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## MICRONESIAN VIEWPOINT

### DOCUMENTING ORAL HISTORY An Investigative Journalist's Approach

by

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*Micronesia Publishing & Rlene Live Productions*

This paper describes my background in mass media, particularly how my role as a talk show host and investigative reporter has helped greatly in the success of my efforts to collect oral history accounts from World War II survivors who have for sixty years in some cases, did not share their personal experiences with their spouse, children, mothers or fathers, but in front of a digital video camera spoke at length, averaging five hours in length. Also how complete strangers have accepted an invitation for a "personal interview" on live radio, without the advantage of scripts or consultation before revealing their life's secrets to the listening audience of an average 5,000 people at any one given time.

I hope that my efforts in the collection of oral history will show the difference between what I call a Prescriptive vs. Descriptive way of gathering valuable information from eye witnesses or personal experiences of Micronesia's history from those who have lived in the islands and survived the colonization of three world powers and the impact each power had on their culture, lifestyles and language. And, how they coped.

#### BACKGROUND

I have been a mass communication specialist for the past 28 years and have worked in mass media since 1978, entering the broadcast media fuelled by personal circumstances, with little more than a high school newspaper and year book experience. My skills have come mostly from traditional experience, supplemented by occasional workshop of seminars. I have worked in all facets of the media, print, broadcast, television and radio, advertising agency service, public relations and marketing. It has been a very challenging and highly rewarding experience with all the twists and turns that the industry presents, and an active exposure to people and events that ordinarily are viewed from a passive perspective of a television set, or the pages of the morning news paper; providing me with the qualifications that make oral history collection second nature.

My introduction to oral history collection came as a result of my investigative journalist and radio talk show host roles. In 1997 when I became the host of my own talk show on K57 Radio called "Rlene Live", conducting personal interviews of members in our community on

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Guam became a weekly feature during my Tuesday programs. The interest of listeners drove the show and soon I was interviewing people about culture, language, history, medicine, tourism, education, health, environmental protection, politics and art, first in the studio and then from anywhere in the world that the telephone could reach someone willing to tell their story.

The "Personal Interview" promos were designed to challenge the individual to willingly talk about first hand accounts, sensitive and embarrassing examples of their past, on live radio and without the benefit of a script, prior discussion with me as host or prepared questions. The goal was to bring out the human interest stories, to reach the heart of the interviewee and to see how much of the life experience we were able to draw out and survive in a period of one hour. In fact, many of the interviews reached very sensitive matters of the heart, delivering tearful expressions on the air and in some cases, admitting to concerns that individuals had denied, and revealing trauma and guilt, or relief in some cases.

A prominent woman in our community was heading a suicide prevention program and was a guest on my show promoting it as a public service benefit. As the woman spoke, it became clear to me that her husband committed suicide and that was why she wanted to advocate its harmful effects on the lives of those in the immediate family and the community. At one point during the show, I asked the woman if she had come to terms with her husband's suicide. She was stunned at first at the question, but composed herself and started to discuss her feelings and reaction to his suicide, right there on the air. After the show, she thanked me for bringing out her feelings, and when she returned to her office, told her staff, "You can never tell where RleneLive will take you, but that's a good thing."

No one could get enough of the interviews, not the least of which was the one in studio with me telling the story, complaining at the end of one hour, that the more time is necessary for them to tell their story. However, when first approached, thought that one hour

was too long and they would run out of things to talk about.

We were delighted with its success and wherever I went people would ask out loud in passing, "Can you survive a personal interview with RleneLive?" to which I would answer, "Maybe not, but she'd survive yours."

The ability to draw people out on the air was a real drive and when around on Tuesday mornings to greet guest before going on my show, Jon Anderson would ask, "Why do you want to go into that room with her when she is going to make you cry?" The truth was, they couldn't wait to see what I was able to draw out of them and that is why they came. The benefits outweighed the anxiety of going through the interview. And, the fact that they were accustomed to my interview style by listening to other on air interviews gave them confidence that they too could survive an interview with Rlene"Live". It was a challenge for us both.

The interviewee draws from your strength as an interviewer and you must draw from your intuition to know the right time to ask a question and a tough question. I have learned that the right time is always while you are engaged in a discussion on the matter of concern. If you are wondering about something, ask and then wait for the answer. Allowing the person to compose his/her thoughts will result in success. Be patient and do not fear silence.

## **THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

Micronesia is all about relationships. At the Symposium, many presenters spoke of challenges in the collection of oral history accounts. I listened attentively to their experiences but not surprised at the apparent difficulty that many have with the collection process.

As one who spends an incredible amount of time with people, it was clear to me that what is missing is the attitude that the stories are not just a part of Micronesian history, but of people's personal experiences and almost without exception, none of the presenters who spoke of collecting oral history accounts speak the language of the people they are collecting the accounts from. And, many don't even live in

the area that their sample population lives. Nor do they have much in common with to establish a relationship or common interest with those they want to interview.

It is my experience that there is little difference between interviewing for a news story or oral history. Relationship is the key factor in the success of both and in many cases, they are as interested in you as you are in them and it's not enough that they know who you are and that you have a legitimate reason for asking about their personal accounts. In Micronesia, who you are and what family you come from can mean getting the facts or getting the story. It's not that they withhold, it's that they release with those they are more comfortable.

The best example of this is when I asked my mother who is herself a World War II survivor to ask her friends and relatives if they would be willing to share their oral history accounts with me of their participation in the Manenggon March event and what they know of the rape of Chamorro women at the end of the war by Japanese Imperial soldiers. Mom said she would help, and in a day, I had three sheets of handwritten list of World War II survivors to interview. And, as is my practice to ask at the end of each oral history interview, how they felt about the experience and why they agreed to be interviewed; without exception they answer, "because I know your mother," or "because your mother is my relative," or "because I listen to your show on the radio and I know that you will do something with the information I tell you."

There are two comments that I think about often which came from WW II survivors Arthur Carbullido and Leoncio Castro. Carbullido said, "I am telling you things that I have never spoken to my mother or my wife and I am doing this because it's time I let it go and I know you will make sure someone hears about my experience." Castro, now deceased said, "Thank you Rlene for your interest in my story and by recording it you are making sure that I will live forever."

The answer to the success of collecting oral history accounts is fundamental to the methodology used in the collection process. As pro-

professionals in anthropology, archeology, environmental sciences, cultural preservation, and education to mention a few, many employ a prescriptive way of gathering information from the laity. But that is not the way I collect oral history accounts.

I am aware of this because I follow in their footsteps of many of the professionals in the fields mentioned above, and also of other journalists and told of many who were denied information because they make the people feel stupid and intimidate them with too many questions. They come with the tablets and ask questions they want answered and many times it's during the verification process that the lay person becomes offended to the point of asking such ones to leave. Or when the cultural way of ending the conversation occurs and the exchange is replaced by silence, the interviewer must learn to pack it up and come back another time.

The instrument containing 20 questions is useless if you can't get the story. The questions I have during interviews are often for clarification, curiosity, or a contradiction in delivery.

By allowing the interviewee to tell a story, I receive more information because memory triggers memory. And, when someone is telling a story it makes the individual less intimidated because he/she is in control of the process. I merely record, and pay attention to the details, bringing out areas of concern that they would not be able to accomplish if the interview had a more interrogative nature about it.

One interesting way an interviewee signals their displeasure during an interrogative approach is when the interviewee shouts orders to someone in the house to prepare food or set the table to feed the guest. It is a way to end the interview.

Another is when avoidance undermines and disrupts the interview. You may have experienced it and not able to explain what happened or not recognized it for what it is; when you ask a question and get nothing back but a trout looking face from the same person who was just talking to you a few minutes ago, but somehow won't speak anymore. That is when you know the interview is over.

There is always business to take care of when collecting oral history and most people dread having to ask for the release. It's important to remember that without the release, you are going to waste your time. You will not be able to use any of the material you collect if you do not have the permission of the individual to use it in reports or public education in media release.

Some of the business can be conducted before and after the interview, addressing the release of the story at the beginning. All other information can be filled out when reviewing the recording or during transcription of the interview.

I have covered many professionals in the field of archeology, science, politics, religion, education, medicine and military forces and have gathered from these individuals the same thought provoking and in-depth historical accounts of their personal experiences as well as significant events that they participated in as an investigative reporter and talk show host without ever once pulling out a tablet full of questions in a circumscriptive manner.

It is important to remember that anthropology is "the study of humanity from a comprehensive, holistic approach." If you don't have the time to get the comprehensive story in a holistic approach, get someone else who can or you'll fail in your attempt to collect the oral history you are after. Oral history is personal and you must have appreciation of the fact that it is a time consuming process and that not everyone interviewed will tell you what you want to hear right away or that you will be able to sit down with an individual and from the top, go into the five Ws & H routine.

In contrast, there are not enough hours in the day or week for me to collect oral history accounts, nor is there a shortage of interested ones to interview. And, as I sat at the Symposium listening to many challenges presented, I counted on one hand how many people have refused the invitation to be interviewed, only to have shared more of their personal accounts when they finally sit down in front of my digital video camera; wondering why they tried to run from the experience in the first place.

## **SUCCESSFUL APPROACH**

Approach is like hunting, and acquiring is all about marketing. I use my skills in both hunting and marketing to my success. But, it's my sincere interest in the person's life experiences that I believe makes me most effective. And because I am a journalist and investigative reporter, I know exactly when to ask the tough questions, and how to get the answer without getting kicked out of the house. Instead, more often than not, I am showered with gifts that in most cases have politely turned down. And it is at that point, that I learn there is no real-estate in offending my new found friend.

The difficult transition between being a journalist and oral historian is accepting gratuity. As a journalist it is my rule never to accept any form of gratuity. But, as an oral historian I can't reject a gift from an old friend, which is what they become when they take me back from the beginning to understand their oral history account.

As a result of my success in the collection of oral history, I was asked in 2003 to submit an application for a grant from the Guam Council on the Arts and Humanities agency in order to collect oral history accounts of survivors of World War II and the participants in the forced march to the Manenggon Concentration Camp in Yona. I hesitated at first and showed little interest in the prospect of collecting oral history accounts of survivors of war, only to change my mind to its value and benefit after collecting oral history now for three years. Many of the interviews average five hours, the longest lasting for nine hours. That came at my second survivor interview.

As a journalist I learned to seek the truth and report it. As an oral historian I have learned what Carmel Bird meant when she commented on an article titled "Fact of Fiction". She said, 'Life is a crude inventor; fiction will only be convincing if it is more artful than life'. Oral history accounts prove her right.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT**

Rlene Santos Steffy is a mass communication specialist of 28 years, incorporating a unique combination of professional, practical and academic casework and experience in the areas of advertising,

electronic media, journalism, photocommunications, public relations, cyber journalism, videography and oral history collection. Her career in mass communications began in advertising broadcast sales, and later expanding into marketing and retail. Steffy's career in mass communications was briefly interrupted when she ventured into private business as the co-owner and president of Images Advertising Agency, and co-owner of Monday's Child, a children's boutique, in the 80's. However, she returned to media as a columnist for the Pacific Sunday News in 1994. In 1997, after immersing herself as a social, cultural, and political commentator, Steffy became a talk show host on K57 Radio, beginning with a one-hour turn three-hour and later expanding to a five-hour-weekly show in nine short months. And, in 2000 while on the radio became the managing editor for the Guam Variety Newspaper until 2001, when she began hosting a 10-hour-weekly show. With a strong desire to pursue her interests in Oral History collection and documentation on a full time basis, she returned to a weekly show in 2003 and investigative reporter. Steffy is a diglot – equally proficient in Chamoru and English, a skill of utmost importance in producing and documenting bi-lingual projects in mass media forms. Her native and intuitive knowledge of the CHamoru language enables her, as a traditional scholar, to discuss and analyze socio-linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of communication strategies and their significance in the oral modality, between and among CHamoru language speakers. With Federal and GovGuam grants, Steffy has collected 60 Manenggon Survivor's accounts from Chamorros in Guam, the CNMI and those who moved to the United States after World War II. From her collection, she's produced one video documentary titled *Oral History Overview of Guam and Micronesia Featuring the Manenggon March and Manenggon Concentration Camp Survivor Accounts*. Her second grant financed video documentary titled *Hagåtña Historic District* will be released in January 2007. With personal funds, Steffy published the *Manenggon March Collection*, a traveling crying wall of Survivor's accounts and with her husband Robert Joseph Steffy published in 2005, the *Y Santa Biblia* Chamorro Red-Letter Edition Bible, and in 2006, the *Y Santa Biblia – The Holy Bible* Chamorro-English Diglot Red-Letter Edition Bible. Her oral history collection totals over 200 Chamorro, Micronesian and Oceanic life histories. She is collecting oral histories in Micronesia for the ILA Global Project on the History of Leprosy and when bored, volunteers her time to collect Vietnam

and Gulf War Veterans histories for the U. S. Library of Congress.

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