

Advice for Interviewing in the Wake of Hurricane Irene



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A Cultural Response

In the days and weeks following Irene, the Vermont Folklife Center received many requests for advice on documenting and collecting stories about the storm and flooding. We believe that even more than a historical record, the stories and the collective experience of this disaster can serve Vermont's communities at this very moment. As Vermonters begin the process of reconstruction, the stories of collaboration and generosity, solidarity and mutual aid that sprang out of this event can be shared, amplified and help to fortify our civil society. These stories have the capacity to ignite hope.

Resilience in the wake of Disaster

In the first few days following Hurricane Irene, we at the Vermont Folklife Center listened as stories poured in about the struggles Vermonters were experiencing around the state. Stories of roads washed out, crops lost to toxic floodwaters, houses swept down stream.

But as the floodwaters began to recede, stories began to shift. We heard about neighbors shoveling mud out of one another's basements, middle school students selling lemonade to benefit local recovery, people rescued from the floodwaters by neighbors in canoes. We marveled as social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook got the word out when news sources couldn't. Public websites like vermontexchange.org created a meeting place for those in need and those who wanted to help. People began to organize to assist one another.

Initiating Conversation:

Recently Director of Education Gregory Sharrow and Aylie Baker led a workshop with 80 eighth-graders from Harwood Union Middle School. Ms. Ibson and Ms. McCurdy's classes are beginning a project interviewing one another to document their collective experience of the hurricane.

One student told a story about members of her community swimming through her flooded basement to help rescue family stores from the rising waters. She told her fellow students how in the aftermath of the hurricane, her father found a Valentine's Day card among debris while walking by the town hall. "I Love you!" it read. It was a note he had written to his father — her grandfather — as a young boy.

Based on our experience with the students at Harwood, stories about the hurricane appear group into three main categories: During the hurricane, the immediate aftermath, and the community that rose up in response. Using these categories as organizing concepts for an interview we brainstormed some basic guiding questions. Remember to encourage the person with whom you are speaking to be specific, reference details, and include sensory information, such as "What did it look/smell/sound/feel/taste like?"

- Please tell me about your experience during Hurricane Irene.
- Where were you?
- How were you affected?
- What did you see the next day?
- How did people in your community respond?
- What are your feelings about what happened?
- What is the memory you will hold with you 20 years from now?

Our Process:

We've laid out some guidelines and focusing questions that will be useful in conducting interviews. But we'd like to urge people to sink a little deeper — to really hunker down and listen.

Particularly in this instance — in which interviewees have very strong and clear memories regarding their experience with the flood — perhaps all it takes is initiating a conversation to allow the story to flow. If the interviewer can establish his/her role primarily as a listener with the intent of bearing witness to someone's testimony, a safe space is created.

Simply asking, "Tell me about your experience during Hurricane Irene" allows the interviewee to drive the discourse. As they begin to relate their experience, the

particulars — where someone was, who they were with, how it made them feel — will emerge through the process of listening and reacting in the conversation.

When we do interviews at the VFC, we of course know why we have selected a particular topic and what we think it is we might learn about in an interview. But what we *don't* know for sure is what the particular story will be — what the interviewee's vantage point is, what they consider to be most significant about their experience, what they want others to know, etc — until we sit down together and begin to talk.

We emphasize that interviewing is as much about *listening* as it is about responding, and that follow-up questions — what one asks *after* listening to someone speak — can't be conceived in advance. We often start out by explaining that interviewing is like asking your good friend about his or her experience on vacation in Florida. Interviewing is driven by curiosity and it's all about creating a space where you as an eager listener draw someone out to speak in detail and at length.

Our Role:

At the close of our workshop in Harwood this last week, an important question surfaced: Where do we go from here?

We advocate that the stories gathered in these coming weeks be used as a springboard for further conversation. The students of Harwood will produce multimedia stories about their experiences that they will share in a public exhibit at the school. They plan to individually invite members of the community to an opening of their work. Such community gatherings can spark off conversations that help to strengthen relationships and coordinate efforts for reconstruction and community planning.

At the Vermont Folklife Center we are happy to serve as a resource for community members who are interested in engaging in interview projects about Hurricane Irene. We are available to facilitate contact with others who are doing Hurricane-related projects, give advice on recording equipment and can house materials in our archive. We encourage you to contact us directly.

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“The joy in disaster comes, when it comes, from that purposefulness, the immersion in service and survival, and from an affection that is not private and personal but civic: the love of strangers for each other, of a citizen.”

- Rebecca Solnit