

Creating a PART Historias Project

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In 2009 ten young Latina students from Conroe High School were paired with 10 Anglo members from the Conroe Pan American RoundTable in Texas for a unique community bridging project. The aim of the project was to develop more connection and awareness between cultures in a changing community that was experiencing growing pains. Connections between generations and ethnic groups are essential for strengthening communities. The project became an undertaking of two years between the women, and the several community professionals heading the project. The end result was a beautiful compilation of life stories written from the perspective of young Latinas. The project concluded with a celebration banquet, and book presentation in March of 2011. The books were archived in the genealogy department of the county's libraries, and were distributed to community leaders to encourage community building efforts. The Conroe Historias Book continues to serve as a teaching tool in a changing community by recording beautiful lives, and connecting women across cultures.

Steps in Developing Unique Historias Projects

The Conroe Historias Project was one version of a biographical community project. This type of project should be unique to each community. There are many versions possible, but some fundamental steps are important for ease and success of the project. The following points guided our effort, but remember that you determine what is best for your project.

1. Form a committee to manage and develop the project. The committee can consist solely of PART members, but it is more productive to have other perspectives from the community involved. Recruit nonprofit members, library professionals, school district or college staff, and other community members with common interest in community bridging. A productive committee should include 5-10 members.
2. Determine the number of Historias participants. Ten young women and ten senior ladies made for an interesting group, but the number became challenging to manage over time. A recommended number is 10 to 14 total participants.
3. Determine the age group you wish to target. The Conroe Historias Project (CHP) targeted older adolescent Latinas- junior and seniors in high school. We included two recent graduates beginning college. Our PART ladies ranged in ages from late 60's to 90 year old. You should check that all participants are able to meet monthly and travel to meeting sites. Also send a brief letter with project information and contact information to the parents of teens. I made sure to call each parent to discuss the project first, get permission, and answer questions. This might not be necessary with older young adult participants.

4. Recruit your members. We asked for volunteers from our Conroe PART group, and Mary Byrne from Conroe ISD recruited the students. When determining the students to choose you should consider their ability to be responsible and thoughtful for such a project. It is a great community project for students to list on their college applications and keep for their resume. We decided to go with Latina students from a diverse level of academic abilities. We had top college bound students and average students, a couple from ESL programs. We felt this more adequately reflected the current Latino community and would give us better insight into how our women would connect. Be mindful of family obligations and stressors. Be open to communicating concerns with both groups of ladies.
5. Diversity. The CHP targeted the relationships between the growing Latino population and the larger Anglo population. An Historias Project can include a diverse group of cultures that reflect the home community.
6. Determine timeline. The CHP was originally set to last less than one year, but lasted two years! Consider the holiday seasons, the testing periods for students, and other ceremonial periods like graduations and summer traveling. All of these activities will inevitably slow the overall process of meeting times. We recommend a six month timeframe. The longer time did help develop stronger ties, but made it difficult to keep everyone on task.
7. Determine frequency of meetings and times of each. The CHP involved two meeting per month for about 1.5 hours after school hours. This gave to time for free chatting and bonding between the women.
8. Determine the site of meetings. The CHP held the first couple of meetings at the high school library, but later moved the meetings to the local United Way meeting room nearby.
9. Be flexible! Times and dates might need to change to accommodate participant needs or unexpected weather or other interruptions. The CHP committee took a “learn as we go” attitude in order to keep the spirit of the project fun for everyone.
10. Biography questions. Request approximately 20 questions to be used from each committee member. The questions help guide the biographical nature of the project so that important data about the lives will be recorded. Basic information like date of birth, place of birth, ethnic ancestry, grandparent and great grandparent information, places lived, schools attended, marriages, children, etc. Compile all the information into a one general questionnaire broken up by periods of life. We began with early childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, senior years, and current thoughts. Questions also included thoughts on local historical facts, cultures, and relationships within communities, as well as other perspectives on world events. Much data will be collected naturally during the talks. Each member will receive the same copy of the questions. Provide teens with a notebook for their notes and questions. Laptops and voice recorders can also be helpful for note-taking as long as they do not distract from the natural talking.

Video were not employed, but we discussed their use. We didn't want to take away from the bonding between the ladies and cost was a concern. Video recording can be a wonderful way to record the ladies to accompany the writings. They might be considered occasionally instead of every meeting, or perhaps a one- time "video" meeting can be included.

11. Assign meeting reminder emails or calls to committee members. We realized that our senior ladies were just as busy as our teens! We also realized that the age differences actually brought out similarities in the women. One way to look at the project was to realize that our teens were just receiving their driver's licenses while some of our older participants were losing their driving abilities. Both groups were in transitional periods in their lives. Reminders proved to be helpful in keeping the ladies moving along.
12. Create a calendar with all the set dates, times, and locations for every participant. Create a master member list with contact information for all members.
13. Write a simple written contract with the teens that pledge their responsibility to participate fully and complete the project as promised while respecting the commitment of all the members.
14. Conduct a couple of introduction meetings with the teens first. Discuss generational differences and cultural differences that they will encounter through the project. Discuss sensitivities towards race and cultural during different times in history as this will be part of the historical context they will learn about. Discuss the teen's personal thoughts and experiences with other cultures and generations. Encourage comfortable and honest dialogue within the group without any political influence from facilitators. Remind the teens of the emotions involved with the commitment to working the project and the connection to their partners. Also, let them know that if at any time they become uncomfortable with their partner or the project they should meet with one of their facilitators to discuss the issue. Make the teens aware that sometimes natural personality differences can make it challenging to connect. Emphasize the importance of emotional connection through communication, confidentiality of personal information shared, and respect for difficult topics discussed. Also meet with your PART ladies to discuss their expectations. Adults also need to understand the differences between cultural and generational differences and how we judge these characteristics among each other.
15. Expect personal growth experiences. We were amazed at the loving connections made between many of the participants. We discovered that these two generations actually had much more in common than what we thought. We were also amazed at what each didn't know about each other's generation. Be prepared to address reactions or questions that might come up in the interview meetings. Some personal sharing can also uncover personal struggles in the teens. Our group worked with a social worker volunteer that was on hand if needed. We found that many of our teen Latinas needed and relished in the nurturing support they received in their meetings from their partners. It became truly special connection between many of our ladies.

16. Make meetings fun! We incorporated a couple of ice breaker activities at our first meeting. After that, the women immediately struck up their conversations. Almost all our meetings were held in the same room, broken up in pairs. By the end of the project some pairs met on their own. We left those opportunities up the ladies comfort level and needs. *Take pictures when you can.*
17. Be respectful of time. Try to keep the ladies on task. On some occasions we would have some ladies that weren't able to attend a meeting at the last minute, and their partner did show up. Try to use that time to catch up with that lady about any concerns or ideas they might want to share for the project.
18. Holidays. We held a Christmas meeting with the ladies at a member's home. We made it a potluck and had a great time. Using these occasions to encourage fun and connection adds to the spirit of the project.
19. Member loss. We lost one teen member due to personal family issues. This was unexpected halfway through the project. You can meet with partner and ask her to continue with a new member if you are able to assign someone. We were fortunate with one of our other teens volunteering to complete two biographies! We also encountered concerns with two other teens moving away from home after high school, and we had to work extra hard to keep them engaged for completion. Things happen, so be flexible.
20. Writing. This is the most difficult piece if you don't have proficient writers. Older teens still struggle with expression and writing. We used a couple of volunteer writing mentors to work with each teen. Some needed little help, while others needed much help. College student participants might be a better option than high school students if you are trying to limit time and effort. We had a volunteer English teacher provide us with a basic format of a paper to include an introduction, body, and conclusion. She suggested a "theme" that best fit the personality of the biography and it's lady. Students were asked to decide on a trait or theme that encapsulated the spirit of their partner and use it as a thread in her paper. Each paper would result in a 6-7 page front and back chapter for each life story. This was about 8-10 typed pages by the student before final formatting. Biography length should be left up to your committee. Our questionnaire totaled around 300 questions! Most of these questions were redundant for each life period, and many weren't used or needed. Make it as simple as you need to. The writing piece takes much patience, and we realized our teens were intimidated knowing their work would be archived. Keep it fun, and use mentors where you can or need to!
21. Funding. The CHP was partially funded by the local United Way and by a community foundation for historical preservation. The project itself doesn't need to be costly. Fundraisers can be considered ahead of time if you would like a more elaborate publication or celebrations. Local community organizations focused on historical preservation or youth development might make great partners. Nonprofits like Girl Scouts might consider helping with the project, as might local businesses. Be open to

involvement from the community and the possibilities with your Historias project. Just remember, the bigger it gets, the more work for your volunteers.

22. Explore publication options. Your Historias project can be as simple as a home printing project or an actual published compilation. The committee should look at possibilities and decide on the most prudent choice. The CHP relied on volunteers to help with set up of the book format. Our committee members contributed ideas, pictures, introductions, and other pieces. We asked the local mayor to provide an introduction, and a local historian to provide a perspective for the book. We followed a traditional book format and an acknowledgement page listing all who contributed to the project. We chose an online publisher (48hrbooks.com) that provided us a reasonable price for the initial book order, and a timely turnaround. Our book included color pages, and a nice hardback cover. Again, cost can be covered by sponsors or project funders.
23. Archive. Our partnership with the county library system offered us the opportunity to archive the book at all library locations. We highly recommend this type of partnership. Also, local historical museums and art leagues might make great partners to help share the message of your work.
24. Photography and Video. Local colleges or schools can make good partners for filming some of the interviews or celebration. We had a volunteer professional photographer that offered her time and supplies to photograph each pair of the ladies, and a group portrait that we gifted to one of our community partners to hang.
25. Publicity. We engaged our local newspaper on the project which produced a front page article and pictures, and a second article. We also engaged a local community magazine to cover the project for the Spanish speaking community. Try to get media involved along the way to cover your special project and what it means for your PART chapter and the community mission.
26. Give yourself a full month for formatting the final biographies and pieces of the book. Use pictures taken throughout the project of the ladies working together, and use old pictures of the senior ladies to show their childhood, early adulthood, family and current picture. We placed these with each chapter that represented each biography. We included a picture of the pair with its chapter and a small paragraph bio of the teen writing the story. The biographies were placed in alphabetical order, with an epilogue, and a page of questions to encourage intercultural connections. You can be as creative as you would like as long as it doesn't deflect from the great life stories.
27. Final check. Have your full committee review the final draft of the book. Have each senior lady review her teen's work for any errors. Sometimes things are mentioned in the writing that the partner might disagree with or might not want mentioned. Be sensitive to this while editing, but also maintain the true perspective of the teen through her eyes. Give the final book draft three good reviews before publishing your final draft. We caught mistakes late and during publishing which cost us extra to correct. This won't be a big issue if you are opting for a simpler home publishing option. Our book has 109

pages with ten stories , dedication page, acknowledgement page, table of contents, greeting page, forward, preface, introduction, PART history page, pictures, and epilogue. You can best decide your book's format and make it as formal or simple as you wish. The overall message of connection between the ladies is what matters most for a Historias Project , followed by the quality of how you bring it all together. Be mindful of this as you proceed so that you stay true to your mission and not be distracted by a deluge of opinions or options.

28. Celebrate! Once you have the final product, celebrate it with a fiesta of some sort. We held a wonderful banquet at a Girl Scout lodge with a buffet, running pictures on a big screen, flowers, music, and a formal presentation of the books to community leaders. We had each teen speak and present her partner with her book. This was a very touching event for the participants. The teens and their parents were shocked to see the beautiful book! The reality of the project hit them all that day, and it made for a very joyful day. The banquet picture and story ran in the local paper as the finale of the Conroe Historias Project.
29. The true finale. The work of the Historias project continues long after all the writing, meetings, and celebrations. Promoting intercultural, and intergenerational connections is important for communities. Use your book to talk to groups, children, leaders, churches, and anyone who needs support in making efforts to connect. The book serves as a great reminder of the uniqueness of your community and your organization. The Conroe PART hopes to continue promoting our project and sharing its possibilities with all our sisters. To date, there have been five different articles published about our project, and it has been shared with different local and national organizations, elected officials, and websites. Be creative in how you use your teaching tool, and be proud of the special record created for your community.
30. Share. Archive your copies with PART, libraries, school districts, and museums if possible. Don't hesitate to ask our Conroe Table for tips or feedback.

All the best and Many Blessings for a successful project!

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