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'Griot' Project To Record 2,000 Oral Stories From Black Families

By [Jacqueline Trescott](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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StoryCorps and the National Museum of African American History and Culture yesterday announced a collaboration to record stories of African Americans.

This was supposed to be a heartwarming event. The news conference was, however, held beside a frozen pond in front of the Capitol in the 18-degree weather. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) didn't waste any time pointing out the ridiculousness of it all.

"I'm going to have each of you checked out for a psychiatric test," he said as he bounded to the lectern from a silver PT Cruiser. His words, and everyone else's introduction, were greeted by hearty clapping of hands, perhaps to stop them from turning numb.

The new initiative is called the StoryCorps Griot project. Over the next year the organizers plan to collect nearly 2,000 stories, principally from World War II veterans and those who were part of the civil rights movement. It is believed to be the largest effort to collect oral histories from African Americans since the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s.

"StoryCorps is a simple idea. The person talks about life's questions," said Dave Isay, who started the national oral history effort in 2003. In New York, StoryCorps has set up story booths in Grand Central Terminal and at the World Trade Center site where

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visitors can tell their own recollections of events, people and their families. "Our stories, the stories of ordinary people are just as important as Paris Hilton and other stories the media feeds us," Isay said.

The reason the announcement was held outside was to offer a look at an Airstream trailer, parked at the curb, that is equipped with a recording studio and will travel the country for the project. Sessions start next Thursday in Atlanta.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting has contributed \$1.4 million to the project, said CPB President Patricia de Stacy Harrison, who huddled with others on the platform. With her were Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund; Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of the African American Museum; and LeAlan Jones, a George Foster Peabody Award winner and spokesman for the Griot initiative.

Though the museum hasn't broken ground yet, it is collecting artifacts for the day in 2015 that it expects to opens on the Mall. Its halls will be filled with lots of voices. Not just those of A. Philip Randolph and Aretha Franklin, but also people such as Sam Harmon, a U.S. Navy veteran, who told his grandson, Ezra Awumey, how he, dressed in his uniform, was refused entry to a movie theater in Washington.

Before the news conference, Lonnie G. Bunch, the museum's founding director, said, "We want to save African American treasures. Often people think of those as three-dimensional, the artifacts. But it is also the memories and the words of African Americans."

Michael H. Frisch, a professor at the University of Buffalo and former editor of the Oral History Review, says oral interviews -- from eyewitness accounts to views of what it felt like in the Depression, for example -- are valuable tools. "This kind of testimony is often missing from the official record," Frisch says. "By and large the historic record comes out of power and privilege. We want to get into the books people who are not in the books."

Yet Frisch says oral histories are complicated tools. They can present problems. "The participants have faulty memories. Many of us who work in the field are correct to be aware and concerned," he says. Yet letters, government reports, court transcripts and newspaper articles can also have problems, Frisch argues.

Bunch, a historian, said, "oral histories are one part of the puzzle, and you marry the interview to other data, other research. Yes, people do embellish. Yes, people do forget. But most of the time, they are accurate."

Isay, seated in the trailer, said listening to oral interviews can be "a transformative experience." He said these would be distinctive

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because a younger family member will often interview a senior relative, with some help from a facilitator. "These are people's memories. This is citizen-generated, with everyday people asking questions. History is so often told from the top down. In this case the stories are through the hearts of everyday people," Isay said.

Copies of the materials from the Griot initiative will be given to the participants ("as part of their personal repository," Isay said), the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the museum archives. Some will be heard on National Public Radio and the project's Web site.

The word "griot" is taken from the West African tradition of having a respected member of the community tell the story of place and people through oral presentations, dance and music.

The Web site for the project is <http://www.storycorpsgriot.net>.

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