Building Capacity and Relevance

ENCOUNTERING Civil Religion

Human Remains in Museums Today

Folkloristic Perspectives and Public History

TECH LEAFLET: Ideas for New Revenue at History Organizations
WITHOUT OUR HISTORY ACCESSIBLE ONLINE, PEOPLE IN THE FUTURE CAN MAKE UP WHAT THEY WISH TO BE TRUE ABOUT THE PAST.

DR. KRISTEN GWINN-BECKER
HISTORIAN, DIGITAL STRATEGIST
FOUNDER, HISTORYIT

TRANSFORM AND EXPAND THE WAY YOUR HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS ARE VIEWED, ACCESSED AND UTILIZED. AND LET YOUR HISTORY INFORM THE FUTURE.

www.historyit.com
Building Capacity and Relevance: Grassroots Grant-Making and Racial Equity at the Michigan Humanities Council

By Robbe Charles DiPietro and Joseph Stanhope Cialdella
In the spring of 2014, the Michigan Humanities Council (MHC) embarked on a challenging, three-year journey to help organizations in our state examine difficult histories of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. We wanted to support organizations’ efforts to connect those histories to the present and to share and validate the experiences of communities across Michigan. In 2015 and 2016 the resultant program—“Heritage Grants: Exploring the History of All Michigan’s People” (hereafter referred to as the Heritage Grants Program)—provided grants of up to $25,000 and capacity-building support to fifty-four local history organizations to support the implementation of these kinds of projects. Across the state, the Heritage Grants Program established connections between history and present-day issues, between elders and youth, between public and academic audiences, and between old narratives and new stories. This effort also nurtured a network of new collaborations and partnerships dedicated to using the humanities and history to advance racial equity.

Foundation Partners
Contributing to projects at state and local history organizations has been one of the central ways MHC achieves its mission to foster a deeper understanding of the past, provide tools for stronger analysis of the present, and to support a more informed vision for the future. In the mid-2010s, MHC board and staff recognized the need to use our grant-making efforts to serve a more inclusive set of grantees and audiences across the state. We sought to ensure that the tools, insights, and resources of history and the humanities reached underserved groups and remained relevant to the challenges facing communities in our state.

In 2014, MHC received $1.7 million in funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to design and implement the Heritage Grants Program to accomplish this goal. The award was made as part of the foundation’s “America Healing” initiative, launched in 2010 as a strategy for advancing racial healing and equity through innovative programs. Over three years, the award enabled MHC to work with organizations to create novel public history projects that shared the stories of the diverse people and cultures in Michigan. The program worked to empower historically underrepresented and marginalized people in Michigan to tell their own stories, affirm their experiences and identities, and move towards a sense of healing.

Both the Kellogg Foundation and MHC recognized the difficulty of funding local, grassroots initiatives and providing direct support to very small nonprofits, and supporting their efforts to design and implement programs. Many such organizations lack the staff or expertise to navigate a foundation’s application process or to effectively manage the funds post-award—and Kellogg lacked the means and wherewithal to support them in that capacity. MHC helped bridge this gap to move the America Healing initiative forward in Michigan, identifying small, grassroots organizations and working with them to provide assistance in grant proposal preparation, evaluation, local projects selection, and subsequent administration of the local project grants. Indeed, the framework for completing this kind of work was already in place at MHC. But while MHC had done this kind of work before, this specific project required expertise that couldn’t be provided by our board.

Planning and Process
MHC forged partnerships with statewide organizations engaged in social justice and racial equity work to create an external advisory group with the expertise and experience required to assist with the early stages of the program’s development and to conduct outreach to historically marginalized and underrepresented groups. Advisory group members included the Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance, Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University, the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, and the United Tribes of Michigan, in addition to more traditional history organizations like the Kutsche Office of Local History at Grand Valley State University and the Historical Society of Michigan. The expertise of these advisors helped to create a program that could resonate with diverse groups across the state.

Advisors worked alongside MHC staff to develop the guidelines and criteria for selecting fundable projects. The goal was to provide a general framework around racial
equity and inclusion principles that applicants should follow, while remaining flexible enough to allow for applicants’ creativity to use the methods and approaches they believed would work best in their local communities. Advisory members also helped MHC reach community and neighborhood groups beyond MHC’s existing network. MHC staff held fourteen workshops and conducted outreach across the state, from metro Detroit to the town of Pickford in the Upper Peninsula, allowing MHC staff to personally connect with communities interested in the program. Staff tapped existing partners to secure workshop venues and engaged advisory group members to help advertise the workshops throughout their networks. A draft proposal period was also built into the application process, allowing grantees to submit their proposals for feedback from MHC staff. Staff also provided technical assistance in developing proposals throughout the application period, a central part of the capacity-building nature of the program. The process helped applicant organizations strengthen existing partnerships and develop new ones as they initiated new conversations about race. While some organizations relied on existing relationships, many indicated that they contacted new groups or stakeholders and engaged in new forms of outreach to broaden their relationships.¹

The Lenawee County Historical Society, for example, built new relationships with Latino individuals and families through an oral history and exhibit project that focused on comparative stories of immigration, discrimination, and overcoming barriers in both the Latino and German communities in this rural area. The project, which served two hundred people, allowed this group to share their stories of ethnic identity and see themselves represented in the community’s central historical space. “Growing up in Adrian, Michigan, in the ‘50s and ‘60s,” one participant shared, “there was a stigma attached to all of us Mexicans and I felt ashamed of who I was and where I came from and felt that I had to live it down. I couldn’t identify with or be proud of my heritage because we were always made to feel inferior because of our race and because of poverty.” The project, he continued, provided new perspective on personal identity and history and helped him “rediscover my roots, and has given me cause to take pride in my own accomplishments… I am proud to call myself Mexican American and can tell my children and grandchildren to be proud of who they are too.” By empowering groups whose stories are often untold to share in the making and interpreting of history, the Heritage Grants Program has helped to create a more complex and deeper understanding of Michigan’s past.

Examples from the Field

Roughly 45,000 individuals participated in projects funded by the Heritage Grants Program. They served on project teams, recorded oral histories, completed school-based projects, visited exhibits, and attended screenings, community dialogues, and other events. Grant projects helped new audiences process negative or challenging experiences, develop renewed understandings of self and community, increase coping and communications skills, forge new intergenerational and community connections, create a stronger voice, and connect the past to their lived experiences through history. Other projects helped more traditional audiences gain knowledge and understanding of the historical contributions of groups other than their own.

The final Heritage Grants Program projects took on a wide variety of formats. Generally, however, they fit into six broad categories: youth and school programs; oral histories; exhibits; documentaries and performances; preserving history; and community conversations.

In each of these categories, exemplary grants suggest some of the outcomes and promising practices for doing public humanities work through a racial equity lens.²

Youth and School Programs

One of the most powerful youth and school grants was “Anishnaabek Journey Toward Understanding,” a partnership between River Raisin National Battlefield Park, local educators, and representatives from Anishnaabek tribes. The program brought together tribes and educators to create a Native American history curriculum for local schools by visiting sites in Michigan central to Anishnaabek history. Teachers on the project reported that it changed their approach to teaching history, while tribal members described the process of telling their own story as “empowering,” “giving ownership to our voice,” and having a great level of “honesty.” A group of fifth-grade students who benefited from the changes to the curriculum also illustrated “a broad interest in social equity issues.” Teachers changed their approach to teaching history because of their participation.

The most successful projects in this category built on existing relationships and well-established programs and adapted them with new content. “HerStory,” a partnership between the Buckham Fine Arts project

George Bayard, Executive Director of the Grand Rapids African American Museum and Archives, interviews two women as part of the “Grandma’s Voice” project.
and the Genesee Valley Regional Center, a short-term juvenile detention facility in Flint, for example, enriched and expanded programming for girls. The workshops used lessons on notable women, many of whom had endured incarceration, as a starting point for participants to create their own writings or creative products. The grantees also took important steps to ensure a supportive, protected environment for youth as they worked on issues of race and class that affected their lives. They also empowered the youth to drive the programs and topics discussed. Across this category, youth came to a greater understanding of their identities and histories and learned to discuss these issues in productive ways. Adults who participated came to value the discussion of these experiences with youth.

**Oral Histories**

Oral history grants recruited community elders to record stories about what they witnessed, experienced, and contributed in building their communities. A project implemented by Latin Americans United for Progress in Holland, Michigan, recorded histories from Latino communities in an area better known for its Dutch heritage. As one participant recognized, “these stories have always been important but now, in our current political climate, they are even more important,” given recent efforts to enact policies that ban immigration from the Middle East and Latin America. A project in Detroit highlighted gaps in the school curriculum for youth too young to recall the events of the 1967 rebellion and worked to challenge the limited and biased interpretations of this event offered through mass media. By feeling empowered to change the narrative, members of communities that participated in these types of projects gained “a stronger and shared sense of identity and pride.” For audiences outside of the communities whose histories were told, oral histories provided a deeper understanding and respect for the experiences of those who were unlike themselves. These grants, unlike youth focused ones, were instrumental in starting or furthering community dialogues about race and were important early steps in broader community engagement efforts, as they were linked to exhibits and presentations that connected with more people. Powerful projects in this category tended to engage members of the featured community in all aspects of the project, focused on historical events that presented opportunities for positive and constructive community dialogue and learning, built upon existing partnerships, cultivated the support and involvement of various community stakeholders, involved those with prior experience conducting oral history interviews, and combined their interviews with exhibits and facilitated conversations.

**Exhibits**

At other sites, exhibits proved a useful tool for dispelling stereotypes. In Battle Creek, the Burma Center created a locally-travelling exhibit that told the story of local Burmese American residents. Members of the community who created the exhibit felt empowered, honored, and heard through the process of sharing their stories. Viewers of the exhibit “gained a better understanding of the Burmese in the community and their experiences and struggles to arrive, and saw the Burmese as people and not just refugees.”

“We wanted to support organizations’ efforts to connect those histories to the present and to share and validate the experiences of communities across Michigan.”

—Michigan Humanities Council
Preserving Histories

Similarly, the act of preserving stories had similar results. The Troy Historical Society worked with the Michigan branch of Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote-MI) to collect oral histories from immigrants to the Troy region who came as a result of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This enabled the organization to include a set of diverse communities that make up 20 percent of the city’s population as a part of the area’s history. Rather than focusing exclusively on a largely white generation of early “pioneers” to the area, the project enabled the historical society to become more inclusive and equitable. The oral histories will be a resource in and of themselves and will provide content for new exhibits and programs. As one participant described, “as a trans-racial adoptive parent, I was very pleased that this project allowed space for adoptees to tell their stories of immigration and working hard to fit into a new country. The parallels between first generation folks and adoptees are present, and without public discourse around that, adoptees are often left out of the conversation.”

Through another project, “Black Voices from Copper Country,” Michigan Technological University also used preservation of little known histories as a catalyst for discussing present-day racial equity issues. In addition to uncovering new stories of African Americans’ experiences in the remote Upper Peninsula during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, project staff worked with their campus’s Center for Diversity and Inclusion to create public programs and community conversations around racial equity, diversity, and inclusion on campus. They continued for a second year through supplemental funding that MHC made available to Heritage Grantees to host community conversations on topics related to their work.

Community Conversations

Through “Cultural Exchange Coldwater,” Tibbits Opera House also used the power of community conversations to share the stories of the Yemeni population in a rural western Michigan town—far removed from Dearborn, the state’s Arab American center—providing them a greater sense of belonging. Arab Americans, most of Yemeni heritage, are the largest minority population in this mostly white city of 10,000, yet their voices and perspectives were often marginalized in the area’s social and cultural life. Tibbits decided that an inclusive and welcoming approach to practicing public history could help alleviate divisions within the larger community.

The first phase of the Tibbits project involved building relationships and trust with the Arab American Society of Coldwater and expanding beyond typical program offerings. They partnered with the Arab American National Museum to develop presentations, workshops, and exhibits aimed at fostering community conversations. The project’s more than 400 participants, including city officials, health care workers, educators, and service club members, learned about the historical and cultural roots of Yemeni Americans in Coldwater. The second phase of the Tibbits project centered on an exhibit that told the story of Yemeni immigration to Coldwater and explored cultural life in the community through objects, images, and oral histories.

In each of these Heritage Grants Program projects, grantees made clear the relevance of history to contemporary issues. Organizations across Michigan used the value of history to lay the groundwork for strong, resilient communities by examining often difficult and challenging topics. Putting history into practice in this way helped public audiences and specific communities clarify misconceptions and reveal com-
plexities that are part of their daily lives. Together, projects funded by the HGP present a more comprehensive, inclusive, and diverse history of Michigan, using the humanities as a tool toward racial equity, healing, and dialogue.

Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Insights Gained

The culminating event of the Heritage Grants Program was a convening held in Lansing that brought together both cohorts of grantees to discuss their projects, reflect, and network. One grantee said, “I have realized our project isn’t simply oral history, but also has the potential for community conversations and long-term changes in attitudes and beliefs.” Another indicated that the convening provided a “sense of connectivity to other colleagues in Michigan working toward racial/ethnic understanding and changes in perceptions.” To share a sense of this collective impact, MHC created a website summarizing the work that took place throughout the program. However, participants at the convenings made it clear there was a desire among grantees to sustain and continue this work.

Significant project outcomes focused on the value of outreach and networking, building trust, and simply bringing together people addressing racial equity challenges. Importantly, participant creators had different experiences than participant observers in nearly all of the projects. Creators’ participation had the potential to affect their emotional well-being and sense of self. Observers’ participation, on the other hand, predominantly affected their perspectives of others. This initiative prioritized the “authentic” voice and encouraged the grantees to design and lead their projects using methods that they determined to be best suited to the sharing of their message. An important outcome was the building of networks and support groups for grantees as they took ownership of and developed confidence in their work while moving towards healing. This was especially true when working with small, grassroots organizations that were new to the development, implementation, and evaluation of grant projects.

As MHC moved into the final phase of our three-year project with the Kellogg Foundation, we saw additional opportunities for continued impact and capacity building by keeping our partners connected. There was great interest in leveraging the work of MHC towards racial equity and extending the significant momentum gained during implementation of the Heritage Grants Program, but this momentum became diminished without additional funding for the initiative to continue. Lack of sustainable funding is a significant limitation for integrating grassroots projects into the public history and humanities ecosystem across the state. Building a lasting infrastructure and commitment takes time. Some grantees became partners and advisors for other MHC programs, while others received continued support through MHC’s regular Humanities Grants.

The outcomes for grantee organizations and individuals still suggest steps toward lasting change. Many grantees reported new or strengthened partnerships with local communities, new audiences, and a heightened profile and stature in the community and profession. Grantees created new models and content for programming that will continue to inform their work. More importantly, the Heritage Grants Program suggests that there is ample space for humanities councils, funders, grassroots groups, and local history organizations to better serve their current and future constituents by working to advance racial equity through public history programming.

To see the fifty-four projects funded by the Heritage Grants Program, visit: www.michiganhumanities.org/heritage-grants-digital-portal.

Robbe Charles DiPietro is the former Associate Director and Director of Grant Programs for the Michigan Humanities Council. She was the Project Director for the Heritage Grants Program and primary liaison with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for the management of the related grant award. She currently is an independent consultant. Contact Robbe at rdipietro517@gmail.com.

Joseph Stanhope Cialdella is a former Program Officer for the Michigan Humanities Council, where his primary responsibility was overseeing day-to-day operations of the Heritage Grants Program. In this role, he worked with Robbe on program development, worked with applicants on their proposals, and planned program events. Currently he is a Program Manager at the University of Michigan, where he oversees the Program in Public Scholarship. Contact Joe at joescia@umich.edu.

1 Evaluation results and data throughout this essay are from the Final Evaluation Report Heritage Grants Program, compiled by Civic Research Services, Inc. and Synthesis Evaluation & Research, LLC, September 2017.

2 The authors would like to thank Nancy Hewat (Synthesis Evaluation & Research, LLC), Lisa Mareckini-Polk (Civic Research Services, Inc.), Carol Taggart, Shelly Kasprzycki, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for their work to support this project and article.