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Resourcing Your Community: Building a Connection Through Overlooked Histories

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ABSTRACT
Community-based research is a valuable tool used to address inequities in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library's local history archives. By collaborating with the community to establish permanent collections dedicated to those overlooked narratives, the library realized its community members were an untapped resource who were enthusiastic to fill informational gaps and appreciated the opportunity to preserve information for future generations. By acknowledging the historical significance of their previously undocumented experiences, equity was added into Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library's archival collections and, in turn, helped the community see value in a relationship with the library. Simple neighborhood discussions between the library and its diverse community led to the development of programming, events, and exhibits honoring and celebrating unique and personal contributions to the local history archives. This chapter illustrates a successful example of how thinking outside the box can create positive change that spotlights the accounts of marginalized communities and contributes to a greater historical narrative by capturing untold stories and honoring suppressed voices.

INTRODUCTION
Located in the third-most populous city in California is the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library (King Library). Home to a unique collaboration between San José State University and the City of San José, the King Library gathers the academic and public library world under one roof. Although each organization has its own objectives, the institutions come together as one entity, expanding their reach outside of their standard roles by removing accessibility barriers. The King Library was the first library in the United States to integrate the services and collections of a major university and a public library system. Since its opening in August 2003, the King Library prides itself on having nine floors that hold a vast collection of materials and unique resources dedicated to lifelong learning. The jewel of the collections can be found in Special Collections areas, home to the San José State University (SJSU) Library’s African, Asian American, Chicano, & Native American (AAACNA) Center and San José Public Library’s (SJPL) California Room. The California Room holds archival items dedicated to California history with an emphasis on the City of San José and the greater Santa Clara County. This heavily used collection is popular with both public and academic researchers. AAACNA Center supports the instruction and research of historically underrepresented groups by housing resources that support different areas of ethnic studies. Both collections are curated by librarians to support researchers’ needs through a combination of rare and unique primary source materials.

Despite this outstanding wealth of resources, one researcher entered the library seeking information about a specific local community group, and the library staff was surprised to discover that the library’s ample collections held minimal information on the subject. Unsurprisingly,
this was due to the fact that “[t]he archival community has historically under documented the experiences of African Americans and other marginalized groups, so this is not a new predicament for academic institutions or repositories” (Hughes-Watkins 2014:28), resulting in a tremendous amount of cultural heritage materials not being preserved outside of families passing down items through the generations. For that reason, it is imperative to create partnerships with the members of the community that hold onto these precious cultural materials. “Partnerships provide opportunities to expand resources and services to users and engage with the broader community beyond the library walls” (Munster, Harrington, and Negro 2017:4).

This chapter will discuss how one question led to the use of a new approach in addressing informational gaps in the library’s collections and how that change led to the creation of permanent, equitable collections of cultural heritage materials. Lastly, the author will demonstrate the importance of establishing a strong, collaborative relationship with the local community that both sides deem as beneficial.

THE PROCESS

Power of a Question

A researcher entered the library seeking information about the local lowrider community and Lowrider Magazine, which was founded in San José. Since both were relevant to local history, one would assume that the library would have information on both. Lowriding was established in the 1940s as part of the Chicano/Mexican American culture that centered around youth lowering cars and applying uniquely customized paint jobs. This rich form of cultural expression has flourished through the generations because the lowrider community is more than just car enthusiasts. Their history is full of activism, innovativeness, and more. For these reasons, the story of the lowrider community was deemed important, and both the AAACNA Center and California Room were tasked to scour their respective collections to see what resources were available to assist the researcher. The libraries’ combined collections were found lacking. The lowrider community has a long, turbulent history in San José, resulting in it not being considered of historical significance. The objective then became to rectify such an oversight.

The correction started with library staff conducting their own research. A staff member was assigned to read through the materials and pull out any information, such as names, events, and dates that could potentially help them locate other potential materials. This is a standard part of any research process. Unfortunately, the staff member hit a dead-end. It was time to think outside the box and take a non-traditional approach, leading to the opportunity to do some outreach. However, “[b]efore engaging in outreach efforts, it was critical to strengthen the policy’s language regarding efforts to acquire archival materials of historically underrepresented people and communities” (Hughes-Watkins 2014:35). By reviewing and evaluating the policies, the library was able to address any issues that could arise as they worked to collect material that could potentially fill informational gaps. This is especially important because it has become increasingly difficult to establish collections of historically underrepresented communities “as generations of immigrants transformed once homogeneous neighborhoods to multicultural epicenters burgeoning with various languages, traditions, and new social mores,” resulting in the misappropriation of materials through assimilation (Hughes-Watkins 2014:28-29). For this reason, the library found it vital for them as a research institution to seek out and capture such important histories before they were lost.

Expanding the collection policy to include the active seeking of materials from community members gave the library the ability to answer specific research inquiries.

By taking the names pulled from this research, the staff member decided to reach out to networks within their social circles, as well as use social media to get in touch with different members of the lowrider community and establish connections. Each interaction began with the staff member introducing themselves and providing an explanation of why the person was being contacted. It then became a conversation about the project and what the person could do to help, creating a partnership between the library and the people. By connecting with the lowriders, this project became a community-based research (CBR) project.

Community-Based Research

The library’s approach to this project became a partnership where it was mutually beneficial to create inclusive and equitable library collections, as it strengthened the library’s holdings and ability to fulfill research requests while
also helping the lowrider community feel respected, honored, and important enough to be documented. “Community-based research involves collaboration between trained researchers and community members in the design and implementation of research projects aimed at meeting community-identified needs” (Strand 2000:85). Specific to this case, the community-identified need came from the library, and the community agreed, deciding it would be worthwhile to become involved. “For organizations and institutions, community engagement is an opportunity to build active relationships with individuals and other entities for mutually beneficial exchanges” (Fritz et al. 2021). Once the partnership was established, it became a process of networking, having those community partners making introductions and encouraging people to speak with the library, making it more individual oriented. Honma (2016) states that being able to work together requires an enactment of collective engagement, using the importance of working in solidarity to empower historically disenfranchised communities. It was because of this collective agreement that, within the 1.5 years of the project, more than 100 lowrider community connections were established through the CBR process.

One of the reasons this research approach was so rewarding was because those community partners trusted that their library partners would treat their community contacts with respect. “Instead of treating communities as “laboratories” and community members as convenient samples, as is more typical in conventional research, CBR holds as a central tenet the involvement of community members in every stage of the research process, from identifying the research question to formulating action proposals that derive from the research results.” (Strand 2000:85). Another reason was that they trusted that the library would value each connection made, no matter if they ended up being fruitful for the project or not. That is because “[d]eveloping effective partnership requires investment of time, attention, and resources from both sides” (Taylor, Pratt, and Whelan 2021:58). The community partners took time out of their lives to initiate the conversation with other community members, making them aware of the library’s project and encouraging them to take the time to meet with library staff.

In order for CBR to be successful, it also requires those participating in the research project to honor “the knowledge and skills each party brings to the table, …enhanc[ing] the quality of work by creating opportunities not possible by one side on their own” (Taylor et al. 2021:58). The library trusted that their community partners would put them in touch with people from the lowrider community that could potentially have something to offer to the project, while the community partners trusted that the library would keep to their word about documenting the history. Without the trust in the library from the community partners, this project would not be possible. Beyond that, “[t]he distinctive combination of collaborative inquiry, critical analysis, and social action that CBR entails makes it a particularly engaging and transformative approach to teaching and engaged scholarship” (Cutforth et al. 2003:5).

By using a CBR approach, the library was able to answer the needs of a researcher and ultimately provide a feasible way to capture a historically significant community’s story that had been undervalued and introduce it to, not just the research/academic community, but the wider community. Proving that “CBR offers higher education a powerful and innovative means for combining the traditional academic missions of teaching, service, and scholarship” (Cutforth et al. 2003:14).

Collections, Exhibits, Programs and More

Through the CBR process, the library not only collected materials that would support the needs of one specific researcher but was able to establish permanent collections that reserved a place for the lowrider community in the state’s historical record. But it was important for the library to remember that its job is more than the extractive nature of collecting. Call and Mims (2020:67) argue, “[w]e cannot rest on the assumption that if we simply fill the archive with new voices, perspectives and experiences, it will automatically attract new users. If it is our intention to be more inclusive, we must do more to open the space to those who have not historically been our main audiences” (Call and Mims 2020:67). This is why the library decided to hold an exhibition of the newly acquired materials, honoring the local lowrider community.

The “Story and King: San José’s Lowrider Culture” exhibition ran from December 15, 2018, to March 31, 2019, celebrating and honoring the lowrider culture of San José. The goal was to capture the true history of the culture and counteract the negative stigma that was placed on that
community by city officials and police. Alongside the materials collected through the library staff’s research, more than sixty contributors loaned their items to the library to be displayed during the exhibition. Together, the library and the lowrider community were able to assemble more than 200 pieces of lowrider memorabilia, including photographs, magazines, programs, flyers, paintings, models, car club plaques, street signs, park signs, replicas, clothing, trophies and more.

As a complement to the exhibition, the library also organized three panel events. The first panel event, entitled “Out of the Past: San José’s Lowrider History,” featured five individuals who discussed the historic lowrider scene of the area. The second panel event, entitled “Lowrider Culture and Society,” featured three panelists who discussed the overall significance of the lowrider culture from an academic standpoint. The final panel event entitled “The Future of Lowriding in San José” featured four panelists from the current lowrider scene and its growth in popularity. The exhibition brought over 1,000 visitors to the library and over 900 people to the three panel events. We also caught the attention of the local newspaper and two city council members for the work we did honoring part of the historically neglected heritage of the Chicano community and for using it to dispel negative stereotypes placed onto the lowrider culture.

By organizing the exhibit and associated events, the library was able to connect with potential donors and public stakeholders, which helped propel the lowrider project beyond what the library thought possible. It was during one of the panel events where another question arose that caused the library to realize there was much more work to do to repair the inequalities in the archival collections. Expanding on the lowrider project, the library began working to document the city’s East Side community, as much of the East Side’s story and people had gone undocumented. The library then decided to follow the same model used for the lowrider project, turning to the community once again.

One major outcome of working with the community was the collective realization that the library needed to do more to address the historical inequalities in its collections, and “[a]s more progressive attitudes toward history began to challenge the appraisal practices of archives, a new charge for archivists was established that demanded a reassessment of previous policies” (Hughes-Watkins 2014:29).
By becoming aware of the various historical inequities and wanting to ensure that no narratives are excluded in the future, the library reevaluated its collection development process. “Centering relationships and community partnerships and decentering collections requires a major cultural change” (Call and Mims 2020:77). Hoping to lead the archivists away from “the traditional modus operandi in the profession, even as it has proven problematic and has resulted in whitewashed collections reflecting dominant cultural values and mistrust in the community” (Call and Mims 2020:70). It is important to remember that when embarking on projects like this, trust is often key to its success. Especially because “[w]hen the intention is to represent a specific locale, the history of the majority culture too often rises to the surface and everything gets lost” (Call and Mims 2020:69). Which may be why the library’s archives focused on the predominantly white wealthy landowner’s population. “Or, what majority culture considered relevant or important, in regards to underrepresented persons, events, or histories does not align with how those they are documenting would appraise and preserve their own cultures” (Call and Mims 2020:69). The collections that were established feature both physical and digital materials that document the local lowrider community, community organizations, local activism, and more.

Another outcome from our CBR projects is that they have helped the library establish relationships outside of the traditional order, showing that it is beneficial for the library to move further away from “past practices dictated that we build relationships in order to build collections” and “reevaluate how we show up as community partners” (Call and Mims 2020:63). What these projects did was challenge the practices that created inequalities, “[b]ut it is also an opportunity to assess the environment and begin to address the physical and cultural obstacles that may conflict with our abilities to engage with various communities” (Call and Mims 2020:68). These projects not only helped the library establish relationships with outside organizations and community members, but it also paved the way for future opportunities for collaboration, which supports the fact that “[s]ometimes community partnerships evolve beyond their original intention in wholly positive ways” (Pershing 2023:282).

One takeaway was that “[w]hat all partnerships share is reciprocity, created out of clear mutual goals and an agreed-upon system for evaluation and refinement of the collaboration” (Pershing 2023:279). What made the CBR successful was that the library approached the communities with respect and honesty. When meeting with the different community members, the library was honest about the project’s purpose and limitations. Being sure to make no false promises about what they could offer was essential. It was also important for the library to explain its plans for the materials it was gathering for its collections and how the materials could be accessed by the public and potential researchers in the future. “Working with communities requires understanding the motivations and goals of all partners and working together to manage expectations and resources” (Lucky and Harkema 2018:190). This type of honesty is what inspired our community partners to trust the library with the contact information of their friends and family. The library accepted every meeting and listened to everyone’s story, no matter the outcome. “Without engagement and understanding of a community’s composition, there can be misunderstanding, misrepresentation, miscommunication, and missed opportunities” (Fritz et al. 2021). Indeed, we missed opportunities due to some community members having had previous negative interactions with the library. Leading to the takeaway that “[t]he issue of insider/outsider status when embarking on a community project can be quite pronounced, particularly along racial lines” (Honma 2016). Mending such relationships requires an understanding that being of a different racial background does not mean that one cannot comprehend the value of those of another race. More importantly, in order to correct the negligence of the information world, the community and the various institutions must come together, knowing there is value in collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Presented in this chapter is a successful example of how valuable communities can be for libraries, particularly when addressing challenging inequities. These two research project examples demonstrate how community engagement can be beneficial to all parties involved. The CBR projects have helped both the public and academic sides of the King Library expand and synthesize their combined mission and the strategic vision both sides have for the library. While the university side of the King Library focuses on student and faculty needs, the public side of the library...
focuses on the needs of the community. The approach of using a library-community collaboration for these projects presented an opportunity to build on the combined vision. “The most successful collaborative projects are driven by the needs of campus researchers or community partners and are designed with outcomes that serve all stakeholders, including the library” (Lucky and Harkema 2018:190). This proves that when faced with challenges, there is great potential for success when libraries “pursue new ways of partnering” so they can have a greater impact on their communities (Munster 2017:15).

It is important to remember that social justice projects like these are ongoing, and by resourcing the community, the library does not have to do such important work alone (Honma 2016). This is why creating a strong foundational relationship with the community based on “[c]ommunication, thoughtfulness and clearly defined intention are keys to success” (Pershing 2023:283). Without such relationships some stories will remain lost forever, creating a great injustice to past, present, and future generations.

REFERENCES