

Statement of Value

Memories are living histories. According to an African proverb, 'Every old man that dies is a library that burns.' Over the past century oral history – neatly described by United States practitioner Ron Grele as 'the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction' – has transformed the practice of contemporary history in many countries.

In this Statement of Value, Oral History Australia summarises what makes oral history so special and so valuable.

- ❖ Oral history adds to the historical record the experiences of individuals and groups who are less likely to record their stories by other means and preserve those stories in permanent archives. For example, in Australia oral history has made significant contributions to the historical record of indigenous Australians, of workers and the unemployed, of young and old, of migration and cultural diversity, of people with disabilities and special needs, and of people with diverse sexualities, among others.
- ❖ Oral history adds to the historical record aspects of experience in the past which are less likely to be recorded and preserved, such as the history of family life, friendship or intimacy.
- ❖ Oral history records and preserves voice, and thus ensures that the historical record includes different languages and vernacular speech, accent and dialect.
- ❖ Visual oral history recordings capture not only what people look like and the significance of non-verbal communication, they also record the places and activities that are pictured in the recording.
- ❖ Oral history recordings capture the emotion of history, including both the significance of emotion in the past and the emotional resonance of that past in people's lives.
- ❖ Oral history provides invaluable evidence about the past, and it provides invaluable evidence about the significance and meaning of the past in the present life of the narrator and their society.
- ❖ Oral history can be empowering for people who have not had a chance to tell their story, whose story has been suppressed, denied or manipulated, and who are affirmed by public recognition that their life and their story is significant.
- ❖ Oral history can be an invaluable resource for advocacy by groups of people whose history has been suppressed, denied or manipulated, and who wish to tell their version of history and set the record straight.

- ❖ Oral history helps redefine and expand who can be a historian: anyone with appropriate training can record oral history, contribute to the historical record, and help to reshape understanding of the past.
- ❖ Oral history brings together community, professional and academic historians who share an enthusiasm for creating and using recorded interviews, and who learn and benefit from their different approaches to oral history.
- ❖ Oral history provides a rich resource of stories, voices and evidence which can be used in a diverse range of historical productions, ranging from museum exhibitions to podcasts, film, television and radio documentary, artwork and performance, history books and creative writing, websites and audio sound trails – and future media that we can barely imagine.
- ❖ Oral history can be so stimulating, and so rewarding, for the person telling their story, and for the person privileged to record that story.