

The Challenges of Local Oral History

The Ryan White Project

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In its 2000 evaluation guidelines, the Oral History Association advised that “interviewers should be sensitive to the communities from which they have collected oral histories, taking care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes nor to bring undue notoriety to them.”¹ Yet a special dilemma arises when interviewers belong to the very community that they examine. Linda Shopes warns that “community-based oral history projects, often seeking to enhance feelings of local identity and pride, tend to side step more difficult and controversial aspects of a community’s history, as interviewer and narrator collude to present the community’s best face.”² Reconciling these concerns was one of a number of challenges that the Howard County Historical Society’s Oral History Committee confronted in 2010 when it launched,

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¹Oral History Association, “2000 Oral History Evaluation Guidelines,” <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/oral-history-evaluation-guidelines-revised-in-2000>. In 2009, the association adopted the revised “Principles for Oral History and Best Practice,” <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices>.

²Linda Shopes, “Why Are They Talking?” from “What is Oral History,” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral>.

with some apprehension, the Ryan White Oral History Project. The year marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of fourteen-year-old Ryan White's fight against the Western School Corporation's decision to ban him from attending middle school classes. The corporation acted after learning that Ryan, a hemophiliac, had acquired AIDS from repeated injections of Factor VIII, a clotting agent that at that point had not been screened for the HIV virus. In the months that followed, Ryan was restricted to home-bound education provided through a less-than-satisfactory phone hookup. Through appeals and court rulings, he ultimately returned to classes. By then, the city of Kokomo, Indiana, where he and his family resided, had become the center of a national controversy. Ryan and his family were subjected to harassment and shunning, and in 1987 they relocated to Cicero in Hamilton County, where they felt more welcome. Ryan died in April 1990, shortly before his scheduled graduation from Hamilton Heights High School. While he had achieved international status as an iconic figure in the struggle against AIDS and the fears and prejudices that epidemic had generated, the residents of Kokomo and Howard County found themselves vilified for their alleged ignorance, bigotry, and heartlessness.

Some twenty years later, the Ryan White story remained a sensitive issue in Howard County, with many still bitter or at least disturbed by what they felt to be an unfair portrayal of their community. Indeed the story, like most historical events, was a complex one to which contemporary media coverage or any single retrospective account could not do full justice. Yet one strength of oral history is that it provides an opportunity for multiple accounts and voices. As many scholars have pointed out, oral history accounts are problematic: they are inherently subjective and prone to be factually inaccurate for a variety of reasons ranging from faulty memory to deliberate deception. Bruce Jackson has suggested that how a story is told depends not so much on what actually occurred in the past, but on what we know about the world now; such accounts might more properly be labeled "significant folklore texts" rather than oral histories.³ Over the past few decades, scholars have explored the intricacies of the "construction of memory." According to Alessandro Portelli, a foremost scholar in the field, memory is not a passive depository but an active process of creating meanings. Thus, oral history tells us less about events than about their meanings.⁴

³John Welford, review of *The Story is True: The Art and Meaning of Telling Stories*, by Bruce Jackson, *Oral History Review* 37 (Winter/Spring 2010), 155-57.

⁴Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York, 1998), 63-74.

Rightly or wrongly, the Oral History Committee did not dwell on these important theoretical questions, which involved the interpretation of results rather than the immediate practical task of collecting interviews in a community that might not be prepared to reexamine an event that remained painful for so many. The committee had been organized in 2008, shortly after my retirement as Professor of History at Indiana University Kokomo, and our first project had dealt with the rather troubled history of the local Continental Steel Corporation.⁵ My previous involvement in oral history had largely been limited to my research on the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in north-central Indiana during the 1920s. This work involved its own challenges, but it was quite different from directing a local history project for a county historical society funded in part by taxpayers. The committee had to be mindful of the public relations aspects of the project without undermining its goals. Secondly, as a committee we were engaged in a collaborative effort, with all the benefits and limitations this entailed. While our different points of view enhanced the project, we ultimately had to reach some kind of consensus without compromising the integrity of our work.

When I began my research on the Klan in the early 1980s, I had no institutional review board (IRB) to contend with and followed my own sense of what was professionally and ethically appropriate. By the 1990s, universities began to insist that oral history fell under the domain of IRBs. While there has been a good deal of debate regarding how suitable IRB supervision is for the field of oral history, in my own work I found it generally helpful, if at times problematic, to have some external guidance.⁶

In conducting oral histories on behalf of the Howard County Historical Society, the committee was free from restraints imposed by an IRB, although it consulted guidelines such as those developed by the Oral

⁵The Continental Steel Corporation had been an economic mainstay and key employer since its founding in 1927. By the 1960s and 1970s, it was beset by numerous problems including dangerous working conditions, labor strife, foreign competition, corrupt practices under which employees lost much of their pensions, and a CEO who would wind up in prison. In the 1980s, the company twice filed for bankruptcy; in February 1986, the company shut down its operation. One major legacy was an Environmental Protection Agency/Indiana Department of Environmental Management Superfund toxic waste site.

⁶Erin Jessee, review of *Ethical Imperialism: Institutional Review Boards and the Social Sciences, 1965-2009*, by Zachary M. Schrag, *Oral History Review* 38 (Winter/Spring 2011), 228-30; Molly Rosner, review of *Doing Oral History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History That Talks Back*, Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano, eds., *Oral History Review* 40 (Winter/Spring 2013), 215, suggests that IRBs have begun to protect public institutions rather than individuals.

History Association. In a recent article, OHA president Mary Larson observed:

The discussion of ethical considerations within oral history can be tidily summarized by paraphrasing a line from a recent pirate movie franchise: In life there are only two things that matter—what a man *can* do and what a man *will* do. This reflects the fact that, overall, the ethical topics of conversation in oral history tend to be divided into two main categories—legislated (what one *can* do) and voluntary (what one *will* do). While the former are enforced through the oversight of Institutional Review Boards in the U.S. and other countries and through restrictions set by legally binding documents, the latter are exercised in response to oral historians' respect and concern for their narrators. While these two facets are not exclusive of each other, they reflect the fact that the methodology's ethical considerations are driven both by legalities and by individual consciences.⁷

Larson points out that the ethical concerns of oral history tend to be situational—increasingly, they arise from the particular contextual issues and complexities posed by the development of new digital technologies.⁸ Thus, as the committee waded into the White project, it not only had to familiarize itself with established guidelines and procedures, but also had to deal with happenstance. Moreover it became clear, as Lenore Layman put it, that institutional guidelines “cannot replace individual ethical judgment.”⁹

The committee planned for a year before we launched into the White interviews. “It is imperative,” Brooke Bryan has advised, “to invest in the planning stage. . . . A project that lacks a solid foundation is a project destined to create more problems than it seeks to explore.”¹⁰ When the committee decided in early 2010 to embark on the Ryan White project,

⁷Mary Larson, “Steering Clear of the Rocks: A Look at the Current State of Oral History Ethics in the Digital Age,” *Oral History Review* 40 (Winter/Spring 2013), 36-37.

⁸Larson, “Steering Clear of the Rocks,” 42.

⁹Lenore Layman, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews,” *Oral History Review* 36 (Summer/Fall 2009), 225-26.

¹⁰Brooke Bryan, “A Closer Look at Community Partnerships,” *Oral History Review* 40 (Winter/Spring 2013), 81.

it recognized the delicate task of dealing with a subject that many in the community might prefer to forget. National and international coverage of the story had focused on the mistreatment of Ryan and his family, often suggesting that backwardness, ignorance, prejudice, and hatred had lain at the root of the original decision to bar Ryan from attending classes. A 1989 television docudrama *The Ryan White Story* had portrayed the community in what many considered was a demeaning, slanted manner. Angry letters arrived at the *Kokomo Tribune*, Western School, and the mayor's office; one proclaimed: "Kokomo now stands, for the whole world to see, as a symbol of bigotry, hatred, narrow-mindedness and ignorance."¹¹ A 1988 cover story in *People* magazine proclaimed: "If responding to AIDS has become one of the litmus tests of human decency, many in Kokomo failed it badly."¹²

The committee nonetheless felt it important to pursue the topic. Twenty-five years had already lapsed, and we felt we could not afford to wait much longer. Potential interviewees had possessed considerable time to reflect on what had happened. Oral history could provide a variety of perspectives on complexities that media coverage, often focusing on the sensational, had overlooked: for example, the media had often ignored the support provided to the Whites by the *Kokomo Tribune*, local organizations, and concerned individuals. Another interesting and perhaps ironic aspect of the story is that the Western School Corporation had been forced by circumstances to become a pioneer in developing and implementing the "universal precautions" needed to minimize the risk of spreading AIDS.¹³ We did not view the project as an effort to exonerate the community; the ugly incidents that had taken place were well documented, but the story also contained many dimensions. While it is tempting to think in terms of a community's "collective memory," a project such as ours dealt with *collected*, and often competing, memories.¹⁴

The committee, consisting of historical society staff and trustees, was fortunate to have members coming from different backgrounds and

¹¹Susan Sandburg, letter to the editor, *Kokomo Tribune*, January 20, 1989, p. 6.

¹²"The Quiet Victories of Ryan White," *People*, April 30, 1988, pp. 89-91. The school corporation was also able to work within the growing evidence that HIV/AIDS was not as communicable as parents and others had feared.

¹³Interview of Bev Ashcraft by Judy Lausch, January 21, 2011, transcript pp. 17-19, and telephone interview of Jeri Malone by Judy Lausch, February 9, 2011, transcript pp. 8-12, 17-18, 20-22, 25, Ryan White Oral History Project, Archives, Howard County Historical Society, Kokomo, Indiana.

¹⁴Edward T. Linenthal, review of *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America*, by Cynthia Carr, *Indiana Magazine of History* 103 (March 2007), 104.

perspectives. Kelly Karickhoff, who was then executive director of the museum, was a native of Kokomo who had been an Indiana University Bloomington undergraduate when the White controversy erupted. Stew Lauterbach, museum curator, was born and raised in West Lafayette, Indiana. He was a graduate student at IU Bloomington in the mid-1980s, and moved on to take museum positions in South Dakota and later Texas, before assuming his position in Howard County in 2001. Anxious to keep abreast of what was happening in his native state, he had followed the Ryan White story while in South Dakota. Bonnie Van Kley, curator of archives, had been a Kokomo housewife with young children who kept abreast of the story as it was reported in the local press. Cindy Morr, the curatorial assistant who transcribed the interviews and maintained the project files, had resided in Fort Wayne at the time of the White controversy but came to appreciate, while working on the project, the strong local passions generated by the controversy.

The project's interviewers included Judy Lausch, Diane Knight, and myself. Lausch had previous experience in oral history, having taken part in the Continental Steel project and having conducted several other interviews for the historical society, some of which had touched on the White case. Judy's professional background in nursing proved very advantageous. She moved to Kokomo from Fort Worth, Texas, in 1979. At the time that Ryan White was seeking admission to Western Schools, she was Assistant Professor of Nursing at IU Kokomo. Although she read press accounts at the time, she reflected more deeply on what had happened after she began teaching a course on community health. She later worked for fifteen years as a public health nurse at the Howard County Health Department, where she was responsible for investigating communicable diseases and headed the HIV Clinic. Lausch came to know and work with many of the health professionals who were involved in the Ryan White case. Her compassion for Ryan and his family was balanced by empathy with Western parents—during the White controversy her own young son was just entering school.

Diane Knight grew up on a farm in eastern Howard County, and lived most of her life in the county. Her son was in Ryan's grade at Western School, and she was the PTO president for Western School Corporation's primary, elementary, and middle schools. Her firsthand experience in the school district as well as contacts with parents, teachers, and school officials would prove extremely useful.

At the time of the White controversy I had been a resident of Kokomo for nearly fifteen years, having arrived from an eastern graduate school to

take a position teaching American history at IU Kokomo. I followed the news accounts of the White controversy, observed local reactions, and, concerned by what was occurring, gave a presentation on the subject to a Kokomo church group. As a social and cultural historian, I had a professional interest in what I had witnessed.

During one of the Oral History Committee's early meetings, Diane Knight suggested that the committee draw up a formal mission statement that it could present to the society's board of trustees, to prospective interviewees, and to the community as a whole so that they might understand the project's goals. After a good amount of deliberation and several revisions, in May 2010 we came up with the following:

Our mission is to collect, preserve and share interviews that reflect diverse community perspectives on a painful, controversial issue which over the years has received intense local, national and international attention. The Ryan White story constitutes an important, unique part of Howard County's history. The project's objective is to examine this event's impact, both positive and negative, on the county, and to illustrate that history must be understood in terms of its inevitable complexities and nuances.¹⁵

The committee presented this mission statement to the board, together with a verbal explanation of our goal to complete approximately twenty interviews within the period of a year. Despite a few expressions of discomfort about reopening old wounds, the board, recognizing the project's historic importance, gave its endorsement and encouragement. Of course, it remained questionable as to whether the project would "foster a sense of community," as the society's mission statement declared. "Remembrance," Edward Linenthal has observed, "can tear a community apart as well as help it come together."¹⁶

The committee gave particular attention to our selection of those to be interviewed. Each interview would require hours of work on the part of the interviewer and the transcriber, as well as the curator and

¹⁵"Mission of the Howard County Historical Society's Ryan White Oral History Project," May 3, 2010, in "Ryan White Oral History Project" research drawer, Howard County Historical Museum, Kokomo, Indiana.

¹⁶Linenthal, review of *Our Town*, 104.

archivist. The project's mission statement gave us some guidance—the goal was a balance of different perspectives and viewpoints. Yet given the dozens of possible interviewees, even this task required considerable research and numerous meetings. After several months, the committee came up with a tentative list of twenty potential interviewees. Some could not be reached, and several declined. Ryan's former Western classmates were particularly reluctant to take part, and Jeanne White-Ginder, Ryan's mother, did not respond initially to our requests. We began interviews in the fall of 2011, and by the next fall we had completed some twenty transcribed interviews. Although the sample was relatively small and important testimonies were omitted, the committee had, at least, succeeded in obtaining diverse perspectives that would illustrate the controversy's complexities.

One key figure had died in 2008: J. O. Smith, the superintendent of Western School Corporation, with the backing of the school board, had made the critical decision in late July 1985 not to permit Ryan to attend classes. We were, however, still able to interview other important subjects. Dan Carter, then president of the Western School Board and a teacher at another county high school, remained a steadfast defender of Smith's decision. Ron Colby, who had been principal of the Western Middle School where Ryan had been enrolled, had originally backed the decision but after research and consultations came to accept the inevitability of Ryan's return, and made efforts to prepare for this. Bill Norwald, as Dean of Boys at the Western High School where Ryan would continue his studies, had developed a close working relationship with Ryan and his mother. Paula Adair, president of the teachers union, explained why the majority of teachers had decided to support the board's policy. Fran Sampsel Hardin, Ryan's seventh-grade science instructor, had opposed the policy and did her best to implement his homebound education. Beverly Ashcroft, Western School Corporation's nurse, provided a detailed discussion of the innovative steps taken at the school to develop spill kits and other "universal precaution" measures to safeguard the health of Ryan and the other students when he returned to classes. Jeri Malone, public health nurse at the Howard County Health Department, described how she assisted in the development of such measures for Western and other organizations, and detailed her efforts at AIDS education. Dr. Alan Adler, the Howard County health officer who had signed the medical certificate allowing Ryan's return to classes, outlined the pressures under which he operated. Dr. Donald Fields, Ryan's pediatrician, explained how little the local medical community knew about AIDS at that time.

Mitzie Johnson, a leader of the Concerned Citizens and Parents of Children Attending Western School Corporation, which opposed Ryan's return to classes, talked about her involvement. David Rosselot, a local attorney who assisted in the organization's efforts, discussed his role and provided an emotional account of his decision to attend Ryan's funeral. Rita Bagby, a Western mother and neighbor of the Whites, reported how she had encouraged her children to continue attending school during the controversy, despite her appreciation of other parents' fears. Chanel Kerbrle, a Western student sympathetic towards Ryan, recalled her father's refusal to sign the petition favoring Ryan's exclusion as well as her own brief encounter with Ryan. Wanda Bilodeau, a neighbor whose brother Heath was one of Ryan's best friends, described her role as Ryan's protector at Western and vividly depicted the abuse he endured. She also spoke of the Western students who supported Ryan and signed a counter-petition in his behalf. Arletta Reith, Jeanne White's co-worker at Delco, related how she befriended the family and sought to raise funds to assist them.

Harold Williams and Ray Probasco, pastors at the Methodist church that the Whites attended, provided their perspectives on the congregation's responses to the family (who had reported that they had been subject to a good deal of shunning). Stephen Daily, then Kokomo's mayor, acknowledged his anguish over the media's harsh criticism of the community; Reverend Ruth Lawson, president of the Kokomo Ministerial Association, gave insight on the proposals made by a group called together by the mayor to counter these attacks. Ken Ferries recounted his frustrations as Kokomo's city attorney, supportive of Ryan's efforts to attend classes in the neighboring Western School District, yet angered by the attacks on his city, which was powerless to reverse the Western decision. Cheryl Genovese, who taught forensics at Kokomo High School, discussed the video produced by her students in answer to the community's negative portrayal in *The Ryan White Story*.

A few interviewees had needed a bit of persuasion to participate in the project, and all were given the opportunity to review the completed transcripts to make spelling, factual, and stylistic corrections. In the few cases where interviewees felt ill at ease with the results, we made some adjustments without compromising the essence of their statements. One interviewee made fairly extensive changes, making some statements appear less tentative than they had been in the oral interview. The notes on this particular interview (which are made available to transcript readers) indicate that alterations had been made. Oral historians have debated extensively as to whether the recording or the transcript should be considered

the primary source in oral history, and whether researchers should take the extra time involved in listening to the original recording.¹⁷ In the case mentioned above, researchers would be well advised to access the recording. Indeed, anyone serious about deeply understanding the controversy's emotional impact on the community should listen to as many recorded accounts as possible, since the tone of the remarks may be more revealing than the actual content. Painstaking transcribers might attempt to convey the tone in the written record, but their particular interpretation might not correspond with the researcher's own judgment.

The committee followed the usual policy of not editing the recording in any way. Yet a "happenstance" situation arose in the midst of one interview, when the narrator covered the microphone with a hand, whispering that the following comments were not intended to be shared with the general public. The review of the recording revealed that these remarks were still audible. The committee deliberated and agreed that it was not appropriate to include the rather sensitive comment (which was, in any case, not directly relevant to the main focus of the project) in the transcript, but questioned whether it was permissible to tamper with the recording in any way. We contacted outside consultants and considered their advice; after some debate and with one vigorous dissent, we decided that the material in question (slightly over one minute in length) would be erased from all public copies of the recording, and that the original unedited copy would be kept under lock and key. We duly indicated in the notes for the interview that the transcript and recording available to patrons had been edited to remove a brief passage.¹⁸

With interviews complete, we faced the question of how to present the project to the community and to the public at large. The historical society's quarterly, *Footprints*, publicized the project with photographs, descriptions of those we interviewed, and an article composed by Judy Lausch. The local newspapers reported on our work, and eventually committee members gave community presentations for selected organizations that included Indiana University Kokomo, two Rotary groups, and a church. Members also gave a few presentations in other Indiana communities. Audiences responded favorably, but the historical society hesitated to sponsor an open meeting in Kokomo, despite the considerable success of a similar public event that had dealt with the Continental Steel project.

¹⁷Steve Cohen, "Shifting Questions: New Paradigms for Oral History in a Digital World," *Oral History Review* 40 (Winter/Spring 2013), 154-67.

¹⁸Nancy MacKay, *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2007), 39.

The committee had already encountered comments revealing some lingering bitterness and we hesitated to subject interviewees to possible angry outbursts. Following a December 2010 *Kokomo Tribune* article announcing the project launch, the newspaper's Facebook page displayed a broad spectrum of comments:

About time!

I'm sure it won't tell about running him [Ryan] out of town, making the kid into a "boogie man"!!!!

The same would have happened in ANY MIDWESTERN town at that time. No one knew about AIDS.

Kokomo got the shaft in the media.

The backwoods mentality that consumes that town set in motion the chain of events that, in my opinion, still haunt Kokomo to this day.

I had no idea anyone from Kokomo was behind this... call me stupid but I thought the problem was with Western Schools in "Russiaville" NOT KOKOMO???

Some commenters cast aspersions on Ryan's mother, accusing her of exploiting the issue for self-gain, while others defended her; others offered conflicting observations on the old rumors that had circulated in the community that Ryan was rude or had spat at people. One person wrote that "the comments on here are pretty sad...here we are, years and years later, still blathering on as if we're not a bit more grown up now and can talk rationally." Others expressed hope that through this project "the entire story" might be told.¹⁹ The committee agreed that as an alternative to an open meeting, I would write an article on the project. Ray Boomhower, editor of the Indiana Historical Society's (IHS) *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, was very receptive, and with considerable assistance from the committee members, I began work on the article.

Preparing the article was a challenge. Writing about a controversial local issue, I strived to maintain a neutral public stance so as not to undercut those who had agreed to be interviewed. Rather than editorializing or providing critical analyses of the interviews, the article presented excerpts

¹⁹Facebook posts, December 28, 2010 in response to *Kokomo Tribune* article, December 28, 2010. Copy in "Taken from a Facebook page on December 28, 2010," file in the "Ryan White Oral History Project" Research Drawer, Howard County Historical Museum.

from five interviews that together demonstrated the complexities that confronted the community and illustrated some of the personal dilemmas and anguish generated by the controversy. I tried to protect the interests of those who had consented to be interviewed—the committee did not wish to embarrass or in any way demean them. We sought to preserve not only the integrity of this particular project, but also our ability to gain public cooperation for any future projects.

I wrote at least ten drafts of the article (one of which was over 120 typed pages!) and shared several with the committee for their feedback. After a few meetings to select the featured interviews, we chose Bev Ashcroft, Wanda Bilodeau, Ken Ferries, Fran Sampsel Hardin, and David Rosselot. The article also briefly acknowledged by name the other participants and their perspectives.

The first draft presented to the committee began with quotations from incendiary letters sent to local officials and the *Kokomo Tribune*, viciously attacking the community for its treatment of Ryan. One writer hoped that residents might “all die and rot in severe pain for as long as you survive in this world, and may God above never have mercy on your souls and send you all to Hell to burn.”²⁰ Some committee members were jarred by such remarks, but all agreed that this introduction would capture readers’ attention and convey the challenges inherent in the project. It remained in the final version, now whittled down to twenty-five pages, that I submitted to *Traces* in March 2012.

If community local history projects risk whitewashing difficult issues, as Linda Shopes warned, individuals working on behalf of a locally supported historical organization cannot be entirely oblivious to local sensitivities. The challenge of establishing a balance between political realities and professional responsibilities continued during the pre-publication process. *Traces* editors recommended further abridgement as well as the title “Beacon of Hope.” These words came from a description of Ryan that had appeared in an early draft but had been omitted in the revised version. More significantly, the title was not descriptive of the scope and intent of the article, and we chose the more fitting “Ryan White and Kokomo, Indiana: A City Remembers.”

The historical society retained full legal rights over the interviews, and researchers were free to make use of them, but before the article went to press, we sent letters to each of the five interviewees who were going

²⁰Allen Safianow, “Ryan White and Kokomo, Indiana: A City Remembers,” *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 25 (Winter 2013), 14.

to be extensively quoted, asking them if they felt misrepresented by the selected quotations or the context in which they were placed. The only replies we received were a grammatical suggestion and a correction regarding a narrator's employment situation. Once the article was published in January 2013, we received some favorable response from the interviewees, and only one objection from someone who believed that the Whites had misrepresented the treatment they had received from a particular organization. That latter person requested that we recall the article and make changes to it—which of course we couldn't do. The article had indicated that people held different points of view on the matter at hand, but that inevitable space limitations kept us from spelling out these differences. Both the committee and *Traces'* editors were reluctant to burden the article with "he said, she said" debates. Such limitations present a quandary, as the article itself acknowledges: selected excerpts

cannot do full justice to the sincere efforts of each speaker to explore a difficult and uncomfortable subject. None tells the whole story of course, but when you have the opportunity to listen to or read a variety of accounts, to see where there is agreement, to discover where there are contradictions, you get the sense that history cannot be reduced to one narrative, one version, and that many voices need to be heard.²¹

The article's conclusion included information on how readers might access the full interviews.

The *Traces* article also provided an opportunity to display images of some materials that the historical society had obtained as a result of the oral history project. We had invited interviewees to bring documents, letters, photographs, and mementos; in many cases these (or copies) were donated to the museum's collection. The article featured personal photographs, Dr. Adler's authorization for Ryan's return to classes, a draft of Western guidelines for dealing with AIDS students, and a handwritten essay in which Ryan praised his mother as "the greatest person in the world."

The White project attracted local, state, national, and even international attention. In late 2011, the British Broadcasting Corporation asked the historical society to recommend a suitable interviewee for a World AIDS Day broadcast that December. After receiving several suggestions,

²¹Ibid., 25.

the producers selected Wanda Bilodeau, who provided a heartbreaking remembrance of Ryan. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation featured an excellent program on the project that seemed to grasp our intent. In contrast, Indiana Public Radio's coverage appeared to suggest that the historical society was trying to hide the project because they had stored the transcripts in acid-free folders and acid-free boxes (standard operating procedure) rather than placing them on public display, where visitors could freely view them. This broadcast, as well as a National Public Radio "All Things Considered" program that developed from it, focused on the abusive treatment that the Whites had confronted—certainly an important part of the story and something emphasized in most contemporary media coverage. But it ignored the project's stated goal of providing a more nuanced, broader picture that extended beyond the negative coverage. Nonetheless, the Howard County Historical Society was overjoyed when, in December 2012, it received the Indiana Historical Society's Indiana History Outstanding Event or Project Award for the White project. In its press release, the IHS noted that the project "not only sheds light on a unique event in Howard County and Indiana's history but also helps illuminate a subject that remains of vital global interest."²² In 2013, the *Traces* piece received the IHS Jacob P. Dunn Award as that publication's outstanding article of the year.

The Ryan White Oral History Project, upon reflection, enjoyed many advantages: financial assistance from a local community grant; strong commitment from the historical society's board of directors and staff, who went well beyond their job descriptions in assisting the effort; the dedication of the volunteer interviewers; the willingness of community members to speak for the record about a difficult and often uncomfortable subject and, in some cases, to contribute relevant items to our collection. Indeed, the project generated a certain synergy that benefited the historical society in unanticipated ways. We attracted media recognition and garnished awards for our efforts. We had the special benefit (and burden) of dealing with a subject that, given Ryan White's prominence, was likely to draw attention that extended well beyond Howard County. Moreover, the topic deserved special scrutiny—1985 had proved a critical year in

²²Press release, Indiana Historical Society, "Howard County Historical Society Wins IHS's 2012 Indiana History Outstanding Project Award," November 19, 2012; BBC World Service, "Witness: Ryan White," recording at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p001skfh; "Oral History Finds Kokomo AIDS Controversy Is Not History," at <http://indianapublicmedia.org/news/oral-history-finds-aids-controversy-alive-kokomo-44245/>; "In Teen AIDS Activist's Hometown, Old Tensions Remain," at <http://www.nrp.org/2013/03/25/174649756/in-teen-aids-activists-hometown-old-tensions-remain>.

the understanding of AIDS and its transmission. The medical community was just coming to the conclusion that the disease could not be spread as easily as many feared, and the public was coming to terms, sometimes inadequately, with the growing evidence. Howard County was hardly alone in dealing with the issue of AIDS in schools in a less than exemplary fashion. Arcadia, Florida, witnessed the torching of the former home of three young hemophiliacs whose parents took legal action to get their sons back into school; the *New York Times* labeled reaction by Queens residents to the revelation that an unidentified student with AIDS was attending a local school as “uninformed hysteria.” Other communities like Cicero, Indiana (which had the benefit of witnessing the tribulations of its neighboring community) and Swansea, Massachusetts, responded in a more accepting manner.²³

The Ryan White project had its shortcomings and limitations. It would have benefited from more interviewers—attracting and retaining volunteers is always an uphill struggle for organizations such as ours, particularly in endeavors that consume a good deal of time. We might have interviewed many other persons. Early in the project, the committee toyed with the idea of focusing especially on Ryan’s former classmates at Western, but perhaps understandably they were reluctant to participate. The committee might have given more consideration to methodology, but it was difficult to find the time even to discuss basic mechanics. We never developed a uniform policy concerning how much interviewees should be pressed on delicate matters, and each interviewer had considerable autonomy in formulating questions. Such issues with the interview process were compounded by the fact that committee members often knew these individuals personally and sometimes had to do a bit of persuading before they agreed to an interview. My own initial thoughts on this matter were that local oral history is not synonymous with investigative journalism, and that narrators should be free to present their own stories without excessive probing from the interviewer. However, it seemed fair to ask follow-up questions for clarification, to tactfully correct basic factual errors, to ask if the narrator had any second thoughts after the passage of so much time, and to present alternative points of view for the narrator’s response. Oral historians do not hold a clear consensus on this matter. Linda Shopes, for example, argues on behalf of challenging contradictions

²³David L. Kirp et al., *Learning by Heart: AIDS and Schoolchildren in America’s Communities* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1989), 1-2, 94-132, quotation p. 114.

in the narrator's account and asking the "hard questions."²⁴ Some experts reject the idea that interviewers are or should be neutral parties.²⁵ Others maintain that interviewers reach a point where they should be respectful of the narrator's "reticence" and that excessive prodding raises an ethical issue.²⁶ In any case, scholars recognize that what a narrator does not say is often as important as what is said.²⁷

Committee members did not spend much time reflecting on how our personal associations with the interviewees or our public personas in the community would affect our results, but these issues pose a particular dilemma in local history, especially in smaller towns and cities. Shopes remarks that the interviewer's social identity, and any prior relationship with the interviewee, might shape the narrator's response.²⁸ We recognized this implicitly and accepted the situation as inevitable. Alternatively, we might have assigned interviewees to individuals whom they did not know, but in a number of cases personal contacts proved essential in getting people to agree to be interviewed. Finally, such prior relationships between interviewer and narrator might lead to more candid responses—occasionally so candid that they might not be entirely appropriate for public circulation. In my research on the Ku Klux Klan, I understood that my position as an academic with a rather "foreign" sounding name could influence the candor of my respondents, and similar biases probably operated in this project.²⁹ Beyond this, the sensationalism surrounding the White story might sway interviewees to be extremely cautious in what they said for the public record.

In retrospect, the interviewers might have asked more consistently during the interviews how their narrators felt about being queried on the subject of Ryan White, and what views they held about the project itself. Both issues came up occasionally, but asking the participants directly for their thoughts would have shed additional light on the meaning of the White controversy for Howard County residents two-and-a-half decades later.

²⁴Shopes, "What is Oral History," in "Making Sense of Oral History."

²⁵For further discussion, see Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2015), 11-13.

²⁶Layman, "Reticence in Oral History Interviews," 226.

²⁷Shopes, "What Are They Talking About?" in "Making Sense of Oral History"; Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 69-73.

²⁸Shopes, "Who is the Interviewer?" in "Making Sense of Oral History."

²⁹Kathleen M. Blee discusses how her identity as a white Protestant influenced the responses of her interviewees in Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of American History* 80 (September 1993), 596-606.

The stated mission of the White interviews was to provide a fuller, more nuanced understanding of what occurred in Howard County when Ryan challenged Western School Corporation, and that goal was at least partially accomplished. More problematic is the degree to which the public and researchers will avail themselves of this resource. Many valuable local oral accounts are available but never consulted. Ruth Reichard examined the White collection for her Indiana University Bloomington dissertation; Nelson Price utilized the material to prepare his recent book, *The Quiet Hero: A Life of Ryan White*.³⁰ Will future researchers who access the accounts consider the material as a whole, or will they simply “cherry-pick,” looking for statements that confirm their existing opinions, as occurred in the NPR broadcast?

When we began our work in 2010, some welcomed the Ryan White project as an opportunity to “heal” the community. Unfortunately, communities can be further divided as they seek, in one way or another, to commemorate a divisive event. Cynthia Carr, in her examination of the notorious 1930 Marion, Indiana, lynching of two young African American men, vividly describes the bitter disputes that arose when well-meaning local ministers proposed erecting a monument or plaque at the courthouse where the incident had taken place.³¹ Referring to the horrific aftermaths of the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attacks, Edward Linenthal has remarked on the inapplicability of “debased terms from the rhetoric of pop-psychology: ‘closure’ and ‘healing process,’” adding that it is “unrealistic to expect memorial processes to proceed smoothly without rancor.”³² At the same time, he maintains that, despite all the controversies and arguments that arose over the design and construction of the Oklahoma City memorial, the process in the end proved to be inclusive and constructive.³³ The members of our oral history committee, given the diverse local reactions to our project, were somewhat skeptical that the White project would in itself bring immediate heal-

³⁰Ruth Reichard, “Blood and Steel: Ryan White and the City of Kokomo, Indiana,” Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University Bloomington, 2015; Nelson Price, *The Quiet Hero: A Life of Ryan White* (Indianapolis, Ind., 2015), xi.

³¹Cynthia Carr, *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America* (New York, 2006), 455-62.

³²Edward Linenthal, “The Predicament of Aftermath: 19 April 1995 and 11 September 2001,” *OAH Newsletter*, 29 no. 4 (November 2001), 1.

³³Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (New York, 2001), 228-35.

ing or closure, but hoped that the results might contribute to a broader understanding of the event.

At the start of the interview stage, the committee had invited Ryan's mother, Jeanne White-Ginder, to participate.³⁴ We also asked intermediaries to contact her, believing that the story would be sorely incomplete without her testimony. Unsurprisingly, she did not initially respond. During the controversy, she had received harsh local criticism for allegedly manipulating the situation and Ryan for her own advantage; scurrilous stories had circulated that her own behavior was the source of Ryan's AIDS. For some locals, she was a more convenient target for their anger and frustration than a dying thirteen-year-old boy.³⁵ Moreover, Jeanne already had access to many other platforms where she could tell her story, including her book *Weeding out the Tears*, without the intervention of a Kokomo-based organization.³⁶ Her own account had become, in many respects, the dominant narrative, nationally if not locally, and our project would inevitably present alternative or conflicting narratives (which could be misconstrued as undermining Ryan's iconic role in the fight against AIDS).

Ryan did have advocates in the community; there had been local efforts to provide financial and other assistance to the White family; and the *Kokomo Tribune* has continually published laudatory feature articles on important anniversaries and World AIDS Day.³⁷ Yet some local residents still disagreed with the inclusion of Ryan's photograph in a pictorial history of Howard County assembled a few years after his death.³⁸ During my research for the project, Western School was extremely generous in providing access to invaluable documents, and the hallways were plastered with anti-bullying posters. The county as a whole, however, has offered little acknowledgment of its most famous student. In 2010, the same year the oral history project was launched, the Howard County Historical Society created a County Hall

³⁴Jeanne White had remarried and was living in Florida, although she remained a fairly frequent visitor to Indiana.

³⁵For more on Jeanne White's reaction to the "lies" circulated about her and her family, see interview of Jeanne White-Ginder by Allen Safianow, October 28, 2014, transcript pp. 23-25, 30, Ryan White Oral History Project.

³⁶Jeanne White with Susan Dworkin, *Weeding Out the Tears: A Mother's Story of Love, Loss, and Renewal* (New York, 1997); interview of Jeanne White-Ginder by Allen Safianow, October 28, 2014, transcript pp. 34-35, Ryan White Oral History Project.

³⁷*Kokomo Tribune*, April 6, 1991, p. 8; April 8, 2000, p. 1; December 3, 2002, p. 1; September 24, 2006, pp. 1, 3; September 13, 2007, p. 1; November 7, 2007, p. 1; April 8, 2010, pp. 1, 4; December 1, 2012, p. 1.

³⁸Ned Booher, *Howard County: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, Va., 1994), 190-91.

of Legends to honor notable residents, past and present. The first group of inductees included inventor Elwood Haynes, author Norman Bridwell, artist Misch Kohn, and correspondent Steve Kroft. Each subsequent year, the society added several others to the hall, but it was not until 2014 that Ryan White, perhaps the county's most well-known native, was added to the list. The society invited his mother to accept the award on Ryan's behalf and, after some initial reluctance, she agreed. In her acceptance comments, she indicated that she had consulted her husband as to whether she should attend:

My husband said to me, "What would Ryan do?" she told an audience of nearly 300 people. "I said, 'He'd tell me to go.'" She received a standing ovation when, in remarks that moved some to tears, she summed up her talk this way: "I could not be more proud to be his mother."³⁹

It was at this August reception that Jeanne agreed to be interviewed for the White project, and that October she provided an extremely moving personal account, an invaluable addition to our oral history collection. In recalling the Legends event for the interview, she reflected further on what Nelson Price referred to as "a poignant, public reconciliation."⁴⁰

Instead of moving on, instead of embracing Ryan, which, of course, I want that, but I think if people could really stop and just listen to Ryan and listen to his story, I think people would be amazed at the kid that he became. And, yes, it was because of Kokomo, but it's a thing where I think we have to kind of adapt and be able to move on and say, "Golly, you know, this kid was really not the kid we thought he was." ... Like, forgive and forget, you know. So that's why I went really, was because I knew that's what Ryan would want. He would want that fight to be over and say, "You know, you're all forgiven. You helped me live." [Weeps] And I don't think Kokomo realizes that, but they did, they helped him live with AIDS because of the fight. Oh, brother, sorry! I didn't think this was going to be emotional!⁴¹

³⁹Price, *The Quiet Hero*, 129.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Interview of Jeanne White-Ginder by Allen Safianow, October 28, 2014, transcript p. 23, Ryan White Oral History Project.

At the time of Ryan's death, Patrick Curry of Channel 5 News—NBC Chicago suggested that although Kokomo would always be remembered by some people "as the town that shunned Ryan White," without the city, "there wouldn't be a Ryan White story to tell" and that Ryan might have died "an unknown" rather than as "a beacon of hope" who inspired "millions toward understanding and personal growth." His determination, together with the questions and fears—not unique to Kokomo—that he provoked, "forced us, the public, to take a look at ourselves."⁴² All those who were interviewed for our project, regardless of the position they took then or now, seemed to appreciate Ryan White's extraordinary role in the fight against AIDS. The committee, however, remained mindful that those who agree to participate in an oral history project and add their comments to the public record are a self-selected group, not necessarily representative of the whole spectrum of community views. At the same time, if our interviews had contained some of the more venomous, potentially libelous comments we occasionally overheard in the community, our committee would have confronted difficult decisions in order to avoid any legal problems for ourselves or the historical society.⁴³

David Broman, current director of the Howard County Historical Society, believes that the Ryan White Oral History Project "has helped the community finally begin coming to terms with the circumstances surrounding Ryan's illness. It continues to do so, and, hopefully, will provide a valuable lesson to other communities and to future generations."⁴⁴ Ideally, the project will also provide a deeper understanding of the tumultuous forces unleashed by Ryan's decision to challenge the Western School Corporation. The project enabled me to see aspects of the controversy I hadn't fully appreciated before: the ambivalence many experienced in a "polarized" atmosphere; the difficulty of balancing fears with compassion; the courage and risks encountered by those who befriended the Whites; the varying degrees of examination and acceptance of the growing medical evidence regarding AIDS and its transmission; and Western School's pioneering efforts to implement universal precautions.

Like other oral historians, our committee confronted the issue of whether we should be involved in interpreting the accounts we had col-

⁴²*Kokomo Tribune*, April 19, 1990, p. 6.

⁴³For more on the complicated subject of defamation, see John A. Neuenschwander, *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2014), 35-50; Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 66-67.

⁴⁴David Broman to Allen Safianow, email, February 18, 2016.

lected.⁴⁵ This is an especially thorny question in the case of local oral histories conducted under the auspices of a community organization, where the interviewers are part of the community they are examining and remain interested in maintaining good relationships so as not to endanger future projects. We considered it unseemly to encourage individuals, sometimes friends and neighbors, to submit to interviews and then to offer interpretations critical of their beliefs. We made compromises and tried to protect our narrators, seeking to accommodate them as much as reasonable when we edited our transcripts.

In reconciling the somewhat conflicting admonitions set forth at the beginning of this article—the need to be sensitive to the community on one hand, and the danger of sidestepping difficult aspects of its history—our committee probably leaned (or erred) in the direction of the first option, thus achieving outcomes different from those that an outside group might have produced. We also believed, however, in the advantages of an oral history project designed and implemented by community residents who are sensitive to local concerns, who had their own personal experiences of, and connections to, the controversy.

Some of the project's flaws were perhaps inherent in the situation we faced; others might have been avoided if we had had more experience or had thought more deeply about our enterprise. Donald Ritchie points out, however, that “there is no single way of doing oral history,” and that beginning oral historians should not become discouraged by the complexities of theoretical issues, and should adopt “the more pragmatic approach of ‘putting practice into theory.’”⁴⁶ Barbara Truesdell, assistant director of Indiana University's Center for the Study of History and Memory, observes that “every interviewing experience is unique; this is part of the charm of fieldwork. So while there is some validity in the adage, ‘The only way to learn how to do it is to do it,’ there are things you can do before, during, and after your interview to make every interview more successful.”⁴⁷

Our committee made an effort to follow professional guidelines and advice and to make the best decisions possible when we confronted gray areas. Local history projects dealing with divisive issues, and conducted by conscientious volunteers with varying degrees of experience working

⁴⁵Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 13-14.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, xvi, 13-14.

⁴⁷Barbara Truesdell, “Oral History Techniques: How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews,” p. 1, at http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/oral_history_techniques.pdf.

on behalf of a publicly supported community organization, face special challenges. The Ryan White project, like most endeavors of this sort, was a learning experience. If our efforts fell short in some respects, there was value in what we did accomplish. We were hardly able to tell the whole story, but we shed additional light on an important and timely subject. We posed new questions and preserved the responses. Clashing voices, as Linenthal observes, deepen rather than impoverish our understanding of events.⁴⁸ And Ritchie notes

the tendency of oral history to confound rather than to confirm our assumptions, confronting each of us with conflicting viewpoints and encouraging us to examine events from multiple perspectives. Oral history's value derives not from resisting the unexpected but from relishing it. By adding an ever-wider range of voices to the story, oral history doesn't simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex—and more interesting.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Edward T. Linenthal, "The A-Bomb Controversy at the National Air and Space Museum," *The Historian* 57 (June 1995), 688.

⁴⁹Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, xiv.