

Listening to Hear

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I hear the cane before anything else, the soft, confident *thwack* against the door. Pulling the door open with the cane's crooked head, she wobbles into the classroom, locking eyes with me. She is bundled in a long, worn coat, a couple buttons missing — her scarf dangling and twisted beneath the tattered trench coat, knitted and knotted in greens and orange. A blue newsboy hat with yellow daisies sits atop her curls. She looks to be in her seventies, lines crease her face, red lipstick softening her demeanor.

“They told me there wouldn't be no pictures, dear. Good thing my mamma told me never leave the house with an empty face. But by that, she meant a smile!” She throws her head back in laughter as she unbuttons her coat, untangles her scarf, and removes her hat, the daisies swaying as if sharing in her jubilation.

We are in a small classroom in East Garfield Park on the West Side of Chicago. This multi-level building, the Breakthrough FamilyPlex, is a refuge and beacon of light in this little community. A block over you can see boarded up windows, where splintered plywood becomes urban shutters. Trash litters the street, with tumbleweeds of crushed metal and plastic bags. The complex functions as the youth Arts and Sciences Academy. Its gigantic size sets it apart from anything else in the neighborhood.

Ms. Maggie, with her wide smile and layered skirts, remembers the opening of Breakthrough and the neighborhood's dramatic transformation into a community. Before, the neighborhood was a food desert with little resources. After the build, Breakthrough became home to a food pantry, shelter, after-school programs, fitness center, and clinic. This is a place of hope and of stories. That day, Ms. Maggie graced me with her own.

East Garfield Park is known for having one of the highest rates of violence in Chicago. This community has not been able to shake off the ramifications of protests during the Civil Rights Movement. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the neighborhood was torn apart by its people. In the decades that followed, many have lost their lives to gun violence—including Ms. Maggie's parents.

From our first phone call, on a cold January afternoon, Ms. Maggie was eager to share her stories despite the trauma.

“I have stories. Gee, love, I do. Give me a listen.”

I booked her interview in five minutes, but she continued talking for another thirty. I was worried that she would exhaust herself and have nothing to share when the recorder was running.

I was wrong.

The mission of oral history is to document and protect stories that would otherwise be lost. These interviews focus on life histories and reflection. The beginning questions aim to contextualize the narrator's upbringing. By starting with childhood memories and places of refuge, interviewees realize that there are no “right” answers. They usually relax and let the experiences wash over them. Even so, some stories are more difficult to tell.

On the day of the interview, with her curls bouncing, Ms. Maggie revels in the attention, her hands as lively as her words. Aware of her audience and aware of herself, she walks through the decades, each a different chapter of her life. Growing up as a girl in a mostly white

neighborhood, she was defined by her skin and not by her actions. Despite the bullying and hardship, she set herself apart by committing her life to education as a means of challenging oppression. Later on, she would go on to start her own non-profit arts organization. Ms. Maggie empowered black children by teaching them the history of their ancestors, the history neglected in a mainstream education.

She created an outlet for representation and expression so these children could see themselves as worthy rather than worthless. From Nigerian dance classes to mural painting, poetry slams, beading, basket weaving, and book clubs, Ms. Maggie provided creative spaces that took kids off the streets. She was humble and selfless in all of her work, prioritizing the needs of others and their futures. In front of the recorder, she is empowered to reflect on her ambition and perseverance.

There is a little part in each of us that craves attention. We spend our entire lives negotiating what to say and what to keep to ourselves. We wonder if what we have to say has worth and if our audience cares. When an interviewee is invited to participate in an oral history project, this uncertainty falls away. Stories gain meaning in preservation and documentation. I often wonder what stories I would tell if the recorder was flipped. When listening to the stories of others, I become intoxicated. I am desperately grabbing onto the experiences, every word a new treasure. The rush is totally consuming, exhausting. When it's over, I find myself drained and envious, torn apart by regret and frustration.

Some people, like Ms. Maggie, submerge themselves in life and soak up experiences despite trauma and hardship – an *everything yes* mantra guiding every move. At any moment, they are ready to share stories of a lived life. Others, like me, struggle to let life take the reins, terrified of falling and straying, winding up bruised and battered. I soak up experiences via the Ms. Maggies of the world. I hope their stories will equip me with a curiosity so powerful I cannot help but jump and be okay if I fall.

After the interview, Ms. Maggie sits back, hands folded in her lap. I turn the recorder off, hands shaking. I collect the scattered papers in front of me, release forms and written biographies become one pile. My heart is beating too fast and I'm out of words. My stomach drops in the silence and I wonder if the high is worth the crash.

"You let me run my mouth, honey," Ms. Maggie says, aware of my trembling. I smile, weakly, and rise from my chair. I thank her for her time and walk her to the door.

In moments like these, oral history gains a new significance for me. Today we listen in order to respond, not to hear. In a world where silence is taboo and perceived as disinterest, oral history provides the space for the purest form of listening. Not only is oral history about filling in the gaps in history, it's about awakening us to the simple humanity of others. In these moments, I truly relish the time I spend asking questions and receiving genuine answers. It inspires me to slow down, revel in untold histories, and explore my own truth.