Final Report

Collecting Memories from our Grandparents’ Lived Histories

South Korea | Amherst College | Ludia Ock (USA, Amherst College)

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project: My project sought to recruit young people to actively collect and appreciate the stories of their grandparents, and I redefined my role in the process by making artwork that exemplifies this transmittance of memories visually. I focused on centering the relationships between young and old folks in a creative oral history project that partners with families and localizes the transference of memories.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they? Projects for Peace provided the only funding used for this project.

How did you come up with the idea for your project? My project is derived from questions I began to examine in the Fall of 2017 when I worked as an English teacher at a Korean senior citizen center while studying abroad. As I became more engaged with older perspectives at the center, all the stories my grandparents shared with me about escaping the war, the hunger, kidnappings, massacres, bombing, and burning came rushing back. As I learned about the country’s reidentification after the war while I was in Korea, and simultaneously built trust with the senior citizens I worked with, sharing stories and memories, I began wondering about my own grandparents’ lives and the stories they have to share. I decided to develop this project as a way to extend my interest in utilizing oral history as a method to collect stories from my grandfather’s generation in South Korea.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists? The many traumatic events that unfolded during South Korea’s history—Japanese colonial rule to the Korean civil war to the rapid industrialization it experienced following the war—have embedded themselves in the South Korean psyche. We often forget that people who lived through those events have valuable first-hand information that can supplement our understanding of history, national trauma, and their implications. Unfortunately, factors such as ageism deter us from viewing older adults as vessels of lived histories. Instead, the negative perceptions attached to aging populations actually divides and polarizes generations, young and old, so that intergenerational relationships are stifled. Even though aging is a natural part of life, the stigma around aging clouds us from seeing the wisdom, history, and generational knowledge that older generations have the power to transmit to enrich our understanding of the past.

Why did you choose your host site to work in? I chose to work in South Korea because I wanted to return to the place where I had made connections with individuals in my grandparents’ generation. After studying abroad there, I knew I wanted to go back and develop a project around collecting stories that I had only a glimpse of from my time there.

What was it like to work in your host site? The last time I lived in South Korea, I was an exchange student at a South Korean university. I had the support of a study abroad program that helped guide me and a community within this study abroad program that I could access freely through events, outings, and more. Coming back on my own this summer was a larger shock than I had anticipated. While navigating daily life was familiar and fairly comfortable, I didn’t anticipate the toll it would take to return without the same pre-existing network or community. In the beginning of the summer, I inevitably navigated feelings of displacement as I adjusted to the loneliness that came from not having a pre-established community. As the summer progressed, however, I networked with artists and community leaders, and I utilized virtual weekly check-ins with staff at Amherst College’s Center for Community Engagement to receive support regarding my project and advice about creating structure for daily life. Eventually, when my project accelerated and developed, I gained the support of an incredible group of artists and community leaders in South Korea who inspired me to push myself and trust the process.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways? When I arrived in South Korea, I found out that the volunteer program coordinator at the senior citizen center left her job. I had planned to work with her throughout the summer, so this came as a shock to me. I was told by her replacement that I wouldn’t be able to carry out my project with the senior citizen center, as they were undergoing renovations and were unable to accommodate me, so I knew my project would no longer work the way I had originally planned. After consulting with other artists in South Korea I had met throughout the
summer, I came to realize: rather than identifying senior citizen interviewees and drawing portraits of them, why not encourage young people to interview their grandparents themselves and celebrate this intergenerational exchange through art? I reflected on the first time I interviewed my grandfather for a school project. I realized that many young people might not have the encouragement or structure to interview their grandparents if not for something like a school assignment, so I thought of ways to give them the structure to initiate the interview. These interviews could open up the possibility to create meaningful, deeper connections and allow the passage of memories and stories for future generations to garner. At this time, I was able to connect with curators at an art space who were willing to work with me to exhibit my artwork.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people? Once my project shifted, I found that my dependence on the interviewers slowed the overall process. My ability to make artwork depended on our follow-up calls after they interviewed their grandparents. Often times, when we were unable to coordinate times to have calls about their interview experiences and it impacted my arrangements with the curators at the art space that hosted me. When I checked in with some the interviewers, they revealed to me that some aspects of the interview material they obtained was personal and sensitive in nature. In fact, one interviewer could not ultimately participate due to sensitive personal information shared during the interview that made her feel uncomfortable about being involved. I used these instances to guide the way the artwork was created. Instead of creating portraits of senior citizens as I had initially intended, I decided to make portraits of the interviewers (the grandchildren) to extol the process of doing the physical work of obtaining information through oral history.

How do you define peace? I define peace as the tool to understand, value, and empathize with marginalized voices and experiences. A peaceful society remembers histories of violence and the impact it has left on people. Additionally, it actively works to privilege voices often unseen and unheard.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term? This project was largely a connections-based project. Through these connections, I found a way to shift my project into a more collaborative process. In the short-term, the project enabled young people to open themselves up to the possibility of creating an archive of their own family history. My project created the structure for the exchange of intergenerational knowledge to exist. I encouraged all of my participants to record these interviews with a recording device, like a phone, and save it onto their computer. This way, they could have the interview to refer to in the future and the oral history provided by their grandparents can live on indefinitely. I have sent out the list of questions I prepared to folks who did not participate in my project but wanted to embark on their own personal methods of engaging with their grandparents. I am currently thinking of ways to disseminate this information to a larger platform.

My desire to expand my project in the long-term led me to conclude my project in Washington D.C. where I met with individuals and curators who were involved in exhibiting memory-based cultural works at the Smithsonian Museums. My most meaningful connection made was at the United States Institute of Peace where I met with a fellow Korean American, a leader of Divided Families USA, who is interested in spearheading a social media campaign to share the stories of our grandparents who have messages to share to their family members who were taken from them during the Korean War. I hope to expand my work to contribute to a larger campaign that breaks down national lines and extends beyond borders, beginning with this particular project.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you? My project began as a solitary endeavor to interview people from my grandparents’ generation, but its success is rooted in the collaborative spirit that allowed me to connect with so many other artists and individuals who helped make my project possible. Embarking on this project was initially overwhelming, but once I realized that there were ways to galvanize a group of young people to engage in this oral history work together, I found solace in the newfound knowledge that the peace-building work I hope to continue in the future doesn’t have to be a solitary one.

Please provide a 1-2 personal statement sentence, suitable to use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned. Through my project, I wanted to localize the process of transmitting stories by facilitating the very intimate act of passing down stories from grandparent to grandchild. I feel more optimistic now that our society can shift emphasis away from the negative aspects of aging and embody a fuller vision of what aging can make possible.