

Keepers of the Flame Oral History Project Involvement

For her final project of Japanese and Japanese American Women Writers, Lindsey Betts chose to participate in the oral history project that took place at the East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center (ESGVJCC). For this project, she interviewed one of the residents at the center over a span of two mornings, utilizing the community center's video and recording equipment and providing a transcript of the conversation.

The ESGVJCC has been in existence since 1936, and Lindsey felt very privileged to be allowed to enter and participate in such a deeply rooted California Japanese community. As a granddaughter of a first generation Japanese immigrant, she instantly felt a connection to the elderly men and women she had the opportunity to meet. And she felt very aligned with the community center's central goal of creating a bridge between the past and present. Lindsey never had a doubt of the importance of such a project as Keepers of the Flame.

Following the workshops on interviewing the elders, Lindsey felt prepared to cover all the necessary topics with her interviewee. She connected very well with her assigned elder and was fortunate enough to meet her during her first visit/tour of the community center. Though overwhelmed at first with the sheer thought of having to interact with so many elders, Lindsey was more in her element when she

began talking with the interviewee on her own. She did very well in establishing the initial connection with her interviewee and the interviewee was quick to open up and begin sharing her story right away.

During the formal interview, Lindsey did an excellent job leading the interviewee into periods of storytelling. She utilized the project's example questions and skillfully directed the conversation to deepen and broaden the subject matter, from the current state of her siblings to the history her husband's family. At several times, she seemed to avoid answering certain questions too explicitly, but Lindsey found ways to draw her out through other topics. For example, she often gave very vague or impersonal answers when describing her life; to combat this, Lindsey used the interviewee's travel stories to help her open up more. The basic elements of her life history were established through the initial questions, and it was through these follow up questions surrounding her adventures with her husband that Lindsey was able to learn more about their marriage as well as her passions and dreams. This "troubleshooting" of sorts was one of Lindsey's strongest skills during the interview, as she expertly navigated the conversation in order to get the most out of her limited time with the interviewee. In fact, they were able to cover the majority of the interviewee's whole life during their time together.

While Lindsey performed well on her feet, she would have benefitted from more preparation in regards to the follow up questions. She often struggled to maneuver around the questions that the interviewee did not want to answer and found herself backtracking rather than quickly moving on to other questions. For many of the questions regarding identity, gender, and race, Lindsey quickly backed off when they were given curt answers. It is uncertain whether her efforts to pursue these questions were just too weak, or the resident was just a stubborn interviewee. Nonetheless, Lindsey

could have tried harder to tactfully and respectfully press into these issues. One flaw in Lindsey's interview methods was her focus on facts rather than emotions. Although asking specific questions led to more stories, she was rarely encouraged to share how an event or part of her life made her feel. Granted, these type of questions did not always get extensive answers from her, but Lindsey definitely gave them up quickly. Regarding the second interview, Lindsey also could have spent more time reviewing the first recordings and compiling a comprehensive list of all the new directions the interview could go. Instead, she stuck to what was most comfortable, which was exploring more family and travelling stories.

Several themes stood out in the interviews. One that correlated with something discussed in class was the idea of silence in regard to history, especially surrounding Japanese internment. Although the interviewee was open about her own experience as a toddler, Lindsey learned that the elderly relatives continued this tradition of silence surrounding that period of their lives. The interviewee showed this tendency for privacy especially when speaking of her husband and their marriage. Either there was not much to say about their romance, or it was none of the interviewer's business.

Another major theme was that of the empowerment that comes from education. She studied two years at a business school before beginning work at a finance company, and she encouraged all four of her children to work hard for their own college degrees. One of the reasons she joined the East San Gabriel Valley Community Center was to expose her children to their Japanese heritage and the community that came with, and she continued to work in academic settings even when her children had left elementary school. Education was never a question for her or her family. Lindsey found this to be the most inspirational part of the interview, especially since it aligned so closely with her

own views. Overall, it was a very positive experience for both the interviewer and her interviewee and both found it difficult when Lindsey's work was finally done and the time had come to part ways.

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