

Saluting Local Heroes

Collecting Community Members' Oral Histories: A *Save Our History*® How To Project Guide

The Millville Army Air Field Museum partnered with 65 8th and 9th grade students from Millville Memorial High School in Millville, New Jersey. Students interviewed pilots and crewmen who served at the Millville Army Air Field, along with other local World War II veterans. Using their interviews as source material, students created “Local Hero Trading Cards” featuring photos of the veterans from World War II, their hometowns, ranks, years served during the war, a brief description of service, and current pictures. Students edited their oral histories and sent them to the U.S. Library of Congress for inclusion in the Veteran’s History Project.



Students produced baseball cards containing images and stories from local veterans in Millville, NJ.

Project Description:

Students will record, gather, analyze and process information about local World War II war veterans (or other community elders) via recorded oral interviews.

Objective:

By exploring the memories and experiences of elder community members, students will gain an understanding of changes that have taken place over time, and learn that history can be found in a variety of places.

Time Required:

1-2 hours

Materials needed:

Interview questions, video camera and/or audio recorder, microphones, extra video and/or audio tape, batteries, veterans, or other community elders.

Project Guidelines:

Preparing for the Interview

1. Create a theme.

You could focus on World War II veterans, alumni from your school, retired employees from a local plant or company, or students’ elder family members.

2. Contact interview subjects.

Explain your project, invite them to participate, set up a time to interview them.

3. Develop a list of questions.

Avoid ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Start with general questions and then move on to specific questions. Try to elicit facts, feelings, stories and descriptions.

4. Practice!

Make sure students know how to use the equipment then perform practice interviews with classmates.

5. Get confirmation.

One day before the interview, confirm interviewer and interviewee’s attendance. Ask them to bring any pictures and or journal entries that will help them recall interesting, vital information.

Project Guidelines:

The Day of the Interview

1. Create a brief release form.

Clearly state the purpose of the oral history project. Have interviewees complete and sign the release.

- 2. Check your equipment.**
Make sure it is functioning and that extra video tapes and batteries are within reach.
- 3. Do a “run through.”**
Ask the subject a few questions before recording the official interview. This could help spark memories, and make the official interview more focused.
- 4. Start the interview.**
Clearly state your name, the subject’s name, the time, date and location of the interview.
- 5. Make eye contact.**
Listen clearly to his or her answers. Be careful not to ask a question that has already been answered.
- 6. Keep it short.**
Try to finish in 30-40 minutes. This can be a tiring process for your subject – and you!
- 7. Improvise.**
Feel free to deviate from the list of questions if the interviewee begins to speak about a particularly strong memory. Encourage them in a friendly manner to continue with their story.
- 8. Don’t push.**
If the interviewee has trouble remembering a certain topic do not push them, move on to the next question. They may wish to revisit a previous question later in the interview.
- 9. Do not interrupt!**
Even if the veteran strays from the question at hand, they may tumble across an unexpected memory that is priceless!

- 10. Say thank you.**
When the interview is finished, thank the veteran for their service to their country and for taking the time to share their memories. Clearly restate your name and the interviewee’s name once again, before you stop recording.
- 11. Keep in touch.**
Update the interviewee on the progress of your oral history project.

The Millville Army Air Field Museum preserves U.S. military aviation

history, including the recent Middle East conflict. Museum programs and tours focus on education about Millville’s vital role in aviation history and the history of the P-47 Thunderbolt. The museum is a federal nonprofit organization, which was founded in 1983, and incorporated by the State of New Jersey in 1988.

*By Robert Trivellini, Stephen Barbaccia and Stephen Wilchensky, Millville Memorial High School.
With Guy Robbins, Executive Director, Millville Army Air Field Museum.*



Students with a local veteran at the Millville Army Air Field. Photo credit: David Yellen