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PHOTO: DAN VAILLANCOURT

**Worcester Women's Oral History Project
leaders Charlene Longhi Martin '78,
Maureen Ryan Doyle '73 and
Linda Burlingame Rosenlund '82**



Three Alumnae Coordinate Comprehensive Worcester Women's Oral History Project

BY TROY WATKINS

The tradition of storytelling predates the printed word. It is how history, and wisdom, was passed from one generation to another through the ages. People telling stories still play an important role in how we remember events and history.

Three Assumption alumnae are committed to preserving the contributions of women with connections to Worcester County; and are doing so through the Worcester Women's Oral History Project (WWOHP). **Linda Burlingame Rosenlund '82, Maureen Ryan Doyle '73 and Charlene Longhi Martin, Ed.D. '78, G'82** have collaborated with a host of volunteers to collect more than 250 interviews with women 18 years and older whose stories reflect the spirit of the first National Woman's Rights Convention (held in Worcester in 1850). Each story focuses on local women's contributions to work, education, health and/or politics.

In October 2009, the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, located at the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, and widely viewed as the most prestigious repository on the history of women in America, accepted the WWOHP collection of interviews.

The WWOHP is an outgrowth of the Worcester Women's History Project (WWHP), which was founded in 1994 by a group of women to raise awareness of Worcester's role in the women's rights movement. WWHP hosted *Women 2000*, a three-day international gathering of women and four years later WWHP's mission and its goals were reaffirmed through an organizational audit. According to Rosenlund, "There was an emphasis on broadly embracing the contributions of women throughout Central Massachusetts, diversifying our constituency and expanding the scope of our historical research and education. A WWHP task force ultimately decided that a community-based, oral-history project would enable us to achieve our goals."

Rosenlund, AC's director of parent programs, was president of WWHP when the oral history project was initiated in 2005 and she became the WWOHP chair. "Oral history had been a passion of mine since 2002 when I worked on a project at Fitchburg State College that helped document the Italian-American experience in that area. Chairing the WWOHP seemed a perfect fit!"

Doyle, who had been a history major at Assumption and had later served as the College's director of public relations, became a WWHP member. She became enthralled with the oral history project after attending a presentation made by Rosenlund. "I learned during my undergraduate days in Prof. John McClymer's classes that history is not just a list of battle dates," said Doyle. "History is alive and vital, a way to make sense of the present and a path to help plan the future."

A sociology major at Assumption and former dean of Continuing

Education, Martin became a WWHP member in 2007 and soon joined the oral history project. She teamed with Doyle to co-chair the project in 2008.

"The oral history project is interested in interviewing women with a connection to the greater Worcester area from every decade of life and from every walk of life," Doyle explained. Among the 250 recordings are interviews with teachers, nurses, a female Episcopalian priest, a survivor of Auschwitz, a physician, political activists and many more.

"Their words are their own and that is what makes this project special," said Doyle. "It is not someone else's interpretations of their lives – these are personal accounts."

Professor Lisa Krissoff Boehm, a nationally acclaimed oral historian who teaches history at Worcester State University, served as the professional consultant to the Project and was instrumental in establishing a relationship between WWOHP and the Schlesinger Library. The WWHOP's collection is larger and broader in scope than most of the other 50 oral history collections kept by the Schlesinger Library, according to Curator Kathryn Allamong Jacob.

The success of the project also was contingent upon numerous collaborations. "Through the Higher Education Collaborative, we work with professors from various Colleges of the Worcester Consortium who agree to incorporate oral history into their curriculum," said Martin. "Assumption professors have been generous in this participation and their students have conducted many oral histories for us."

After the 2011 spring semester, the WWOHP added interviews with the Latina community that were conducted in Spanish by Assumption students under the guidance of Associate Professor of Spanish Maryanne Leone, Ph.D.

Through their collaborative work on the oral history project, Martin and Doyle are co-authoring a book, *Voices of Worcester Women: 160 Years After the First National Woman's Rights Convention*, using a grant they received from the Schlesinger Library. The book, targeted for publication this fall, will highlight excerpts from several transcripts and focus on the areas that characterized the spirit of that first National Woman's Rights Convention.

Martin and Doyle continue to work on the project begun by Rosenlund. They chair a committee of women – including Rosenlund and Assumption professors Regina Edmonds, Ph.D. and Arlene Vadum, Ph.D. – that conducts classroom tutorials, offers community oral history workshops, and hosts an annual program featuring an oral historian and students presenting their findings. The WWOHP is a living oral history. Each year, the Project plans to add another group of interviews to its collection at the Schlesinger Library. To access the interviews or find out more about the Project, visit www.wwhp.org. ❖