:

- Hani Khan from *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*
- Mr. Lai from *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*
- Soledad Castillo from *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America*

The curricula from this collaboration are accessible to students and teachers in New York City for the 2023-24 school year and beyond.

Classroom Spotlight: Engaging with History through Artifact Interviews

Through an ongoing consultancy with the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), the VOW Education Program has been working with several middle and high schools around the city to develop oral history projects for their classrooms.

During the 2022-23 school year, VOW collaborated with Aisling Prange, an eighth-grade English teacher at Roosevelt Middle School.

While reading Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, Prange wanted to make the historical context of Japanese American incarceration during WWII more accessible to her students. Prange also wanted to find a way to celebrate and mark the end of middle school for her students as the school year drew to a close.

VOW and Prange constructed a project centered around “artifacts”—objects with personal, familial, or cultural significance. VOW’s education specialist, Jessica Fagen, contributed an artifact from her family’s history. Students conducted an “artifact interview” to discover the story behind Fagen’s item: a poster advertising a boxing match between Harold Hoshino and Tomboy Romero. Over the course of the interview, students learned that Harold Hoshino was Fagen’s grandfather—Hoshino had been a professional boxer before EO9066, when he was forced to end his boxing career due to his Japanese ancestry. Executive Order 9066 authorized the forced displacement and incarceration of people with Japanese ancestry during WWII.

To connect the experience of examining historical artifacts to their own lived experience, students brought in personal artifacts from home to conduct interviews with one another. The students selected individually significant artifacts representing their hobbies, cultures, or relationships. Reflecting on the interview experience, students noted that “it was fun to share an important thing which represents me to others” and “it was nice to finally open up to another person.” Prange helped celebrate the end of the school year by creating a digital scrapbook featuring students’ artifacts and excerpts from their interviews.

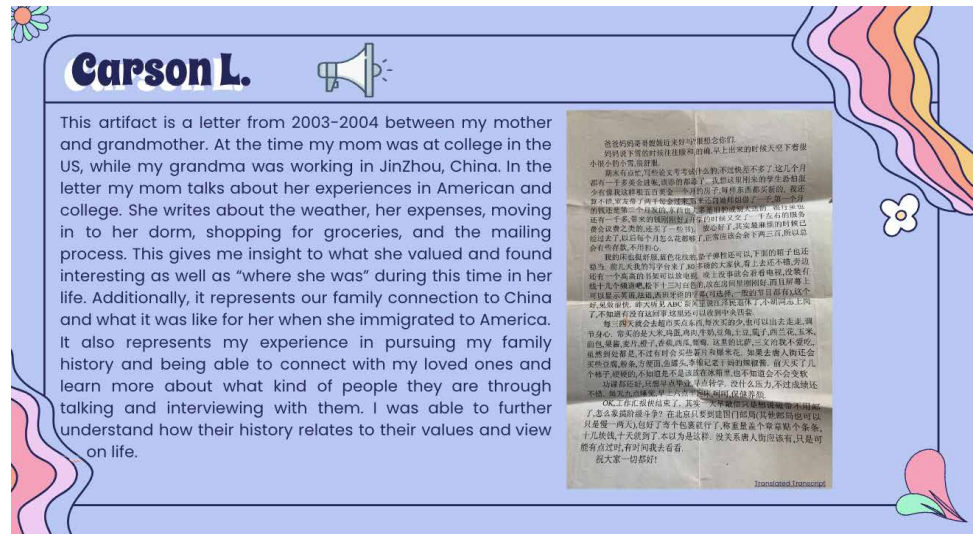


Photo credit: Jessica Fagen

Storytelling & Advocacy with Oakland's Maya Community

During a recent bright afternoon in the courtyard of the Cesar Chávez Public Library in Oakland, Voice of Witness gathered with our community partners, East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC) and their Voces Maya team, for a brainstorming session. Our small group went back and forth discussing the structure for our workshop session at the upcoming Maya Cultural Festival, hosted by City College of San Francisco. “Before we talk about Voces Maya and the work we do, we want to show people why,” said community partner Esmeralda Mendoza—“why we are preserving our cultures and traditions.”

This same goal has been central to VOW's storytelling collaborations developed over the last year with EBSC, Voces Maya, and the storytelling coalition Amplifying Sanctuary Voices. VOW has worked closely with EBSC since 2018, initially connecting through the publication of *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America*. EBSC, a legal and social services nonprofit that has served immigrant communities in the Bay Area for over forty years, has become a vital partner for VOW in developing programming that utilizes the power of storytelling and narrative for advocacy and political action. VOW has worked with EBSC to co-host events highlighting immigrant voices and led workshops for community members on sharing their personal stories for demonstrations and campaigns demanding immigration policy reform.



Voces Maya is an outreach group within EBSC dedicated to sharing resources with Mam and Latinx people in the East Bay. Oakland is home to one of the largest Mam-speaking communities in the United States; Voces Maya estimates there are almost 15,000 speakers of Mam, an Indigenous Mayan language from Guatemala, in the city. The Voces Maya trilingual team attends community events like the La Pulga Flea Market to provide information to the local community about workers' rights, COVID-19 safety, preventing hate crimes, and “Know Your Rights” protocols for encounters with ICE. They also produce Radio B’alam, an award-winning weekly Facebook radio program broadcast in Spanish and Mam.



Photo Credit: East Bay Sanctuary Covenant

Earlier this year, VOW began working with the Voces Maya team to build their oral history skills. Our intimate workshops have focused on developing a trauma-informed, supportive space for participants to share experiences. What truly makes a story? How do you share who you are and what's important to you? For a community that has rarely received the mic from mainstream media, Voces Maya team members have explored how rich, resonant stories can emerge from "simple" prompts, such as telling the story of one's name. By encouraging participants to share at the pace (and in the language) that feels most comfortable to them, we're collectively building spaces for community healing, connection, and advocacy. In line with a mutual emphasis on growing support and solidarity across multiple organizations, our storytelling workshops have also included collaborations with Berkeley Repertory Theatre and City College of San Francisco.

"Storytelling in safe spaces helps participants to connect with their voice and know that their perspective, culture, identity, and dreams matter," says Lisa Hoffman, EBSC's director of development and communications. "The Voces Maya team is bringing healing and hope to their community by embodying their own stories and encouraging others to do the same."

VOW is excited to continue working with the Voces Maya team in the coming months, including moderating the group's workshop at the Maya Cultural Festival in San Francisco. Our partnership with Voces Maya is just one example of the new connections and mutual learnings that continue to emerge from our long-term relationships with community organizations like EBSC.

APPLIED ORAL HISTORY IN ACTION:

Separated, a Project on Migration and Family Separation

By Fanny Julissa García

Fanny Julissa Garcia is an oral historian and narrative change strategist. This summer, she worked as a consultant for Voice of Witness. She shares her independent work here as the project director for Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity, which began in 2019 in partnership with history professor Nara Milanich. Here, Fanny reflects on how the project has incorporated applied oral history methods. To learn more about the project, visit separatedoralhistories.org



In the summer of 2018, news broke about the US government's adoption of a radical new policy to separate parents from their children at the US–Mexico border as a form of immigration deterrence. The situation provoked anger and mobilized tens of thousands around the country. The administration was forced to rescind the policy within weeks, but the damage had been done. Border agents separated thousands of families. The government forced parents to return to their countries of origin while their children remained in the US, resulting in months or years of separation. Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity documents this historic human rights violation. It records the stories of mothers and fathers and daughters and sons to ensure their experiences are not forgotten.

Since the project began in 2019, we have recorded more than thirty interviews with parents and seven interviews with children. All the interviews took place through telephone conversations and employed a dynamic verbal consent process. We use the term “dynamic” because we asked each narrator why they wanted to share their story and how they wanted it used or disseminated. These two simple yet essential questions created an exchange focused on respect for choice and personal agency. Every person had their own unique response, but almost all the families responded that they wanted their stories to help advocate for ending family separation. One mother we interviewed stated, “I would be willing to tell my story a thousand times over because I don’t want this to happen again, especially with my people. We are human beings.”

The dynamic consent process also made us (the project's oral historians and interviewers) more aware of the responsibility and care the project needed. Suddenly, we were not just recording interviews for posterity. The narrators were tasking us to do something with their stories and commit to their intentional dissemination. This process motivated us to develop and implement "applied oral history" methods to the project design. Applied oral history is influenced by the oral history for social change practices championed by oral historians such as Alisa del Tufo, Virginia Espino, Gabriel Solís,

and many others. Their practices use oral history and narrative creatively, effectively, and ethically to support movement-building and transformative social change.

In applied oral history, the first goal is for the research to serve the people. It seeks to serve the community whose members are contributing their life histories and experiences, and to raise consciousness and contribute to policy change aimed at social justice and equity. We created the following set of commitments to remind us of the level of responsibility we have toward our narrators:

1 To engage in respectful and prolonged relationship-building with individuals who have experienced state-inflicted violence and family separation.

2 To provide opportunities for participation that will foster choice-making as it pertains to collecting, disseminating, and interpreting one's story.

3 To activate and apply oral histories toward interventions in other fields such as policy change, advocacy, journalism, community organizing, education, and more.

4 To center the project's foundation in a culturally respectful, trauma-informed, and healing-centered blueprint that listens to and adapts to the narrator's needs.

5 To serve as a proactive partner in the call for justice, restitution, and accountability on behalf of the people harmed by family separation.

6 To connect the present violence of forced family separation with other similar forms of state-inflicted violence and family separation documented throughout history.

Using applied oral history methods helped us ensure the active participation of the narrators in all aspects of the project, not just the interview. It also provided a process to explore the long-term relationship needed to care for the project past its documentary stage and into its activation in service of the families who contributed their stories and experiences.

Many practitioners use some form of long-term relationship engagement with narrators for oral history projects.

Relationship building is needed to ensure the active engagement of narrators and to make the process less transactional and more relational. Still, we have rarely explored the deep commitments required to make this possible. Applied oral history is one method we can use to start exploring this more intentional process of documenting and preserving oral histories of people, and communities, who have experienced some form of state-inflicted violence.

EDITOR Q&A:

Documenting the Automated Welfare State through Oral History

Not a Number: Global Stories from the Automated Welfare State is an upcoming book in VOW's series, expected to be published in 2025. This in-depth oral history project documents narratives from individuals who have been impacted by the automation of social benefits systems.



Photo credit: Pablo Jimenez Arandia



Photo credit: Virginia Eubanks

Voice of Witness interviewed editors Virginia Eubanks and Andrea Quijada about the project.

Q: Why Not a Number? Why now? In other words, why gather narratives about the automation of the welfare state at this particular moment?

A: The welfare state is under attack, in the United States and worldwide. For example, about one in four Americans were enrolled in Medicaid during the pandemic. According to KFF Health News, at least 5.5 million people have been disenrolled since April, as many as 72 percent of recipients in some states. Three-quarters of them have lost their health insurance for procedural reasons: outdated address information, confusing renewal processes, or the state failing to process submitted paperwork before coverage expires.

Pushes to make social insurance more scientific tend to arise in times of widespread economic suffering—look at the history of the county poorhouse or the Scientific Charity movement. These backlashes always rely on a kind of moral calculus that rationalizes weeding out people considered undeserving and removing life-saving social supports. If we know this history, the push to automate welfare decision-making and integrate artificial intelligence into public assistance at this moment should not surprise us. But it is crucial to hear from those bearing the brunt of these changes so we can effectively fight for a more abundant future for everyone.

Q: You are working all over the world. What insights have arisen from that global approach?

A: So far, we've gathered narratives in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Colombia, Finland, Indonesia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We hope to also include narratives from Kenya, México, the Philippines, and Uganda. One of the most surprising things we learned is that even when the political will exists to provide robust social benefits—for example, the passage of the Ingreso Mínimo Vital, a federal minimum income program, in Spain during the pandemic—automated processes can keep benefits from getting to those who need them most.

Interestingly, there remains a need for human interventions in these so-called automated systems. For example, in Colombia, government representatives make house visits and can override the initial rankings produced by the automated system. Someone first denied access to health insurance might be determined by an in-person assessor to be eligible after all. So far, we have found in each country various third-party individuals, official or unofficial, who assist applicants with accessing their respective systems and even with being reevaluated.

Mostly, these in-person networks and interactions are positive. But we're also finding that a lively gray market has arisen in some countries where people offer to fill out electronic forms for those who lack tech access—for a fee. Considering the sensitivity of the information applicants share, this raises real concerns about privacy and exploitation.

Q: We're seeing a lot about artificial intelligence (AI) in the news. What lessons does your oral history approach to documenting technological change have to offer these conversations?

A: One of the most frustrating things about the current conversation about AI and social justice is its future orientation. The mainstream dialogue tends to fixate on challenges AI might pose for democracy, equity, environment, and community in a dystopic tomorrow. What oral histories of the automated welfare state illustrate is how threats to fair decision-making processes, equitable outcomes, and even material survival have already been occurring, particularly in poor and working-class communities. Oral history keeps us grounded in the experience of people facing automation's most life-changing impacts right now.

Q: What advice for public assistance recipients, policymakers, and social movements has emerged from the work?

A: The process of reestablishing eligibility is so stressful, and losing access to a life-saving program is so terrifying. But if your public benefits—here in the US, those would include Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, home heating assistance, housing, veteran's benefits, childcare subsidies, et cetera—are denied, reduced, or terminated for any reason, you have a right to a fair hearing. Request one right away. In writing.

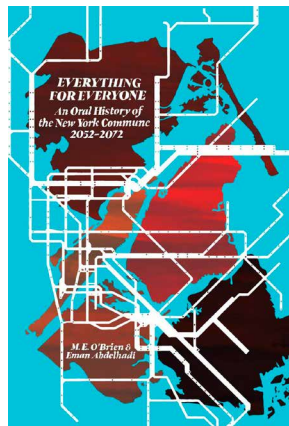
Hard-won victories from the national welfare rights movement in the 1960s are currently under assault. But we've protected and even expanded social insurance before. We can do it again.



Our Work Is Everywhere: An Illustrated Oral History of Queer and Trans Resistance
by Syan Rose (2021, Arsenal Pulp Press)

"A really gorgeous presentation of a diverse group of narrators sharing their experiences, wisdom, challenges, and dreams. Lovely to see oral history presented in this way; the art is as complex and detailed as the narratives."

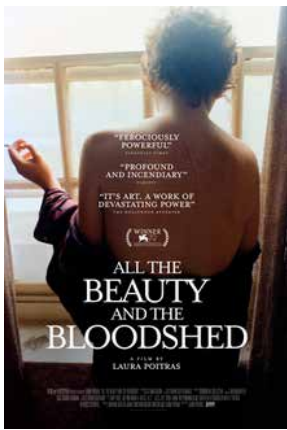
—Erin Vong Limoges,
Education Program Director



Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune 2051-2072
by M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi
(2022, Common Notions Press)

"A must-read for anyone interested in oral history, speculative fiction, and collective action to build alternative futures. This book, a set of interviews with the people who made the revolution, models how well suited oral history is to reflect the complicated interplay between individual lives and societal structures. VOW was honored to host a Q&A with Eman Abdelhadi, one of the co-authors, at a session during our last staff and board retreat."

—VOW Staff



All the Beauty and the Bloodshed
(2022, a film by Laura Poitros)

"All the Beauty and the Bloodshed is a biographical documentary about artist and activist Nan Goldin. The film chronicles Goldin's life and photography, the impact her work had in expanding LGBTQ+ representation in the '70s and '80s, and her more recent efforts to combat the opioid epidemic by raising awareness about the crimes of the Sackler family. It is an inspiring and emotional exploration of the many ways in which art and artists can bring about major positive change."

—Jessica Fagen,
Education Specialist and Program Coordinator



Inside Appalachia
(West Virginia Public Broadcasting)

"Not a new podcast, but definitely notable. Inside Appalachia tells the stories of contemporary Appalachia and its people—through food, music, and culture. In the June 12, 2023, episode, I was delighted to hear an update with Kentucky artist Lacy Hale talking about her 'No Hate in My Holler' screenprint and its continuing appeal. She also happens to be the illustrator for the narrator portraits in VOW's forthcoming oral history book *Beginning Again: Stories of Movement and Migration in Appalachia!*"

—Dao Tran,
Editorial Director



Suave
(2021, Futuro Studios)
Winner of the 2022 Pulitzer Prize
in Audio Reporting

"This gripping, seven-part podcast explores the justice system that sentences juveniles in the US to life in prison—all told through the story of one man, David Luis 'Suave' Gonzalez. Suave is a magnetic storyteller, and his unique, decades-long relationship with journalist Maria Hinojosa is a fascinating case study in the complex power dynamics and ethical implications between a reporter and their source. Once you start listening, you won't be able to stop."

—Ela Banerjee,
Community Partnership Manager



I Was a Teenage Exocolonist
(2022, Northway Games)

"A narrative video game about a teenager growing up in Earth's first exoplanetary colony. It explores themes of colonization, environmentalism, and fascism through the lens of childhood. A beautifully illustrated and surprisingly emotional game that has kept me returning to the world over and over."

—Kate Garrett,
Individual Giving Manager



Ways to Give

Help Voice of Witness create storytelling projects and resources that center marginalized voices in education, media, movements, and policymaking. We offer many ways for our community members to show their support.

Donate to a Campaign. Your tax-deductible gift provides general operating support for our book series, educational programs and resources, community partnerships, events, and other storytelling initiatives. Look out for our next end-of-year fundraising campaign this fall/winter and help us meet our goal.

Become a Monthly Donor. Monthly donors play a pivotal role in providing sustainability to our programs. Monthly giving is convenient and allows you to spread your contribution over time. Look out for updates to our monthly giving program in 2024.

Targeted Giving. If you're interested in helping us launch the Storyteller Initiative (see more on page 4), or would like to provide direct support to one of our programs, we can work with you to create a giving plan that aligns your interests with VOW's current funding priorities.

Employer Matching Gifts. Multiply your giving by participating in your employer's matching gift program. Many companies support mission-driven organizations such as VOW by matching their employees' giving. Not sure if your employer offers this benefit, or unsure how to take advantage of a matching gift program? Contact us and we'll guide you through the process.

Legacy Giving. Including Voice of Witness in your estate planning helps us ensure that we can continue serving our communities and supporting human rights well into the future.

Corporate Support. We offer tailored sponsorship packages for companies and their employees seeking to incorporate ethical storytelling practices into their work. We develop customized workshops that help amplify the voices of your constituents and promote empathy, active listening, and inclusion among staff.

Hire us. Could oral history storytelling support the work that you're doing? Through our consulting services, you can hire VOW to facilitate workshops, provide program or curricular support, or work with you to develop and guide in-depth, customized storytelling projects that advance your mission and goals.

Share your network. One of the quickest and most effective ways to expand our community of supporters is through you! Join our team of "champions" that helps spread the word to their networks about our work and asks for contributions to our end-of-year fundraising goal.

With Gratitude

Thank you to all of our partners who make our work possible. Our community of narrators, volunteers, advisors, funders, board, and staff and their generosity are essential to advancing VOW's mission to amplify unheard voices. We are grateful for everyone who supported us over the past year. (*This list reflects July 1, 2022–June 30, 2023.*)

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