

Final Report on Officer's Grant to the Center for History & New Media, George Mason University, for development of the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank

On October 24, 2005, the Center for History & New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University received a program officer's grant of \$45,000 to launch the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (HDMB) in partnership with the University of New Orleans. Two weeks later, we opened the site <www.hurricanearchive.org> to contributions solicited through personal networks in this early testing phase. On March 28, 2006 we received an additional \$225,000 to more fully carry out the project. By January 2006 we began publicizing the site primarily through Gulf Coast media and personal networks. This report serves as a final report on the officer's grant, which concluded on December 31, 2006, as well as an interim report on the larger grant, which continues until May 31, 2008.

We began the project with two central goals. First, we set out to collect and preserve digital evidence of the devastating Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2005, because such evidence will prove invaluable to future historians and analysts. In addition, we thought that the process of recording experiences of those affected by the storms would contribute to healing and rebuilding in their communities. Second, we see the HDMB as a way of further developing and disseminating the practice of collecting and preserving the past online. Not only will the *HDMB* provide an important example to other practitioners, it will also offer guidance, tools, and approaches that can be used in a wide variety of settings to reproduce similar digital collections.

Based on our experience with the *ECHO* and *September 11 Digital Archive* projects, we knew that it would be difficult to predict the success of the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, but we set out to collect at least 3,000 online narratives and photographs—that would make HDMB 50 percent more successful than the *September 11 Digital Archive* relative to the target population.) We also sought to attract 1 million page views of the website in 2006. To accomplish our goals and build a robust digital memory bank we implemented several strategies. First, we began by spreading the word through personal networks of project staff. Second we began to build strategic partnerships with institutions in and outside the Gulf Coast area. Third, we engaged the media to promote contributions to HDMB. Fourth, we looked to moments of commemoration to stimulate contributions, notably in 2006 during Mardi Gras (February and March) and the anniversaries of Katrina and Rita (August and September). Sixth, we began creating an automated collecting tool to take advantage of contemporary trends in the online world to facilitate both the automatic discovery and collection of born-digital objects such as photos, blog entries, and podcasts. Finally, we reached out to public historians through a digital history workshop and conference presentations.

Overall, we proved much more successful than we had hoped in our online collecting—gathering almost 13,000 digital objects before the end of 2006—more than four times our initial goal. We did fall short of our website visitation goals, but only very slightly--receiving about 900,000 page views rather than one million. Despite this overall success, we faced some significant challenges in this project. Unlike the September 11

attacks, which elicited emotional reactions from most Americans, these hurricanes, while nationally significant, did not directly affect the entire country. Moreover, we found it hard in some cases to get those who are still rebuilding to tell their stories, because they are still struggling to deal with the storms' aftermath. And we were less successful than we hoped (see below) in reaching the poor and unwired. Overall, we probably underestimated the degree of devastation and how that would hinder our work. Nevertheless, we believe that we have accumulated a major archive that includes the words and images of those directly affected by the hurricanes, first responders, and those who voluntarily traveled to the Gulf Coast to help rebuild to share their stories through HDMB.

The earliest contributions to HDMB came from personal contacts of Outreach Coordinator, Michael Mizell-Nelson, a New Orleans native, and Project Manager Sheila Brennan who lived in Port Arthur, Texas. Michael and his students at the University of New Orleans wrote some of the first narratives, uploaded photographs, and encouraged their families to contribute to HDMB. Other personal contacts led to the development of twenty strategic partnerships throughout the year, which include: universities and colleges (University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi, Al Gore, Sr., Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University); museums (Smithsonian Institutions' National Museum of American History, Louisiana State Museum, Museum of the Gulf Coast, National Hansen's Disease Museum, Historic Naval Ships Association); state humanities councils (Mississippi Humanities Council, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities); military units (Kansas Army National Guard); media outlets (NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Beaumont Enterprise); non-profit relief groups (Katrina Kids Project); and grassroots empowerment groups (Student Hurricane Network, Katrina's Jewish Voices, Do You Know What it Means, New Orleans, the Floodwall Project, New Orleans Oral History Project).

Throughout the year, but particularly during Mardi Gras and the anniversaries of Katrina and Rita, we distributed press releases, flyers, and postcards in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas. During Mardi Gras, the Outreach Coordinator and Project Manager distributed nearly five thousand Mardi Gras-style cups emblazoned with the project logo and URL during numerous parades and celebrations. They also both conducted radio and television interviews reaching audiences in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas that drove web traffic to the site.

To encourage online contributions and boost visitation during the anniversaries of Katrina and Rita, we leafleted public and university library workstations on the Gulf and distributed them electronically through Webjunction, an online community of librarians, across the country to gain spontaneous contributions from those sitting at internet-ready computers. To reach college students at twenty Gulf state universities, we used Facebook.com. During the world-premiere of Spike Lee's documentary on Katrina and the re-opening of the Superdome in New Orleans, project staff passed out flyers and postcards to crowds gathering for those events. With Patti Giglio's assistance, we

contacted the media via the PR Newswire. *HDMB* also secured a Google Ad grant allowing us to run free ads on Google's high traffic search portal.

We tried reaching the displaced and unwired by establishing a voicemail account with the Internet phone service Skype with a New Orleans exchange, and by printing and distributing postcards with a pre-paid reply card with space for writing a short personal reflection (to be scanned into *HDMB*). Responses to the voicemail account was less successful than we hoped, but we are still distributing the phone number and are ready to save and upload any audio stories recorded. Mizell-Nelson also worked to bridge language barriers with students in the English as a Second Language program at Delgado Community College to compose and contribute their stories.

We also took a number of steps to spread more generally the practice of online collecting through digital memory banks. In particular, we brought six Gulf Area scholars working on a hurricane-related public history projects to Chicago in October to attend a digital history workshop, to teach them about online collecting, and to discuss ways for them to contribute to *HDMB*'s collections. In addition, we continue to spread *HDMB* and the practice of digital memory banking through conference presentations and in print including: Texas Association of Museums and Louisiana Association of Museums Conference (April 2006); American Association for the History of Computing Conference (April 2006); Society of American Archivists Conference (August 2006); Gulf South History and Humanities Conference (October 2006); and *Vectors Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular* (Spring 2006), Concordia University (October 2006); and Marymount University (September 2006).

We will continue in 2007 and the first half of 2008 to work on both sides of the project—further collecting of stories and digital materials related to the Hurricanes of 2005 and further development and promotion of the practice of online collecting. The accomplishments of the past year provide a strong foundation for the successful completion of the project.

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