Archive Tucson: Oral histories tell the story of Tucson across place and time

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Aengus Anderson likely knows more about Tucson than the average Tucsonan, but it wasn't always that way.

Although he grew up in Tucson, college took Anderson to Portland, Oregon, when he was 18. Then a career in advertising, specifically radio production, led him to jobs in Chicago and later San Francisco.

He left advertising when he was 28, and an interest in the idea of place – how places change, and how people live through those changes – brought him back to Tucson in 2009 for a master's program at the University, in history, with a focus on the American Southwest.

"I grew up in Tucson, and I didn't know anything about Tucson, and I didn't learn anything about Tucson, and then I left Tucson," Anderson said, giving the very abridged version of his early life. "I thought I should actually learn something about the place I grew up in, which I still liked."

When his master's program ended, Anderson's advertising background led him, in 2013, to a role on the University Libraries marketing team, where he now works as a digital media producer, making videos, photos and other promotional materials for the libraries.

But Anderson is also still learning about Tucson, and he's sharing what he learns with everyone.

Since 2017, he has produced Archive Tucson, a vast online oral history project within Special Collections, that aims to record as many of the city's stories as Anderson can find. In five years, Anderson has logged more than 450 hours of interviews with more than 100 people. He only plans to add more.

'If this person doesn't tell me, it's gone'

Anderson visualized an oral history project about Tucson during his time as a grad student. While trying to write about the Southwest, he found that records about average people in mid-20th century Tucson were hard to come by.

Special Collections archives included collections from Arizona politicians, artists and other notables. Other local historical organizations had done oral histories with Tucsonans in the 1960s, so their recordings covered a period much earlier than Anderson had in mind.

When he started working at University Libraries, Anderson began asking around about doing an oral history project, and many supported the idea. He recorded his first interview for the project in 2014 with Bernard "Bunny" Fontana, a local anthropologist and prolific author who served as the University Libraries field historian for 35 years, until 1992.

Anderson said he envisions oral history as the recording of people's memories about the recent past with the future in mind — looking at current events that people might take for granted today and asking whether they will be important to future generations.

As people telling the stories of what happened in the past, historians are biased toward written records, which can last longer than oral records, Anderson said. That doesn't always give us objective, accurate history.

"Written records reflect the people who can write — who are usually the people with power — so the stories we tell about the past are usually the stories of people in power," Anderson said. "What oral history does is, now you can talk to regular people who don't leave a lot of written records."

Anderson doesn't rely on a strict set of rules when it comes to choosing his subjects. It's often a matter of luck, he said. On his day-to-day travels around the city, he often asks people he meets to refer him to other folks who might have a story to tell. It's sometimes difficult to figure out who those people are, Anderson said. But he's learned to recognize them once they start talking.

"It's most exciting for me when I'm talking to someone and I realize, 'Oh, none of this is in the record somewhere else. This is cool,'" said Anderson, who records most interviews in his home studio on Tucson's west side. "We're getting something that, if this person doesn't tell me, it's gone."

Voices from the University and beyond

The hundreds of hours of full interviews on the Archive Tucson website are organized in alphabetical order by last name. The site also includes short excerpts, organized by topic, originally made for airtime on Arizona Public Media.
Some names will be familiar to many in the University community.

President Emeritus John P. Schaefer, who led the University from 1971 to 1982, shared more than five hours’ of life stories over six recording sessions. The interviews cover memories about life on campus in the 1960s, growing the University’s national reputation, establishing the Center for Creative Photography and more.

Anderson also spent more than three hours interviewing Schaefer’s wife, Helen Schaefer, a prolific local arts philanthropist who passed away last month. The recordings include stories from her time as a woman pursuing a degree in the male-dominated chemistry field and her efforts to get a new building to house the Poetry Center.

Lydia Otero, an associate professor emerita in the Department of Mexican American Studies and an author shared her upbringing in the Barrio Kroeger Lane neighborhood, on Tucson’s west side, in the 1960s. The construction of Interstate 10 left her family’s home adjacent to the freeway’s frontage road.

Robert Elliott, who played for the Wildcats men’s basketball team in the 1970s and later the New Jersey Nets shared memories of culture shock when he arrived in Tucson from his hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Elliott also discussed his time with the Wildcats and how collegiate athletics has changed since then, as well as his career as an accountant in Tucson and his service on local corporate boards.

In a recent two-hour interview with Dante Lauretta, the principal investigator of the University’s OSIRIS-REx mission, Lauretta details the challenges and successes of undertaking a NASA mission to visit an asteroid and return to Earth with a piece of it.

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Anderson's favorite Archive Tucson interviews, he said, are the three he did with Joel Turner, one of Tucson’s first Black dentists. Turner, who grew up in Tucson in the 1930s, shared many life experiences, including growing up in the Dunbar Neighborhood, studying chemistry at the University and serving as a commanding officer in the U.S. Army.

"We talked about a ton of stuff in Tucson's history that I was really glad went on record," Anderson said of his time with Turner. "He was just a really good storyteller."

Seeing Tucson 'in four dimensions'

Anderson doesn't see an end to Archive Tucson, at least not soon.

"I could do it forever," he said. "You find these threads and you kind of pull and get into different communities. There are a lot of communities that I just haven’t gotten into enough and would like to. I’m just waiting to find the person who opens that door for me."

Regardless of what threads he finds in the future, the ones he’s already pulled follow him around the city, whether on his bike commutes to campus or walks around his neighborhood.

"I read once that studying history lets you see in four dimensions, and I’ve always really liked that expression – the notion that now I can see back in time," he said. "Every day, I pass some place that somebody has told me a story about. You do enough of this, and everywhere is that place."

Anderson said he’s always interested in considering referrals for interviewees. Those interested in suggesting someone to interview for Archive Tucson can reach him at aengus@arizona.edu.