

An Oral Historian Gains New Insights into How to Tell Better Stories of People and Places for The Oklahoma Bahá'í Oral History Project

Course: Writing Biographies and Histories: Recording Stories of People and Places 2017

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Mark Vaccaro, a Bahá'í from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA, a learner in the Wilmette Institute course Writing Biographies and Histories: Recording Stories of People and Places 2017, had a lot to say about his passion: making audiovisual recordings of fellow Bahá'ís in his home state as part of The Oklahoma Bahá'í Oral History Project and sending them to the National Bahá'í Archives. He and a fellow Bahá'í Alex Resnick started the project in 2004 as an individual initiative and have so far interviewed sixty-two Bahá'ís who now live in or previously lived in Oklahoma.

With thirteen years of oral histories under his belt before he enrolled in Writing Biographies and Histories, Mark had much to say about the art and craft of making oral histories and what new information he learned. Among his new understandings and insights are these:

- One can find biographical information about the person you are writing about in the biography of another person with whom he or she has interacted.
- The Bahá'í author must have a clear understanding of why he or she is writing the biography. What is he or she trying to accomplish? It is important not to duplicate what has already been done.
- It was very helpful to learn that biographers need to be careful not to slip unintentionally into hagiography—that is, telling the story of a Bahá'í as if he or she were a saint.
- It is probably not a good idea to have a biography of a Bahá'í written by a Bahá'í just for Bahá'í readers.
- Often when Bahá'í biographies are written, there is frequently much more information available than can be included in the work. Accordingly, a biographer will have to make tough decisions about what to include and what to exclude in the biography.
- When considering the Bahá'í writings and the guidance from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, there is actually a very high expectation for the quality of the work produced by the Bahá'í biographer.
- I have learned that when writing a history about an individual or event it is important to include multiple vantage points. I interviewed three people for The Oklahoma Bahá'í Oral History Project while taking this course. Because of what I learned in the course, I was more attentive during the recording sessions to including multiple vantage points and specifically asking those interviewed to comment on changes they have seen in the Faith over time and how they have reacted to those changes.

In all Wilmette Institute courses, one goal (or hope) is that the learners end their study with new or improved skills. Writing Biographies and Histories was no exception, and Mark, with the ongoing oral-history project in his state, reported that he had learned a great deal:



Left: *Mark Vaccaro (right) and Alex Resnick, the founders of The Oklahoma Bahá'í Oral History Project*

“I have improved my skills in talking to people for Bahá'í oral history interviews. I found the video by Sonia Purnell helpful concerning how to approach writing a biography. The how-to articles throughout the course were quite practical and helpful as well. These will remain as resources for me to return to

in the future. The video about how to do an oral history interview was good and pointed out not only what should be done but also what should not be done. My work for some time has been in accordance with those guidelines. I was so happy to learn of the many online resources for biographers. I had not heard of approximately one-third of them. I have carefully bookmarked each of them. I have learned of the importance of creating a timeline in advance to guide my interviews and to help me keep the interviews following a chronological sequence.”

As for new feelings and new attitudes about oral histories, Mark wrote this:

“I have become even more aware of the critical importance of creating Bahá'í biographies both written and oral. More of them need to be done while we are closer in time to our subjects. It will be much more difficult in the future to find primary source material on the early Bahá'ís, and I consider the Bahá'ís alive today as early Bahá'ís.”

Then he went on to say:

“The course has reinforced my decision to keep on doing what I have been doing. I have been passionate about documenting the development of the Bahá'í Faith both here and abroad for almost forty years. I look for every opportunity to take photographs and videos of Bahá'ís and Bahá'í activities and submit them to the National Bahá'í Archives and when possible to the local Bahá'í archives as well. When I find valuable Bahá'í photos that others have, I see that they are duplicated, identified, and sent to the National Bahá'í Archives.”

Now that the course on Writing Biographies and Histories has ended, Mark says that he “will continue doing oral history interviews on video of Bahá'ís, mostly in Oklahoma.” He hopes that “the interviews will continue to improve over time with techniques learned in the course.”