

“Housatonic in the 70s: Examining the Culture” Oral History Podcast

The hills are alive with oral history and HVRHS student intern Valerie has mined student interviews with alumni from the 1970s to create a rich and thought-provoking podcast that explores the concept of culture within the school, the local community, and society at large.

Valerie observes, “Even though I’ve lived in this area for my entire life, I’ve always questioned how small and secluded these towns really are. It wasn’t until I got to high school, met new students and HVRHS faculty, and got more involved with my community that I learned that this area and the school has a history of its own.”

Valerie collaborated with Housatonic Heritage Executive Director Dan Bolognani, Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College Director Judith Monachina, ECE US History instructor Peter Vermilyea, and Career Experience Coordinator Dr. Mary O’Neill to weave a historical narrative using these alumni interviews.

According to Vermilyea, “Students in ECE United States History learn to use the tools of the historian, which includes using oral history to interact with the past. Oral history is a powerful way of making history more relevant to students. In our project, students interview Housatonic graduates from a particular decade in this case, the 1970s, about the experience as high school students and in the broader Region One community. By doing so, today’s students learn how to sift through different perspectives on events to construct a richer, more nuanced view of the past.”

During the year, Valerie met regularly with Monachina, Vermilyea, and O’Neill to guide her independent efforts. Listening to the raw interviews and analyzing the accompanying transcripts, Valerie explored emerging themes and diverse perspectives on them. She was on the lookout for segments that painted a vivid and visceral picture of high school life in the 70s. Valerie extracted particular interview clips and wrote the accompanying narrative to give context and created a fluid and cohesive final podcast.

Valerie describes, “This was an opportunity to examine and elaborate on a passion of mine: being involved with my community. It has been a thorough process to cull information and compose a podcast episode. The motivation from my community and support from mentors kept me focused. Specifically, Judith’s guidance and counsel pushed me to view local history and academic projects differently. She gave me advice that I will bring to college to be a better learner and researcher. Spending hours examining interviews, studying their speech, and exploring the time period, I learned the significance of oral and local history.”

The Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College decided a few years ago that it would create podcasts in order to bring oral history interviews to people. It was at that time that the Center began to work with HVHRS. Monachina elaborates, “Once again, our relationship with HVHRS has been a pleasure and fruitful. It has created a collaborative learning environment, a professional team working to support the student, in which the intern develops new and important communications and media skills, with support and supervision, while also learning and communicating about our region’s history. It represents many hours of strategic thinking, skill-building, and teamwork by Valerie.”

Bolognani echoes these thoughts, “The internship provides the perfect opportunity for Housatonic Heritage to interface with students, and to challenge these young people with a variety of

heritage-related projects and introduce students to a broad range of topics and tasks. Valerie had both direct and incidental exposure to the people, places, and events that comprise the rich historical context of where we live provided her with the impactful engagement that we seek.”

For the HVRHS Career Experience Program, this internship opportunity represents a model of collaboration between school and community that links curriculum and career skills. O’Neill comments, “Valerie has been working alongside caring and knowledgeable history professionals in our area using material that is immediate and relevant to her life as an HVRHS student. As an intern, she has guided this project to completion and has had a leading voice in creating the finished product. It’s been a tremendous learning experience and she has added to her professional network.”

This professional networking pays future dividends. Abby Adam, the 2017-2018 HVRHS podcast intern is now a junior at Gettysburg College majoring in history with a public history minor. Like history that repeats itself, this summer she is interning again with Monachina. “Abby is helping us with archives, podcasts, blog posts, troubleshooting various digital platform issues, and the like.”

Valerie’s immersion into local history is also one she will take with her as she graduates HVRHS and heads to Cornell University in the fall. She reflects, “Especially being a first-generation American, local history allowed me to explore the complex culture my area holds and gave me a sense of place. Hearing alumni speak of their experiences, in and out of Housatonic, allowed me to look at my own journey as an HVRHS student from a different lens. Considering that I am a person that is drawn to leaving the area and exploring new places, analyzing these interviews encouraged me to redefine the northwest corner of Connecticut, the area that I call home.”

The podcast can be found [here](#). You can listen to it and other oral histories at [Oral History Center Podcasts and Other Inspirations](#).

This internship and podcast were made possible with funding from The Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area (Housatonic Heritage), which is a partnership program of the National Park Service that serves the watershed region of the Housatonic River. A priority goal for Housatonic Heritage is to engage youth and young adults in the region’s heritage and to immerse them in the region’s rich history, culture, and natural resources. The Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College serves people and organizations in the Berkshires of Massachusetts and the Northwest Corner of Connecticut. It is a partnership between [Housatonic Heritage](#) and [Berkshire Community College](#).

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