

Voices of Charity: Sharing Women's Stories in Catholic Social Services

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Project Rationale, Aims, and Goals

The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul first arrived in Chicago in 1861. This order of nuns, like many others called to this growing metropolis, responded to the urban needs of their time by ministering to the sick and poor through hospitals (such as St. Joseph's), and orphanages (such as the St. Vincent Infant Asylum), which they administered. In 1914, seeing a need to offer childcare and social services for Chicago's working mothers, the Daughters of Charity helped found the Catholic Social Center in what is today's West Loop. A year later, in 1915, seeing similar needs in the largely working class immigrant neighborhood of Lincoln Park, the sisters helped found the DePaul Day Nursery and Social Center in a two-flat donated by labor leader Agnes Nestor at Halsted and Webster. Over the course of nearly a century, the two organizations-- now called Marillac Social Center and St. Vincent DePaul Center -- have seen new buildings, and name changes—but the missions of both remain committed to “strengthening and empowering those most in need to reach their greatest potential.” Women -- both laywomen and nuns -- have been at the vanguard of seeing this mission fulfilled.

In preparation for their upcoming Centennial celebrations Sr. Patricia Dunne, DC [Daughters of Charity] -- Director of Mission Integration for both Centers—has been collecting and assembling relevant materials with the intent to produce public historical programs and exhibits that would be unveiled during the Centennials. Unfortunately, the extant archival traces are somewhat scant—in relevant archives

and in published sources. In terms of published sources, for example, the labors of Chicago's nuns and Catholic laywomen often escaped notice of the press, with the notable exception of the widely publicized 1965 arrest of the four Daughters of Charity from Marillac Social Center who were protesting racial segregation in Chicago public schools. While the uneven collection of archival materials pose significant challenges, there is a yet untapped source of material that would help us document histories from the last several decades: the stories of those women who have worked at the two Centers.

Feminist historian Margaret Stroebel has argued that many nonprofit grassroots organizations that are mission-driven and understaffed (and disproportionately female) “often do not prioritize keeping records that tell their side of the story on issues about which they are passionate.”¹ As a corrective, Stroebel recommends that those working for such organizations develop a forward-thinking consciousness about the value of their documentary records, and also tap into complementary oral histories of those who carry important insights and memories about their organization's history. In that spirit, I am requesting funding to begin a feminist oral history project whose aims are to document the histories of these women-led social service centers, and to explore the unique role that Catholic laywomen and nuns have played in administering social services to Chicago's low-income families and residents, and to interpret their stories in the context of wider social issues from the mid-twentieth century to the present. In addition to collecting and analyzing untold stories of these female social workers, a major goal of the

¹ Margaret Stroebel, “Getting to the Source: Becoming a Historian, Being an Activist, and Thinking Archivaly: Documents and Memory as Sources,” *Journal of Women's History* 11.1 (Spring 1999), 181-192.

project will be to showcase the oral histories in an appropriate public historical format for the Centennial celebrations.

Theoretical Foundations & Methodology

Feminist oral history is both a research methodology and a theoretical foundation. More than merely filling in gaps in the written record, feminist oral history seeks to understand narratives through interpretation that analyzes power structures -- laying bare how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape lived experiences.² Furthermore through all stages of a feminist oral history project (i.e., planning, interviewing, and analysis) the researcher must be alert to the ways that their own identity plays into the shaping of the project, and to be conscious of uneven power relations between oral history narrators and the interviewer.

I also will practice (and introduce my students to) feminist standpoint epistemology which values women's lived experience, in part because such experiences allow us to "critically examine society through women's eyes" even while we must be ever-mindful not to essentialize any one woman's story as representative of all women.³ Indeed, as Donna Haraway and others have argued, respecting differences between women's perspectives and experiences is as

² Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analysis," in Sherna B. Gluck & Daphne Patai (Eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11-26.

³ Abigail Brooks, "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment Through Women's Lived Experience," in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Lina Leavy (Eds.) (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007), 58.

important as seeing the ways in which individuals might forge alliances that could effect positive social change.⁴

Project's Cohesion With Mission of Beck Research Initiative

This project works with the mission of the Beck Research Initiative on a number of levels. To begin, it is community-based in its conception and in its implementation. I began planning this project with Sr. Patricia Dunne DC in Fall 2011 when she approached me about working with my HST 391: Local and Community History course on a community-based history project in Spring 2012. These students are currently helping to organize the existing archival materials. Per the guidelines of the BRI, I will involve students in the research project directly should I be awarded a faculty fellowship. In autumn 2012 I will be teaching HST 396: Oral History Project. As a university-community partnership, staff from the Centers will meet with DePaul students (including the WGS graduate assistant and myself) to orient them to the history and mission of their organizations. Nuns and laywomen will contribute to the selection of interview questions and also make initial contacts with potential narrators (twenty-one possible narrators already have been identified). The HST 396 research team will conduct, transcribe and code the initial 10 of the 21 possible interviews, and will also make preliminary selections on some of the most illuminating excerpts, which they will share in a public presentation at the Centers in Autumn 2012. In winter 2013, the WGS graduate assistant and I will conclude

⁴ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"?" in Sandra Harding, (Ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 127-140; Helen E. Longino, "Feminist Epistemology," in John Grecco and Ernest Sosa (Eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell: 1999), 327-353.

interviews, transcriptions and coding, followed by analysis and public dissemination of findings. Research materials yielded from the project will be made available at DePaul University Library's Special Collections, and at the Daughters of Charity Archives in Indiana. Furthermore, I would regularly use these materials in my HST 391: Local and Community History class, which I teach during spring quarters. In addition to presenting at the Service Speaks conference, I would write a single-authored article, which I would submit to an appropriate journal such as the *Oral History Review*, or the *Journal of Women's History*.

Documenting laywomen and nuns' late twentieth activism will significantly contribute to Chicago's social justice history. As historian Suellen Hoy has observed, "women-religious" (i.e., nuns) and Catholic laywomen are largely absent from narratives about women's history, even while they played vital roles as agents of social change.⁵ Thus, the project fits squarely within the mission of the BRI in its commitment to "documenting, collecting and making public the contributions of individuals whose lives reflect previously untold experiences and resilience."

⁵ Suellen Hoy, *Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago's Past* (Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2006).