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‘Lest We Forget’: Archiving Oral Histories in the Wake of 21st Century Mass Shooting

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Abstract

This study is the first to compare the creation of the largest mass shooting repositories in America. In addition, it explores the narratives held in one collection to determine the impact of a mass shooting on a campus community. It does so by expanding the Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project, held by the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, into a longitudinal study. By returning to ten original narrators and adding new voices from former students and faculty, this research thematically analyzes accounts of living through a university mass shooting. Using the University of North Carolina, Charlotte as a case study, this thesis examines the impact of mass shooting on survivors and the community through the lenses of safety and security on campus, as well as community recovery. It also explores collective memory and student voices of activism in the aftermath. It concludes by evaluating the use of archives and archivist activism in social justice movements and using examples of crisis oral history's utility in the public history sphere, postulates how narratives of trauma might be used by future generations.

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Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to dedicate this work to the remembrance of gun violence victims across the United States, to Riley Howell and Ellis 'Reed' Parlier and their families, and to the archivists collecting to remember these tragic events, lest we forget.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree* at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed name: Casey Bumgarner Moore
Signature: Casey Bumgarner Moore

** See 'Research Overview' for details on commonalities in literature reviewed for my Masters dissertation 'Archiving Mass Shooting: Oral History Projects in the Aftermath of University Gun Violence', completed in 2021 as part of the requirement for the degree 'MSc Information Management and Preservation' awarded by the University of Glasgow.*

Abbreviations:

APA – American Psychological Association

ATF – Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives

BLM – Black Lives Matter

CAPS – Center for Counseling at Psychological Services

CMPD – Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department

CSPG – Center for Political Graphics

EAP – Employment Assistance Program

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

IRB – Institutional Review Board

MFOL – March for Our Lives

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NIU - Northern Illinois University

NNROHP – Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project

NPR – National Public Radio

OCRHC – Orange County Regional History Center

OHA – Oral History Association

OHRC – Oral History Research Center (Las Vegas)

OHS – Oral History Society

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SAA – Society of American Archivists

TAVP – Texas After Violence Project

UNCC – University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Introduction and Literature Review

In the twenty-first century United States, few issues are more controversial or polarizing than the debate surrounding gun control and gun ownership. From 2011 to 2014, the frequency of mass shootings in the United States tripled, from a shooting occurring every 200 days, to one every sixty-four days.[1] And yet, with just two major exceptions, despite public outcry and national media attention, very few policy changes have followed these tragic events.[2] The first was the 2018 federal ban on bump-stocks after a shooter used the device to target a country music festival in Las Vegas, Nevada, killing fifty-eight people and wounding more than 850 in ten minutes—the deadliest mass shooting in America to date.[3] However, the Supreme Court overturned that ban in 2024, arguing that bump-stocks did not meet the definition of a 'machinegun' and that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) had exceeded its authority by placing the ban.[4] The second was largely attributed to the actions of students from Parkland, Florida, who organized, demonstrated, and sparked a national youth protest movement in the wake of the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting.[5] Three months after the Parkland shooting, the Florida Legislature passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, a bill establishing mental health parameters for gun ownership, banning bump-stocks in the state, and establishing stricter gun safety protocols

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[1] Amy P. Cohen, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, 'Rate of Mass Shootings Has Tripled Since 2011 Harvard Research Shows', *Mother Jones*, 15 October 2014 <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/10/mass-shootings-increasing-harvard-research/> [Accessed February 8, 2022]

[2] Since 2013, thirty-three states have passed legislation allowing concealed carry firearms on college campuses. Bills attempting to ban concealed carry in five states that had campus shootings, failed to pass in all five states. Michele Kiely, 'School Shootings: Creating Safer Schools' in *Why We Are Losing the War on Gun Violence in the United States,* ed. by Marie Crandall, Stephanie Bonne, Jennifer Bronson, and Woodie Kessel (Springer, 2021), pp. 33-47 (p. 35), doi:10.1007/978-3-030-55513-9

[3] According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), a bump stock is a device which allows 'a shooter of a semiautomatic firearm to initiate a continuous firing cycle with a single pull of a trigger'. The 2018 presidential memorandum redefined the devices as machineguns and gave Americans the option to destroy their devices or turn them in to the ATF. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 'Rules and Regulations', ATF (2010) < https://www.atf.gov/rules-and-regulations/bump-stocks>[Accessed February 8, 2022].

[4] Congressional Research Services, 'The Supreme Court Invalidates the ATF's Bump-Stock Ban', Congressional Research Services, 20 June 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/LSB/LSB10920> [Accessed June 25, 2024]

[5] See: Bradley A. Serber, '"The Last Mass Shooting": Anticipating the End of Mass Shooting, Yet Again', *Rhetoric and Guns*, ed. by Lydia Wilkes, Nate Kreuter and Ryan Skinnell (University Press of Colorado, 2022), pp. 135-150, doi:10.7330/9781646422159.c008

including three day waiting periods on gun purchases and increasing the age limit to purchase from eighteen to twenty-one.[6]

At the 2018 March for Our Lives (MFOL) rally in Washington, D.C., Parkland student Emma Gonzalez stood in silence for six minutes and twenty seconds, the exact amount of time it took a student gunman to kill seventeen people and injure fifteen others at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Gonzalez concluded her speech by underlining the priorities of the newly conceived nonprofit MFOL, stating, 'Fight for your lives before it's someone else's job'.[7] Reflecting on the students' activism, women's studies scholar Emily Bent noted they 'cleverly turned politicians' thoughts and prayers into appeals for political action and government accountability'.[8] Parkland students determined to keep their story relevant. This led to organized marches, voter registration events, and meetings with legislators.[9] Through these actions, they enacted real societal change in a state known for its opposition to gun control. As of 2022, there are 300 MFOL chapters in the United States, all comprised of American youth, and today they continue to spread through secondary schools and higher education communities.[10]

One year after the Parkland shooting, a student gunman entered professor Adam Johnson's Anthropology and Philosophy of Science class at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (UNCC). 30 April 2019 was the last day of spring semester classes at the University. Johnson's students were engaged in final presentations when the gunman opened fire, killing two students and injuring four others. In the days that followed, media personnel covered everything from vigils and memorials to marches and protests against gun violence, demonstrating how the tragedy affected not only UNCC students and faculty but the community of Charlotte as a whole. Within days, Chancellor Philip Dubois had assembled a remembrance commission to oversee the University's response and recovery. Among the commission's final recommendations was a call

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[6] CB/SB 7026, 2018 Florida Legislature, Reg. Sess. (Fl. 2018) <https://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/BillSummaries/2018/html/7026> [10 November 2025]
[7] Dakin Andone, 'Emma Gonzalez Stood on Stage for 6 Minutes- the Length of the Parkland Gunman's Shooting Spree', *CNN*, 25 March 2018 <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/24/us/march-for-our-lives-emma-gonzalez> [Accessed 10 September 2022]
[8] Emily Bent, 'This is Not Another Girl-Power Story: Reading Emma Gonzalez as a Public Feminist Intellectual', *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45, 4 (2020), pp. 795-816 (p. 795), doi:10.1086/707796
[9] Ibid.
[10] 'March For Our Lives 2020 Impact Report', March For Our Lives (2020) <https://marchforourlives.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/March-For-Our-Lives_2020-Impact-Report.pdf> [Accessed March 10, 2022].

to conduct oral history interviews with students, faculty, and staff, 'to document this event through the eyes of our campus and community members'.[11]

Using oral history as a methodology to document narratives from marginalized groups has allowed practitioners to capture memories and events that would otherwise escape the historical record. By supplementing historical and elite holdings with oral histories, academic and community archives offer more enriching, diverse, and also complicated stories. These collections provide new opportunities for historians to analyze narratives in-depth to study collective memory and survivor testimony after mass shooting events. Like the voices of students in the wake of the Parkland shooting, oral history narratives also hold similar power. But can these narratives produce change, influence policy, and aid in social justice movements? By capturing mass shooting narratives and making them available to the public, oral historians and archivists are compiling repositories not only of the collective memory of crisis, but of community grief, anger, and proactive reactions by survivors who are ready for change. While their future utility is yet to be explored, examples from social justice archives speak to their potential in the fight for gun control in the United States.

I.1: Research Overview and Argument

This investigation of mass shooting oral history collections builds on foundational research conducted for my master's degree in 2021. That dissertation investigated the Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project (NNROHP) and condolence archive through the lens of archival theory and information management, while also evaluating the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) newly created resource kit, 'Documenting in Times of Crisis'.[12] Using oral history as a methodological approach to interview archivists involved in both projects raised new questions for me about the use of crisis oral history in documenting mass shootings. This work draws on a similar base of scholarship as my 2021 dissertation but does so on a greatly expanded scale. It is distinctive because it focuses on the Niner Nation Remembers collection as a case

[11] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', University of North Carolina, Charlotte (2020), p. 3. <https://ninernationremembers.uncc.edu/niner-nation-remembrance-commission/final-report> [Accessed 21 July 2021].
[12] 'Documenting in Times of Crisis: A Resource Kit', Society of American Archivists (2023) <https://www2.archivists.org/advocacy/documenting-in-times-of-crisis-a-resource-kit> [Accessed 15 July 2025]

study in community recovery and collective memory after mass shooting and because it compares various mass shooting repositories in the United States.[13]

This thesis argues that oral history interviews with mass shooting survivors are under-documented and underutilized in the American archives sector. These stories hold value for future research as they document community recovery and serve as a record of a population living through the gun violence epidemic in the United States. In the coming chapters, I will explore how a select few archivists are leading the push to document their community's mass shooting events, what the narratives tell us about survivors and community recovery, and how the stories might be used in the future by archivists, activists, researchers, and communities.

This multidisciplinary research project combines archival studies and archival theory, crisis oral history, and collective memory. It draws on methods and insights from the disciplines of oral history, ethnography, and information studies, which I elaborate on in the concluding section of this introduction and in the following chapters. My findings make this thesis a pivotal read for archivists and community practitioners beginning to document traumatic mass shooting events through crisis oral history, which has become a useful means for collecting narratives surrounding tragedy.

Over the past sixty years, oral history has gained legitimacy as a credible methodology for capturing memories. Definitions of oral history are straightforward in their assessment of it as a method. Former Director of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office and oral historian, Ronald J. Grele described the methodology as the 'interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction'.[14] Twenty years later, gender historian Lynn Abrams opened her monograph *Oral History Theory* by introducing oral history as a research method. She writes, 'It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analyzing their memories of the past' including that as a methodology, it is also 'engulfed by issues which make it controversial, exciting and endlessly promising'.[15] The limitless interdisciplinarity of oral history as a research method has led to its use in capturing trauma narratives.[16] Termed crisis oral history by oral historians Steven Sloan

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[13] See: Casey Bumgarner Moore, 'Archiving Mass Shooting: Oral History Projects in the Aftermath of University Gun Violence' (unpublished Master's dissertation, School of Humanities, University of Glasgow, 2021)
[14] Ronald J. Grele, 'Directions for Oral History in the United States', in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd edn., by D.K. Dunaway and W.K. Baum (AltaMira Press, 1996), pp. 62-84 (p.63).
[15] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edn. (Routledge, 2016), p. 1.
[16] Ibid., p.175.

and Mark Cave, the growing subfield is being used by academics, researchers, and local communities to document crises such as humanitarian emergencies, refugees and displacement histories, natural disasters, social justice movements, and political violence. This thesis argues that archivists are also navigating trauma interviews at both the community and university level and they face challenges in project design and implementation because of the nature of crisis oral history projects and a lack of 'good practice' standards.

This thesis examines multiple factors surrounding mass shooting archives. With limited scholarship on the detailed practices of project creation, interviewee selection, interviewing, and opening repositories, I examine how archivists navigate these challenging projects, how they steward the gathered narratives, and suggest how repositories could be used as social justice collections in the future.[17] Analyzing archivist interviews to extrapolate certain themes within each mass shooting oral history archive provided me insight into the thoughts of narrators in the affected communities of Las Vegas, Orlando, and Charlotte. With UNCC in particular, I compare more recent interviews to the initial 2019-2020 interviews to determine how the 2019 shooting affected the campus community and how it collectively moved toward recovery.

A review of scholarship surrounding the role of 'activist archivists' along with recent developments in archival theory provides a view of the current state of trauma-based interviewing, archiving, and mass shooting collection management. Trained archivists receive little to no professional guidance on how to create and steward trauma collections or how to address and aid their user communities after tragedy. As archivist Ashley Maynor found, few protocols exist for archivists looking to document tragedy through collecting 'spontaneous shrines', and even fewer resources are available for oral history projects.[18] However, as

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[17] See: Tamara Kennelly and Susan E. Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self: Trauma and Student Survivors of the Shooting at Virginia Tech' in *Listening on the Edge,* ed. by Mark Cave and Steven Sloan (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 55-73; Roger Christman, Anne Platoff, and Tammi Kim, 'Documenting Resilience: Condolence Collection Projects in the Wake of Violence', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]; Katie Howell, Tina Wright, Casey Moore and Tyler Cline, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy: An Ongoing Case Study', (2020) National Council on Public History Conference, virtual <https://ncph.org/conference/2020-annual-meeting/conference-materials/> [Accessed 28 March 2022]

[18] Ashley R. Maynor, 'Response to the Unthinkable: Collecting and Archiving Condolence and Temporary Memorial Materials Following Public Tragedies', in *Handbook of Research on Disaster Management and Contingency Planning in Modern Libraries,* ed. by Emily Nelson Decker and Jennifer A. Townes (IGI Global, 2016), pp. 582-624, doi:10.4018/978-1-4666-8624-3.ch025

university archivists and oral historians, their role in documenting campus history often makes their involvement inevitable.

Historically, oral history archives have benefited from the contribution of community-based interviews conducted by local citizens after crises. These projects have made a positive contribution to both archival holdings and community collective memory upon their donation.[19] They also do not require much institutional staffing or funding as projects are developed and managed by community members. Capturing traumatic mass shooting events through oral history is a nascent practice for the library and archives sector. After the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, university archivist Tamara Kennelly recognized the necessity of conducting oral histories with the community. Beginning in 2009, she created the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project collecting seventy interviews with oral historian Susan E. Fleming-Cook aiding as interviewer.[20]

Following Kennelly's lead, other universities and local institutions began documenting their own community shootings through oral history interviews. After the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida claimed forty-nine victims, the Orange County Regional History Center launched 'The Stories They Could Tell' project to capture oral history narratives from survivors, families of the victims, and community members.[21] In Las Vegas, the deadliest mass shooting in American history took place at the 2017 Route 91 Harvest music festival. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas' Oral History Research Center began an oral history project in response, seeking to interview first responders, witnesses, and survivors.[22] This shift in archivists engaging in active collecting can be seen in other areas across the sector, as archivists in

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[19] Archivist Craig S. Simpson and historian Gregory S. Wilson acknowledged the contribution of local citizen Sandra Pearlman Halem who collected sixty-nine interviews between 1990 and 2000 to remember the 1970 Kent State shootings. In 2005, Kent State's Special Collections and Archives launched a second phase of oral history interviews which accompanied Halem's analog tapes. See: Craig S. Simpson and Gregory S. Wilson, *Above the shots: an oral history of the Kent State shootings* (Kent State University Press, 2016), p. 4.

[20] Tamara Kennelly and Susan E. Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self: Trauma and Student Survivors of the Shooting at Virginia Tech' in *Listening on the Edge,* ed. by Mark Cave and Stephen Sloan (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 55-73 (p. 69).

[21] 'The Stories They Could Tell', Orange County Regional History Center (2016) <https://www.thehistorycenter.org/stories-they-could-tell-english/> [Accessed 14 March 2022].

[22] 'Remembering 1 October: A Collaborative Initiative to Document the Tragedy and Response', University of Nevada, Las Vegas University Libraries (2017) <https://www.library.unlv.edu/whats_new_in_special_collections/2017/10/remembering-1-october-collaborative-initiative-document> [Accessed 14 March 2022].

universities work to document marginalized voices and fill gaps in their archives to better represent the communities they serve.

The twenty-first century approach of using oral history to capture experiences of mass shooting survivors after community tragedy has further pushed archivists out of their historical roles as neutral stewards of donated material, and into a postmodern, activist position within their organizations. By actively collecting narratives of trauma, archivists are ensuring that community voices are not only heard, but will be remembered. Just as the students of Parkland used their tragedy to enact legislative change, this thesis argues that collected archives of mass shooting narratives have the potential to also promote change.

Beginning this project, I questioned why oral history interviews with mass shooting survivors were under-documented, underutilized, and perhaps undervalued in the archives sector. To explore this observation, I developed five overarching research questions to help frame my argument: How is oral history being used to document US mass shooting events? How does the politicization of gun violence impact the creation, implementation, and usability of archival oral history collections? How might feminist approaches and trauma-informed practices allow archivists to document and preserve people's experiences of mass shooting ethically? What do these narratives say about living through a mass shooting event? Lastly, how might survivor narratives and the resulting archival collections capture community collective memory, and can they inspire social change?

These research questions are considered in the following six chapters, as I move from analyzing individual mass shooting archives across the United States to discussing their broader impact in terms of social justice archives. This introduction and first chapter review previously published literature and detail my research methodology, positionality, ethical considerations, and project limitations. Chapter two answers the first three research questions by interviewing archivists stewarding mass-shooting oral history collections. By discussing project design, ethics, and feminist approaches, this chapter argues that archivists can build on their training to adopt 'good practices' to document a community mass shooting through oral history. Chapters three and four use UNCC's Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project (NNROHP) as a case study of an impacted community and its recovery to understand the fourth question: how narrators discussed living through a mass shooting event. Using community recovery goals outlined by

Carolyn Lunsford Mears' work with the Columbine community and Columbine parents,[23] chapter three argues that UNCC's rush toward recovery and resiliency disillusioned narrators, but that students and staff demonstrated community strength and bonding. Chapter four highlights the question of collective memory by arguing that mass shootings, and school shootings in particular, are so prevalent in America that they are integral to students' cultural life scripts. It also argues that Generation Z narrators chose routes of activism in the aftermath by engaging in protests, using their power as university leaders, and by involving themselves in social justice organizations. Chapter five investigates the fifth research question, considering the use of archives within social justice movements while postulating the future usability of mass shooting oral history collections. It argues that narrators' voices can aid the fight for gun control in America.

To ground my research within current academic scholarship, I first review literature surrounding archival theory and collective memory, oral history methodology and trauma-informed practices in crisis oral history, and the social impact of mass shooting archives. This allowed me not only to position my study but also to determine the original contributions it could make to archival studies and archival theory, crisis oral history, and collective memory.

I.2: Postmodernism and Collective Memory in the Archive

Debates surrounding recordkeeping, collection appraisal, and archival theory have dominated the archival profession since the inception of formal collecting. Even the possibility and use of archival theory were contested concepts throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. As archival theory developed, archivist moved from gatekeepers of elite histories for researchers, to documenters and stewards of information for the benefit of communities and users in the twenty-first century. Only recently have perceptions of archives become more fluid, with scholarship surrounding active collecting by archivists, decolonization, feminist theory, and radical empathy becoming popular topics in the archival community.[24]

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[23] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma,* p. 218.
[24] See: Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives', *Archivaria*, 81,1 (2016), pp. 23-43 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687705> [Accessed 10 June 2025]; Nicola Laurent and Kristen Wright, 'A Trauma-Informed Approach to Managing Archives: A New Online Course', *Archives and Manuscripts,* 48, 1 (2020), pp. 80-87, doi:10.1080/01576895.2019.1705170

The suggestion that there is theory behind the practice of archival work was a contested topic in the late twentieth century. Writing in 1987, archivist John Roberts argued that the acquisition work of the archivist was dependent upon historical scholars using the archive. Therefore, the archivist's role was to satisfy the identified interests and subjects of historians.[25] To him, the concept of archival theory was 'an emotional need' built on 'an archival community seeking professional acceptance'.[26] Canadian archivist Terry Eastwood challenged Roberts' view of archival theory and of the archivist's role in using theory for acquisition purposes. Looking at the notions of impartiality, naturalness, interrelatedness, and characteristics of authenticity and uniqueness, Eastwood concluded, 'Theory dictates the social agenda of archivists, who stand as protectors of evidence to ensure that social relationships may be pursued on objective grounds […] of evidence of facts and acts.'[27] This stance opposed that of early archival theorist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, often credited as a founder of archival ideas and practices. Jenkinson advocated for impartiality on the part of the archivist, representing what archivist Caroline Brown claimed is a 'detachment from theory, as theory can represent a dangerous tendency toward interference in the archival process'.[28]

In the early 2000s, postmodernism began to occupy discussions of archives and record collecting. In his 2002 article for the *American Archivist*, archivist Tom Nesmith noted the importance of postmodernism as a means to suggest 'a new intellectual place for archives in the formation of knowledge, culture, and societies' with archivists as co-creators and shapers of the knowledge held in repositories.[29] In 2017, archivist Geoffrey Yeo emphasized the rapid changes occurring in the archival community, identifying community relations and participatory culture, access, and accountability as key areas of concern for twenty-first century archivists. 'Because

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[25] Terry Eastwood, 'What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?', *Archivaria*, 37 (1994), pp. 122-130 (p. 122-123) <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11991> [Accessed 18 June 2024]
[26] John W. Roberts, 'Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving', *American Archivist*, 50 (1987), pp. 66-74 (p. 66), doi:10.17723/aarc.50.1.l357257455776g52
[27] Eastwood, 'What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?', p. 127-129.
[28] Caroline Brown, 'Introduction' in *Archives and Recordkeeping: Theory into Practice*, ed. by Caroline Brown (London: Facet Publishing, 2013), pp. xi-xxiii <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1680066> [Accessed 10 September 2025]
[29] Tom Nesmith, 'Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives', *The American Archivist*, 65, 1 (2002), pp. 24-41 (p. 26-27), doi:10.17723/aarc.65.1.rr4845050r0712u

records can be used to hold individuals and organizations to account for the actions they undertake,' he wrote, they 'do not always relish the prospect of comprehensive recordkeeping'.[30]

Over the past three decades, university archivists have become more active in shaping their holdings and comprehensive collections. Examining modern stewardship of university archives in the United States, archivist Helen Willa Samuels found archivists have embraced a participatory role in collecting, becoming active 'in the creation, analysis, and selection of the documentary records'.[31] In what would later be termed 'activist archivists' or 'archival activism', archivists have abandoned simple stewardship, instead becoming active documenters of records at universities. This shift away from Jenkinson's push for impartiality aligns with postmodernist archival theory and the role of archivists, which Nesmith viewed as being 'key mediators' and 'co-creators' of knowledge, and where archives are at the precipice of 'the formulation of knowledge, culture, and societies'.[32]

In their introduction to the 2015 special issue of *Archival Science*, archivists Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander explained the concepts of archiving activism and activist archiving. They described the ideas presented in the issue as 'intersections between contemporary archival practice and activism […] inspired by a variety of motivations and objectives', explaining that these practices 'go beyond advocacy for more active archival approaches and incorporate the spaces and endeavors where archivists seek to creatively document political and social movement activism'.[33] Postmodernist archival practice and the acceptance of activist archivists have led current archivists to advocate for a more decolonized, feminist, care-centered approach to archives and recordkeeping.

The discussion of feminist ethics in archival practice stems from 1990s and early 2000s discourse around deconstructing the archive and 'the (in)visibility of women and sexuality' within it.[34] Historians Jane Freeland and Christina von Hodenberg argued the lack of

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[30] Geoffrey Yeo, 'Introduction to the Series' in *The Silence of the Archive*, by David Thomas, Simon Fowler and Valerie Johnson (London, Facet Publishing, 2017), ix-xi, (p. xi), doi:10.29085/9781783301577

[31] Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1992), p. 12.

[32] Nesmith, 'Seeing Archives', (p. 26-27).

[33] Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander, '"Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft": Introduction to the Special Issue on Archiving Activism and Activist Archiving', *Archival Science* (2015), pp. 329-335 (p. 329), doi:10.1007/s10502-015-9260-6

[34] Jane Freeland and Christina von Hodenberg, 'Archiving Exhibiting, and Curating the History of Feminisms in the Global Twentieth Century: An Introduction', *Women's History Review*, 33, 1 (2024), pp. 1-6 (p. 1), doi:10.1080/09612025.2208401

marginalized voices within the archive challenged its preconception as 'a fixed entity of historical reality' leading to an expansion of archival holdings to incorporate queer and feminist histories .[35] In 2016, archivists Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor outlined a feminist ethics approach to archival theory, proposing that archivists shift their focus from individual rights to radical empathy to address social justice issues. This design 'would require archives to make survivors and implicated communities not just a target group of users, but central focal points in all aspects of the archival endeavor'.[36] Caswell and Cifor's radical empathy concept has influenced archivists and their praxis worldwide. It also influenced the design of the NNROHP and my own research by building relationships with narrators, adopting Creative Commons licenses for narrator ownership, and centering narrators at the core of both projects.

In 2021, the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* dedicated a volume to the concept of radical empathy. In their introduction, archivists Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith wrote,

> The framework for radical empathy has allowed us to make space for collective vulnerability, racial reckoning, and accountability. This is a proactive departure from the culture, ethics, practices, and theoretical foundations that we have inherited in the archival profession.[37]

For the authors, employing radical empathy in an archival setting is a pathway to liberatory archives, which may begin to repair some of the damage cultural heritage institutions have inflicted. They argued, 'Radical empathy and feminist ethics of care cause us to think beyond simply understanding how an individual or community feels; they compel us to commit to just actions' shifting our interactions and understandings.[38] Adopting a new praxis which centers record creators and informs metadata creation leads to more diverse, inclusive collections that offer users unique insights into a community's history and collective memory.

The role of the archive as an institution of power is also applicable to understanding the role of archivist as collector. Archivists Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook opened the 2002 thematic issue of *Archival Science* with a discussion of archives, records, and power. They

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[35] Ibid, p. 1-2.
[36] Caswell and Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics', p. 23.
[37] Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill and Holly A. Smith, 'An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 3 (2021), pp. 1-21 (p. 2), doi:10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171
[38] Ibid., p. 6

argued that archives are rarely seen for what they are: powerful institutions of human identity and collective memory. Archives, they explained, 'wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies,' making the role of archivist one of power and identity formation.[39] The archival document, or oral history narrative, becomes a powerful historical record, but also reflects the needs and desires of its collector, who is the archivist in this thesis.

As a master's student, Michael Folkerts researched university archivists and their role in documenting tragedy and amplifying collective memory in the aftermath of the 2008 Northern Illinois University (NIU) shooting. Folkerts is one of the only researchers to write on the topic of archiving mass shooting, particularly through oral history, making his master's thesis enlightening, critical scholarship. Folkerts initially questioned the appropriateness of university archivists documenting a mass shooting occurring on their campus. However, after interviewing NIU archivists, he concluded that an archivist's formal training and experience were sufficient preparation for collecting in the aftermath of a tragedy affecting their own community. He found that the archivists' ties to the university community and relationships with administration produced a more meaningful and significant collection.[40] Folkert also argued in favor of crisis oral history work in the wake of tragedy. He found the methodology illuminated and contextualized tragedy better than other archival collections. While these narratives risk sensitive topics and unprocessed emotion, they can potentially provide researchers 'a better understanding of the collective memory as it was being formed at the time'.[41]

French Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is credited with first coining the term collective memory in the early twentieth-century and his inaugural text is often recognized as foundational scholarship in the formation of memory studies.[42] Sociologist Lewis Coser recalled,

> Halbwachs was without a doubt the first sociologist to stress that our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in light of the present.[43]

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[39] Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science,* 2 (2002), pp. 1-19 (p. 2), doi:10.1007/BF02435628

[40] Michael Folkerts, 'The Documentation of Tragedy in the Archives: Exploring the Records of the Campus Shooting on Northern Illinois University, Collective Memory, and the Archivist' (unpublished master's thesis, Western Washington University, 2011), p. 36, doi:10.25710/s5ve-t150

[41] Ibid., p. 22.

[42] Sarah Gensburger, 'Halbwachs' Studies in Collective Memory: A Founding Text for Contemporary "Memory Studies"?', *Journal for Classical Sociology*, 16 (2016), pp. 396-413, doi:10.1177/1468795X16656268

[43] Lewis Coser, 'The Revival of the Sociology of Culture: The Case of Collective Memory', *Sociological Forum*, 7 (1992), pp. 365-373 (p. 372), doi:10.1007/BF01125050

Psycholinguist Csaba Pléh interpreted Halbwachs' view on collective memory by writing that 'memories are social to the extent that recall and access to them are mediated by group belongingness'.[44] Archival scholar Jeannette A. Bastian also defined it in terms of group affiliation, stating that collective memory is 'a social phenomenon that refers specifically to a group's recollection of the past in the present'.[45] Critical to understanding the oral histories used in this thesis, collective memory often manifests in forms of commemoration and contestation and through various outlets such as monuments, storytelling, or gatherings. A tragedy like a mass shooting unites and sometimes divides communities in ways that ordinary events do not. Collective memory can also be utilized as a methodological strategy. Bastian described it as 'a way to comprehend, study, and explain […] traumatic events with their multiple stories in meaningful and connected ways' which is pertinent when thematically analyzing an array of oral history narratives. .[46]

In the postmodernist landscape, archivists and researchers can utilize collective memory as a complementary alternative to traditional archival sources, which Folkerts found in the NIU case study. Bastian proposed,

> Charting the history of a particular collective memory as an extension of the event itself may be one way to augment, enhance, and contextualize the records, a way to fill in some of the undocumented and underdocumented spaces.[47]

Bastian's suggestion of capturing underrepresented sources also aligns with the utility of oral history as a methodology. Paired with archival collections, and specifically those collected from spontaneous vigils and memorials, oral histories of mass shooting events can help researchers understand the collective memory of a traumatic event. However, how did oral history come to be employed as a way to document crisis and tragedy? And how do archivists ethically collect, steward, and use collections of trauma? To understand oral history's usefulness for documenting crisis, we must first consider its history as a 'democratizing' methodology and its complex relationship with trauma.

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[44] Csaba Pléh, 'Remembering the Collective Memory of Maurice Halbwachs', *Semiotica,* 128 (2000), pp. 435-443 (p. 435), doi:10.1515/semi.2000.128.3-4.435
[45] Jeannette A. Bastian, 'Flowers for Homestead: A Case Study in Archives and Collective Memory', *The American Archivist*, 72, 1 (2009), pp. 113-132 (p. 116), doi:10.17723/aarc.72.1.k751734304667050
[46] Ibid., p. 118.
[47] Ibid., p. 119.

I.3: Crisis Oral History, Mass Shooting, and the Archive

Oral history matured as a research methodology in the latter half of the twentieth century and is today a respected interdisciplinary practice for many scholars in the humanities and beyond. At its inception, the methodology allowed practitioners to document underrepresented and overlooked historical sources, which public and oral historians Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes link to the 'democratizing of history in the 1960s, fueled by decolonization and the feminist and civil rights movements'.[48] Abrams noted,

> By the 1980s, oral history had become the methodology of choice (and necessity) amongst scholars of the twentieth century seeking to uncover the experiences of a number of groups who had traditionally been disregarded by conventional histories.[49]

It would be difficult to discuss the strides made by oral history as a methodology without discussing the work of oral historians Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini. Portelli altered the academic reputation of the methodology by arguing that the perceived weaknesses of oral history—faulty memory, inaccurate historical detail, and credibility—were actually useful strengths. In his article 'What Makes Oral History Different' he insisted that orality, subjectivity, and even misremembrances in oral sources were valuable assets to researchers.[50] Luisa Passerini expanded Portelli's findings by studying the power of memory, specifically memory as an active process that is formed by a person's present.[51] Abrams credits Passerini's work on oral history under fascism as 'the move of oral history from social science to cultural history', where Passerini advocates for an understanding of subjectivity, not simply fact, in narratives.[52]

Oral historians have covered topics of trauma and crisis for decades. Historians Malin Thor Tureby and Yurii Kaparulin traced the first oral histories of the holocaust to those collected by Soviet writers and journalists Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman during the World War II

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[48] Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, 'Introduction: Building Partnerships Between Oral History and Memory Studies', in *Oral History and Public Memory*, ed. by Hamilton and Shopes (Temple University Press, 2008), vi-xvii (p. ix).
[49] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 4.
[50] Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different?' in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 3rd edn. (Routledge, 2016), pp. 48-58, doi:10.4324/9781315671833
[51] Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511753213
[52] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 6-7.

and to other historians working in Eastern Europe to document Nazi atrocities. These narratives continued through organizations such as Yad Vashem and in later years, found a new platform in audio-visual technology.[53] Abrams argued that it is only more recently—beginning in the 1980s but becoming more prominent in the 1990s—that practitioners have taken an interest in 'the human response to violence'.[54] The wars and conflicts of the late twentieth-century, as well as the end of apartheid in South Africa, prompted a number of oral history projects focused on both survivors and perpetrators of violence. However, the association of trauma as a psychoanalytic phenomenon to be overseen by a medical professional made these projects daunting for historians. Abrams reasoned that 'the freighted meaning' of western definitions of trauma, PTSD, trauma response, and other psychological-associated terms, prompted oral historians to adopt other descriptors which are more 'concerned with the ways in which oral historians engage with narratives produced out of crisis'.[55]

The formation of the field of trauma studies within the humanities and social sciences in the last thirty years has provided oral historians scholarly work on trauma theory and new definitions for working in and around the field of trauma.[56] Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth and psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem both discussed trauma not as an emotional response, but as a physical manifestation of the body. Caruth defined trauma as 'an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events' wherein the response may be delayed with consequences of 'uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'.[57] Menakem described its affiliation with the body, where trauma 'overwhelms the body' in a 'spontaneous protective mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further (or future) potential danger'.[58] Understanding the physical manifestation of trauma through not only the body but in cultural and collective landscapes, allowed oral historians to expand their knowledge

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[53] Malin Thor Tureby and Yurii Kaparulin, 'Oral History and the Holocaust- An Introduction', *Eastern European Holocaust Studies*, 2, 1 (2024), pp. 15-23 (p. 15-16), doi:10.1515/eehs-2024-0011
[54] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 176.
[55] Ibid., p. 182.
[56] Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth argues that her research on trauma, narrative, and history through literary theory, as well as research by Psychoanalyst Dori Laub, and Literary Theorists Shoshana Felman and Geoffery Hartman, helped solidify the field of trauma studies in the mid 1990s. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 85, 126.
[57] Cathy Caruth, 'Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History', *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991), pp. 181-192 (p. 181), doi:10.2307/2930251
[58] Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Penguin, 2021), p. 21-22

of trauma beyond psychological definitions, aiding our understanding of ethics, and our analysis of crisis narratives. My usage of trauma in this thesis amalgamates psychological definitions and those of the body to understand interviewee's experiences of lockdown during mass shootings and, in most cases, uses the term only if narratives have referenced their own 'trauma'.

As a methodology, oral history has evolved from its initial democratizing impulse and goal of equalizing the historic record. Abrams argued that its more recent trends involve power and activism, stating,

> Oral history has thus emerged with advocates variously promoting political aims, and the telling of life stories as a mean to achieving personal coherence or composure. Oral history has been deployed to convey international shame for genocide, to foster religious and ethnic identify, to advance the power of marginalized groups, to diminish the power gap between academics and society and to contribute to the writing of alternative histories.[59]

With this emphasis on the politics, power, and the activist nature of oral history narratives, its use to document recent trauma or crises such as mass shootings and gun violence seems an obvious choice. However, documenting during or recently after a historical event is a relatively new approach. Much of the lauded oral history scholarship representing a significant contribution to the methodology involves conducting interviews decades after the occurrence of historical events. New complications related to ethical project design, re-traumatization, and secondary trauma and the mental health of those conducting interviews for these projects arise in discussions of interviewing in the recent aftermath of tragedy.

In the early twenty-first century, as oral historians continued their work on subjects of trauma and tragedy, the recognized subfield of crisis oral history emerged as a flexible term for projects born out of tragedy. It grew so rapidly that Abrams published a second edition of *Oral History Theory* in 2016, which included a new chapter on trauma and ethics. Abrams discussed the addition with regard to the exponential interest amongst oral historians, suggesting it was 'so much so, that a distinctive field ha[d] grown up around the methodological, conceptual and ethical approaches' to crisis oral history.[60] Oral historians were grappling with how to capture stories of natural disasters, refugee crises, war, and mass violence.[61] In 2014, oral historians Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan edited a collection of oral history case studies that serve as a

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[59] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 160-161.
[60] Ibid,. p. 175.
[61] Ibid.

valuable resource for oral historians looking to design their own trauma-based projects. In his introduction, Cave contextualized the subfield of crisis oral history, noting that 'Crisis is a historical constant' and 'Oral history as a methodology, with its patient, open-ended approach and emphasis on empathy', is well suited for exploring the experience of crisis amongst survivors.[62]

Abrams argued the widespread acceptance of therapy and mental health counseling in trauma survivors is beneficial to oral historians as well, with 'some psychiatric professions believ[ing] that oral history can play a valuable role in supporting meaning-making in the aftermath of traumatic events'.[63] Oral history literature features discussions of how to ethically conduct potentially traumatic oral history interviews, and in the last decade, scholarship on trauma-based practices has emerged, encouraging researchers to reflect on their own mental health in the course of trauma projects. Abrams also suggested that oral history projects can offer survivors the space and permission to share their stories, while also providing validation that they are believed.[64]

Both Cave and psychoanalyst Ghislaine Boulanger considered the unique opportunities of recording in the recent aftermath of crisis, including the possibility of survivor validation, and the ability to help make meaning of events.[65] However, there are risks involved in using oral history to document recent trauma and these are not examined in Cave's introduction. While Cave briefly mentioned the psychological impact of interviewing for narrators and vicarious trauma for practitioners, his advice to oral historians is to educate themselves on the signs of trauma. Ultimately, he employed Boulanger's research to advise practitioners that 'if an interviewee is willing to talk […] then it is generally safe to proceed with an interview'.[66] Abrams also suggested that twenty-first century approaches to counseling and mental health

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[62] Mark Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* ed. by Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 1-14 (p. 1-2).
[63] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 177.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge,* p. 1.
[66] Boulanger's extensive work with the oral history community, specifically traumatic projects interviewing narrators about September 11th, marks her expertise in the field of psychology and oral history interviewing. She details her thoughts on trauma interviewing and its benefits to narrators in Cave and Sloan's *Listening on the Edge*. Ibid., 1-2; Ghislaine Boulanger, 'The Continuing and Unfinished Present: Oral History and Psychoanalysis in the Aftermath of Terror', in *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* ed. by Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 110-126.

services have aided oral historians as survivors of trauma seem more willing to participate and discuss sensitive topics.[67]

Since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of scholarly articles surrounding oral history projects and the Covid-19 pandemic. Writing for *The Oral History Review* in 2020, Stephen M. Sloan suggested the number of pandemic related projects stemmed from our 'current digital environment' and the need for human connection and an emotional outlet during the course of lockdown and physical isolation.[68] However, questions regarding psychological impact and re-traumatization emerged in the discussion over when to begin documenting Covid-19 narratives. Oral historians experienced a general hesitancy over conducting interviews amidst an ongoing pandemic.[69] Jennifer Cramer, Director of the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at Louisiana State University, acknowledged the possible therapeutic power of oral history but also emphasized the difference between an oral history interview and mental health therapy. Oral history is generated for the public, interviewers are not licensed therapists, and there are no review boards in the United States vetting projects for ethical issues or compelling practitioners to have formal training.[70] Cramer ultimately urged practitioners to remember the primary goal of oral history, which is 'to create and disseminate primary resources for the sake of a shared public history'.[71] These points are especially pertinent to archivists documenting mass shooting through oral history projects as they weigh the benefit of interviewing in the recent aftermath of trauma, their training, and possible ethical concerns.

Aside from ethics and re-traumatization, scholars have competing views on the quality of the interview in the aftermath of tragedy and how quality affects its value. Cramer discussed good practices for interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic in her 2020 article. These guidelines apply to other projects documenting during or in the recent aftermath of tragedy. She

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[67] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 177.
[68] Stephen M. Sloan, 'Behind the "Curve": COVID-19, Infodemic, and Oral History', *Oral History Review*, 47, 2 (2020), pp. 193-202 (p. 195), doi:10.1080/00940798.2020.1798256
[69] Ibid., p. 199.
[70] From 1991 to 2017, oral histories were subject to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in the United States. Since 2017, oral historians are not required to undergo human subject research training. The Institutional Review Board is 'a body formed at every research institution, and charged by the federal government with the protection of human subjects in research'. Leland J. White, 'Oral History Research Excluded from IRB Oversight', *Perspectives on History* (2017) <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/oral-history-research-excluded-from-irb-oversight-january-2017/> [Accessed 28 March 2022].
[71] Jennifer A. Cramer, '"First, Do No Harm": Tread Carefully Where Oral History, Trauma, and Current Crises Intersect', *The Oral History Review*, 47 (2020), pp. 203–213 (p. 208). doi:10.1080/00940798.2020.1793679

argues 'although most oral historians come across trauma in the course of any life narrative, the nature of fieldwork changes when an oral history project is conducted during the course of an ongoing disaster'. [72] Often interviewees have not processed the trauma endured, risking a raw, emotional narrative. Cramer also notes, 'recent-based event narratives are more fragmented and focus on the details of the how and the what' making them less linear and resolved than past-based event narratives.[73]

However, in returning to narrators years after an incident, oral historians may not capture the emotion of the moment. Cave did not discount fragmented, emotional interviews, instead deeming them worthy of collecting. He argues emotion is 'a big part of truth, particularly in times of crisis' so collecting quickly is integral as those feelings could fade over time. Cave suggests, 'As the powerful feelings associated with an event begin to fade, the memory of the details of the experience begin to degrade. Our weakened memories then become vulnerable to change' through our values, interpretations, and attitudes.[74] The non-linear interview with little reflection considered problematic by Cramer, is valued by Cave for its overt emotion and passion. While an archivist's role is typically viewed as reconciliatory of the past and, as such, passive, postmodernist and activist archivists would applaud the decision to collect fragmented interviews which tell emotional stories with many interpretations. Postmodernism's emphasis on archivists as 'key mediators or constructors of the knowledge available in archives' places the profession in a significant position to help shape the knowledge held in records which, in turn, begin to form a community's collective memory.[75]

Cramer's argument surrounding the quality of interviews in the recent aftermath of trauma are worth considering. However, writing only months into the Covid-19 pandemic, she does not reflect on longitudinal studies and how multiple interviews might mitigate some of the reluctance of collecting fractured narratives in the recent aftermath of a crisis. She notes that proponents of crisis oral history work 'advocate for careful project design, collaboration with narrators […] and in some circumstances incorporating longitudinal approaches by conducting follow-up interviews with the same respondents years later'.[76] She does not discuss how projects

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[72] Cramer,, 'First, Do No Harm', p. 205.
[73] Ibid., p. 206.
[74] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 5.
[75] Nesmith, 'Seeing Archives', *The American Archivist*, 65, 1 (2002), 24-41 (p. 26-27).
[76] Ibid., p. 209.

might benefit from longitudinal designs or reference relevant case studies of these types of projects.[77] Cave argues that conducting multiple interviews is beneficial but suggests that 'There is still much we do not know about how memory works'.[78]

Oral Historian and Director of the Columbia Center for Oral History Mary Marshall Clark is well versed in longitudinal design. She co-led a project to document voices of New Yorkers after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attack on the city, calling its longitudinal design a 'temporal anchor for the project'.[79] She argued,

> Ideally, the work of oral history in and after crisis should include interviewing people over time so that the memory of the emergency does not overshadow the memory of that which comes after—which is the only time in which the impact of crucial events can be measured.[80]

While Clark reflected on the diversity of narrators and key themes her team hoped to gather, she does not detail how participants were found or selected for interviews. She also neglects to include which interviewees were chosen for a second and third interview and why.[81] This three-year cultural memory project holds massive implications for New York's collective memory of September 11th. As practitioners continue to discuss how various crisis oral history projects source participants in a landscape of tragedy, a detailed discussion of how Clark's project captured multicultural narrators and who they returned to, would be beneficial to the oral history community.

Oral Historians and scholars continue to omit their procedures for sourcing participants within project design. This is troublesome for crisis oral history as a crisis may necessitate a rapid response oral history project. In the case of university mass shootings specifically, archivists must work quickly to recruit student narrators because of student turnover rates and the unreliability of student records for future contact information. As this case study found, university student interviews greatly benefit from a longitudinal project design. Given that most students will be between eighteen and twenty-one during their first interviews, offering a period

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[77] The obvious purpose of this article was to offer a discussion and word of caution to practitioners beginning interviews in the midst of a world-wide pandemic, therefore, a detailed discussion of longitudinal project design was not expected. However, a list of projects or references to consider the point would have been helpful to include.
[78] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 6.
[79] Mary Marshall Clark, 'A Long Song: Oral History in the Time of Emergency and After', in *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* ed. by Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 241-261, (p. 257).
[80] Ibid., p. 257-259.
[81] Ibid., p. 255.

of time for students to reflect on their experience and interview a second or third time over the course of a few years provides valuable insight on how mass shootings affect student lives.

However, few sources detail how to design such projects. For example, Kennelly and Fleming-Clark interviewed over seventy narrators from Virgina Tech and the larger community after the 16 April 2007 mass shooting, yet the pair do not discuss how narrators were chosen, how many were students, and if parameters were put in place to safeguard the most vulnerable.[82] Clark's September 11th project interviewed Muslim immigrants, Arab Americans, Sikhs, and Latinos to 'assess the nature and scope of urban injury' in post-9-11 New York City, which assumes the project had a goal to reach a broad scope of ethnicities and life histories, yet there are no details about how this was accomplished.[83] Clark also discussed returning to one-third of narrators two to three years after their initial interviews.[84] While she maintained the gap was important for interviewees and significant in terms of the reflective views gained years later, she does not outline the difficulties of maintaining relationships with narrators, or other inconveniences that may have disrupted multiple interviews. She also does not qualify why only one-third were chosen for second or third interviews.[85] These examples are indicative of many articles written about oral history projects where analysis is favored over discussions of methodology. For crisis oral history in particular, method and project design are crucial for beginning a project quickly and ethically, specifically when targeting a student population that is ever-changing and often not grounded in the local community.

Carolyn Lunsford Mears was one of the first academic researchers to use oral history to capture narratives surrounding US school shootings. Now a prominent trauma researcher and public speaker, her work on educational leadership in times of crisis, ethics, and qualitative research methods make her a leading scholar in the field of crisis and school mass shootings. Mears' son survived the 1999 Columbine shooting and her experience as a parent living through a traumatic event prompted her doctoral research on the experiences of other Columbine parents.[86] Her 2013 monograph, *Reclaiming Schools in the Aftermath of Trauma*, was an edited volume with chapters examining trauma's effect on the brain and how schools navigate student

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[82] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 69.
[83] Clark, A Long Song, p. 255-256.
[84] Ibid., p. 256-257.
[85] Ibid., p. 254-258.
[86] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, 'Experiences of Columbine Parents: Finding a Way to Tomorrow,' (unpublished doctoral thesis, College of Education, University of Denver, 2005), doi:10.13140/RG.2.1.5166.0324

emotion and reintegration after mass shootings and natural disasters. Mears opens the work by noting that schools and universities are community hubs and disasters affect the entire community. Communities may struggle to build a new sense of identity, but 'honoring the loses, celebrating the strengths, and respecting the many ways that individuals process grief and pain' can lead schools and communities to move toward recovery.[87]

Mears, Folkert, and Kennelly and Fleming-Cook authored three of the only published scholarly works detailing oral history projects created in the wake of mass shootings, and they are all case studies of individual projects.[88] In her 2008 article for *The Oral History Review*, Mears explored the experience of the grieving community of Columbine, aspects of trauma, and the 'gateway approach'—the notion that oral history interviews along with the interviewer narrator relationship can offer a 'gateway to deep understanding of the significance and meaning related to an experience'.[89] Mears argues that trauma can alienate a community from broader society, leaving survivors reliant on others who witnessed and experienced an event. The gateway approach is meant to help connect researchers and interviewees not by 'finding the average of what has been experienced' but by 'illuminat[ing] the diverse expression and responses to that situation'.[90] Along with official reports and condolence material, Mears' approach can be used to help create an encompassing view of a school shooting which includes emotive narratives, community grief, and recovery efforts.

Reflecting on the use of oral history and the implementation of the gateway approach in speaking with Columbine parents, Mears stated,

> It is a gentle form of data collection, giving the narrator the power to control the content and the scope of the interview. In this regard, it is especially appropriate for working with individuals who have been exposed to traumatic events, those devastating situations that render victims powerless […] It provides an opportunity for others to observe how people

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[87] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, *Reclaiming Schools in the Aftermath of Trauma: Advice Based on Experience* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), p. 218.

[88] The topic has also materialized in conference presentations given at the National Council on Public History where participants detail oral history projects as part of larger condolence collecting endeavors. See: Howell, and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy: An Ongoing Case Study', (2020) National Council on Public History Conference <https://ncph.org/conference/2020-annual-meeting/conference-materials/> [Accessed 28 March 2022]; Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]

[89] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, 'A Columbine Study: Giving Voice, Hearing Meaning', *The Oral History Review*, 35, 2 (2008), 159-175 (p. 162), doi:10.1093/ohr/ohn026

[90] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, *Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research: The Gateway Approach* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 71, doi:10.1057/9780230623774_1

> are affected by events and how they reconstruct order out of chaos […] revealing a great deal about the significance and the understandings that are taken from the experience.[91]

Mears detailed her methodology in chapters surrounding the research process and advises practitioners on practical topics such as generating research questions, ethical approaches to interviewing, and conducting in-depth interviews.[92] The gateway approach has subsequently influenced the development of documentary projects and responses to the shootings at Virginia Tech, Chardon, Ohio, and Sandy Hook Elementary School.[93]

In an effort to understand how mass shootings and traumatic events affect narrators, it is useful to understand the medical implications of trauma and trauma's effect on the brain. Experts on trauma response and post-disaster counseling, social work scholars Alan Kirk and Steve King research the impact of school violence on the greater community. The pair argue that traumatic experiences 'create structural changes in the human brain that can alter mood, cognitive ability, and behavior patterns'.[94] For college students in particular, they suggest that the likelihood that students have witnessed or experienced trauma is greater upon entering college, thus the chance for traumatization is greater. Additionally, college students are treated as adults, relationships between students and teachers change upon entering college, and the level of parental support and supervision declines. These factors make college students more vulnerable to the neurobiological consequences of trauma, and could potentially impact students involved in trauma oral history interviews.[95]

In addition to Kirk and King's point about the effect of mass shooting on the larger community, psychologist Deborah J. Vinall wrote her doctoral thesis on the phenomenon of Massacre Survivor Syndrome. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with therapists of mass shooting survivors, Vinall argued that mass shootings affect a far wider community scale than just those in close proximity to a shooting. She found that mere statistical data on the number of victims wounded and killed during a shooting, '[did] not tell the full story of societal

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[91] Ibid., p. 163.
[92] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, *Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research: The Gateway Approach* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
[93] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 2-3.
[94] Alan Kirk and Steven King, 'Trauma's Effect on the Brain: An Overview for Educators', in *Reclaiming Schools in the Aftermath of Trauma*, ed. by Carolyn Lunsford Mears, pp. 12-29 (p. 16).
[95] Ibid., p. 22.

cost', a point which Mears also highlighted regarding Columbine.[96] By focusing on physically unharmed survivors of shootings, Vinall's study 'illuminates the depths of life-altering effects' on victims not historically defined as such. Her work not only adds scale and depth to the public health effects of mass shooting events, but could be of significance for proactive policy makers wishing to reform gun laws.[97] Vinall's work is important to this study as it validates the emotional reaction of narrators and their status as survivors of the UNCC shooting.

Mears' research is significant for any educational institution suffering through a mass shooting for its discussion of administrative leadership in times of crisis. Archivists and oral historians can also employ the practical advice discussed in connection with the gateway approach. A notable missing link in the available academic research, however, are case studies of archivists *doing* crisis oral history work. Discussion of archival practices surrounding projects documenting mass shooting and memory usually refers to the collection of physical or digital condolence items linked to a tragedy.[98] However, accessioning and creating metadata for left materials is quite different from archivists interviewing and collecting oral history narratives after a mass shooting. This gap in scholarly research leaves archivists to rely on the literature surrounding interviewing in the aftermath of trauma, which lacks a university context and excludes information on archival processing, trauma-informed practices, and public accessibility.

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[96] Mears found that although fifteen students and teachers were killed including the perpetrators and twenty-four wounded, '9,000 persons, including students, faculty, staff, their family members, and the crisis responders who arrived on scene, were considered to be at high risk for adverse psychological reaction'. She argues countless other community members were also impacted. Mears, 'Experiences of Columbine Parents' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, College of Education, University of Denver, 2005), p. 4, doi:10.13140/RG.2.1.5166.0324.; Deborah J. Vinall, 'Massacre Survivor Syndrome: Trauma Sequelae and Life Adjustment in Survivors of Mass Shootings Treated with EMDR' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Behavioral Sciences, California Southern University, 2020), p. 22.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Archivists and librarians at Virginia Tech have published extensive scholarship on the creation of the library's condolence archival collection. Their guidance includes the utilization of cataloguing and software standards, as well as the creation of a digital memory bank, which encourages the public to upload memorial content. Archivists from Virgina Tech, University of California at Santa Barbara, and University of Nevada at Las Vegas also discussed research and experiences with the creation of condolence archives at the 2018 National Public History Conference. See: Aaron D. Purcell, 'More than Flowers Left Behind: Building an Archival Collection and Remembering April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech', *Journal of Archival Organization*, 10 (2012), pp. 231-242, doi:10.1080/15332748.2013.795804; Brent K. Jesiek and Jeremy Hunsinger, 'The April 16 Archive: Collecting and Preserving Memories of the Virginia Tech Tragedy' in *There is a Gunman on Campus: Tragedy and Terror at Virginia Tech*, ed. by Ben Agger and Timothy W. Luke (Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), pp. 173-193; Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience' unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]

Aside from Folkerts work interviewing NIU archivists, one of the only available case studies, and one written by the archivist, details the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project. The 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech remains the largest university mass shooting in the United States with thirty-two fatalities and another seventeen injured. University archivist Tamara Kennelly and oral historian Susan E. Fleming-Cook were the first to write about the library's oral history project in *Listening on the Edge*. In the chapter, they highlight three interviews with student victims and provide large sections of transcripts and analysis. Discussion of their project speaks more to the stress of crisis oral history work on the interviewer and less to the creation of the collection. Kennelly writes about the decision to collect oral history interviews, stating,

> I was charged with developing the libraries' permanent collection of condolence artifacts. As I read the messages […] it struck me that we also needed to hear the voices of those closer to home who had experienced the tragedy firsthand […] No voice could speak for all, but through diverse voices the many facets of the story could be told.[99]

The pair's analysis of the project focuses on the effects of crisis interviewing within one's own community and vicarious trauma, which are important considerations for any archivist conducting interviews after a shooting on their campus. Regarding the importance of collecting the interviews, they argue, 'These trauma oral histories help make meaning of what happened on that day and afterward. Those individuals who elected to tell their narratives of trauma and healing gave a great gift'.[100]

The Kennelly and Fleming-Cook chapter is the only published literature to feature portions of survivor interviews and the stories the three student survivors tell are emotional and harrowing, emphasizing the significance of collecting student voices in the aftermath of a campus shooting. Focusing on the collection of physical materials, interview analysis, and interviewer well-being, Kennelly and Fleming-Cook's discussion of the project did not include parameters like legal barriers, interviewee selection, accessibility, and other issues future archivist might question when designing their own projects. *Listening on the Edge* seeks to recognize the limited literature on crisis oral history and to 'acknowledge the unique problems that this work presents', while trying to help prepare practitioners.[101] The lessons learned from

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[99] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 69.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 11.

the Virginia Tech project are important for communities documenting an insular trauma. Twenty years have passed since the project began collecting interviews and only in 2023 did the collection open with access restricted to the reading room,[102] accompanied by a general description online which excludes the names of those interviewed for the project.[103] As of 2025, the only available online access to the collection is ten interview clips, around one to two minutes in length each, which are hosted on the special collections website.[104]

Kennelly's retirement from Virginia Tech in 2020 marked the loss of a significant professional resource for archivist navigating similar projects and one which prompted my initial research into this topic.[105] The need for guidance around mass shooting oral history projects, and even 'good practice' standards, reflects the gap in research around archivists documenting university mass shootings. Speaking about the problematic nature of collecting and archiving condolence materials, archivist Ashely Maynor acknowledges, 'Few protocols, if any, exist to guide librarians and archivists with this monumental undertaking, which is further complicated by each tragedy's uniqueness as well as the singular character of the event's surrounding community'.[106] Maynor's point is even more relevant to the development of an oral history project in the wake of a mass shooting. The growing necessity for 'good practices' is reflected in the number of tragedy response based papers and sessions emerging from public and oral history conferences in the last few years,[107] as well as in the creation of the Tragedy Response Initiative

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[102] Complexities surrounding accessibility are understandable in the case of Virginia Tech as the university was engaged in a lawsuit brought by the parents of two victims until 2013. This may have affected the collection being open for research. Bill Mears, 'Virginia High Court Dismisses Virginia Tech Mass Shooting Lawsuit', *CNN*, 31 October 2013 <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/31/justice/virginia-tech-shooting-negligence-lawsuit/index.html> [Accessed 9 February 2022].

[103] 'A Guide to the Virginia Tech April 16, 2007 Archives of the University Libraries, 2007-2010', Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Special Collections and University Archives (2020) <https://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=vt/viblbv00656.xml> [Accessed 15 January 2022].

[104] The clips include alumni, administrative, and community voices, focusing mainly on Virgina Tech's school pride and resiliency after the shooting. 'Oral History Clips: April 16, 2007', Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, Virginia Tech <https://digitalsc.lib.vt.edu/items/browse?collection=253 > [Accessed 14 October 2025].

[105] Mark Owczarksi, 'Tamara Kennelly honored with emerita status', *Imagine Magazine*, 1 (2020) p. 38 <https://lib.vt.edu/content/dam/lib_vt_edu/magazine-fall-winter 2020/University%20Libraries%20Imagine%20Fall%202020%20web.pdf> [Accessed 11 September 2023]

[106] Maynor, 'Response to the Unthinkable', p. 583.

[107] For examples of tragedy response presentations linked to gun violence, see the following: Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]; Joanna Paxton Federico, 'When a Unique Tragedy Becomes All Too Familiar: The Heath High School Shooting Oral History Project', unpublished poster delivered at the conference 'Oral History in Our Challenging Times: Oral History Association' (Concordia University, October 2018); Marina Laura Lopez, 'Making Sense of the Tragedy:

Task Force by the Society of American Archivists (SAA), which includes an oral history section.[108] A poignant example of the intersection of tragedy and public history, and specifically gun violence, was NCPH President Marla Miller introductory message at the 2019 National Council on Public History conference. Discussing the year's theme of repair work, she remarked, 'We particularly hope that this gathering can help us all confront epidemic gun violence and contemplate ways that public historians can help the nation address this crisis'.[109]

Because of the historically political nature of gun violence in the United States, the gap in research surrounding crisis oral history projects after university mass shooting is an unsurprising, yet frustrating reality. Gun control is a partisan issue in the United States and all mass shootings are politicized.[110] Universities, many of which are federally funded, are wary of taking a political stance on gun control and administrations may be concerned with branding and marketing issues which have the potential to affect funding. Universities engaged in lawsuits, as in the case of Virgina Tech, may find projects stalled or permanently stopped for legal purposes. Archivists wishing to begin an oral history project are met with timing and access limitations if they choose to interview students and, in many cases, require administrative support to fund projects and access student contact information. These considerations further complicate projects which are already difficult to design and implement.

Oral History and the Emmanuel Massacre' unpublished paper presentation delivered at the conference 'Oral History in Our Challenging Times: Oral History Association' (Concordia University, October 2018); Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy' (2020), National Council on Public History Virtual Conference; Casey Bumgarner Moore, 'Documenting School Shooting in America: Narratives from the "Lockdown Generation"', unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Whose Voices: Oral History Society' (Glasgow, June 2025).

[108] In 2019, the SAA released 'Documenting in Times of Crisis', a resource kit of templates, manuals, and policies designed to help archivists navigate the process of documenting tragedy. The resource kit's purpose is to 'assist cultural heritage responders' by 'provid[ing] templates and documents that will assist archivists in collecting materials on tragedies within their communities'. See: 'Documenting in Times of Crisis', Society of American Archivists (2023) <https://www2.archivists.org/advocacy/documenting-in-times-of-crisis-a-resource-kit> [Accessed 15 July 2025].

[109] Marla Millar, 'Greetings From the NCPH President', Repair Work: Annual Meeting of the National Council on Public History (March 27-30, 2019), p. 4 <https://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2019-Annual-Meeting-Preliminary-Program-Web.pdf> [Accessed 20 March 2024] Also see: Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy: An Ongoing Case Study', (2020) National Council on Public History Conference <https://ncph.org/conference/2020-annual-meeting/conference-materials/> [Accessed 28 March 2022]

[110] Researching the political reaction by Americans after a mass shooting, political scientists and public policy experts Tyler T. Reny, Benjamin J. Newman, John B. Holbein and Hans J. G. Hassell found that high profile public mass shootings 'consistently cause surges in public engagement with gun policy' in a myriad of ways, even if their views and engagement do not influence policy at the state or federal level. Therefore, as mass shootings continue, so do American reactions to gun violence, control and ownership. Tyler T. Reny, Benjamin J. Newman, John B. Holbein, and Hans J. G. Hassell, 'Public Mass Shootings cause Large Surges in Americans' Engagement with Gun Policy', *PNAS Nexus*, 2 (2023), pp. 1-15, (p. 1-2), doi:10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad407

However, practitioners are pushing through these barriers to document tragedy for future generations. University of California Santa Barbara librarian Anne Platoff closed her panel discussion on 'Documenting Resilience' at the 2018 NCPH conference with a call to action for historians, archivists, and librarians alike. Reflecting on her university's work archiving condolence materials after the 2014 Isla Vista killings, she considered the unique role the heritage sector plays in society's memory. Platoff stated, 'We facilitate social memory through physical collections and oral histories, we preserve various types of historical records and we study and interpret historical events […] Your role, though, and that of your institution will be whatever you decide to make of it.'[111]

Without published case studies, the strengths, weaknesses, and ethics of care surrounding crisis oral history project design remain unknown and inaccessible to institutions struggling to begin collecting. As Maynor reiterated, the uniqueness of each tragedy only adds to the complexity of archival work, therefore, more open communication around the topic is desperately needed.[112] But, as Platoff considered, each institution must decide their role in collecting tragedy and what that work might contribute. The decisions surrounding the creation of an oral history project after a mass shooting are further impacted by the severity of each tragedy and each university responds differently according to the trauma experienced by their campus community. Trauma itself is a hurdle archivists and oral historians must navigate and understand to design an informed, ethical project. Fortunately, new approaches to archival theory, crisis oral history, and trauma-informed practices have gained traction in archival literature in recent years and are available to aid practitioners interviewing around trauma.

In recent decades, there have been a number of articles and research surrounding potential traumatic reactions in oral history interviews. Oral history literature also suggests several methods for conducting interviews with probable discussions of trauma. Abrams recommended active listening and deep listening as ways that oral historians might encourage and validate the testimony of survivors.[113] For unexpected trauma that may emerge in an interview, oral historian Emma L. Vickers used Transactional Analysis, a psychoanalytic therapy

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[111] Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]
[112] Maynor, 'Response to the Unthinkable', p. 583.
[113] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 187

in which she trained. She discussed a grounding technique called refocusing which brings narrators back to the present by encouraging them to focus on aspects of their environment through sensory experiences.[114] While interviews conducted in the wake of mass shootings would be defined as narratives with moments of expected trauma, Vickers' work is still applicable for crisis oral history interviewing. She notes that while oral historians may be able to listen to trauma narratives, they are not necessarily trained in how to respond to them.[115]

Oral historians must also recognize the signs of vicarious trauma, which is a potential issue when interviewers 'fail in the struggle to maintain distance between their own experiences and the narrator's'.[116] Fleming-Cook identified this as one of the most challenging aspects of oral history work in the wake of the Virginia Tech shooting, stating, 'I could not flee or ignore the trauma of how what interviewees revealed to me settled in my heart and mind'.[117] Social scientist Michale Salter is the Director of Childlight UNSW, which researches the impact of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Through his research around trauma, Salter outlined various practical self-care measures oral historians might employ to ensure the sustainability of trauma-intensive research. They include self-reflection, professional supervision, mindfulness practices, and connecting with others.[118] Equally important to oral historians engaged in trauma interviews is a supervisor who understands the oral historian's research and can offer a safe space to enable growth and reflection.[119]

Given the care and ethical design needed to prepare and begin a project documenting mass shooting, as well as the potential necessity to begin interviews quickly, it is little surprise that future use is not considered at the outset. Archivists repeatedly stress the need to collect and document as the most important aspect of their work. Questions of access and accessibility, as well as user communities, are an afterthought. However, are there ways archivists might anticipate a collection's future use and work to promote it? Are mass shooting archives too political to make available at inception, leaving future researchers to determine potential use and

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[114] Emma L. Vickers, 'Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing', The Oral History Review, 46, 1 (2019), pp. 134-141 (p. 138-139), doi:10.1093/ohr/ohy099

[115] Vickers defines unexpected trauma as 'that which occurs in a postcrisis context or that which arises because the research explicitly asks respondents to focus on that aspect of their experiences'. Ibid., p. 136.

[116] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 188.

[117] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 70.

[118] Michael Salter, 'Doing Sustainable Trauma Research', *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, 2, 1 (2017), pp. 1-5 (p. 4), doi:10.23860/dignity.2017.02.01.05

[119] Vickers, 'Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing', p. 139-140.

accessibility? A review of literature surrounding social justice and archival practice helps to center these questions in theory and navigate the postmodernist shift in archivists from gatekeepers or guardians of information, to stewards and creators.

I.4: Social Justice Impact of Mass Shooting Repositories

The presence of social justice and inclusion in discussions of archival practice spans the last half century, but advocacy of social justice as part of the larger archival mission is a more recent preoccupation among archivists.[120] Over the past few decades, archivists have argued over ambiguous definitions and how social justice might be incorporated, and even defined, by the archive.[121] For the purpose of this thesis and in order to frame my discussion of archives engaging in social justice work, I utilize archivists Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell's breakdown of key areas in which archives and social justice issues overlap in place of a formal definition. These areas include:

- Inclusion of underrepresented and marginalized sectors of society
- Reinterpretation and expansion of archival concepts
- Development of community archives
- Rethinking archival education and training
- Efforts to document human rights violations[122]

Using these key areas to define archival forays into social justice work, I argue that crisis oral history collections can have a social justice impact and that oral history repositories reflect, and can possibly influence, local social change. Activism in archival practice has pushed practitioners into diverse projects to better define the communities they serve. In doing so, they have documented and made available collections representing community voices, which can be used to empower communities and enhance campaigns for social change. In writing about his experience interviewing sexual abuse survivors, Michael Salter was critical of the power of oral

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[120] Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, 'Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice', *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 86, 1 (2016), pp. 25-42 (p. 25)
[121] Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtaam and David A. Wallace, 'Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation', *Archival Science*, 13 (2013), pp. 317-348 (p. 324-325) doi:10.1007/s10502-012-9198-x
[122] Punzalan and Caswell, 'Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice', (p. 27).

history. Salter challenged that while this is honorable work, 'It has limited power to catalyze individual or social transformation, in and of itself', noting 'the process of using research to drive change is low and incremental and involves collective activism and organizing'.[123]

However, there is scholarship that suggests archives can influence change. In a study of community-based archives and activism, archivists Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci found that archivists in these local institutions consider themselves activists and that by activating their collections, the archives played a significant role in social movements.[124] Community archives in the United States often develop in response to social and political movements, making them ideal repositories for recording local issues and marginalized populations for social change.[125] Cifor and others noted that 'There is now widespread acknowledgement in the archival field that archives can and should play a role in self-determination and work toward social justice'.[126] Of the twelve community archives studied, all interviewees agreed that archives are not places of neutrality, instead they 'reflect and produce power'.[127] One participant at the Center for Political Graphics argued that archives can affect people's personal opinions and actions, and therefore 'can be extremely transformative for social justice reasons'.[128] Cifor and others concluded with evidence of community archives serving a crucial role in connecting activists with archival material which enabled the fight against gentrification and supported local preservation efforts.[129] In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I provide more examples of how archives are used to empower and drive change while questioning the utility and future use of mass shooting collections, or collections of traumatic material.

One factor to consider with collections related to activism is their potential to include traumatic material. Information studies scholars Lisa P. Nathan, Elizabeth Shaffer, and Maggie Castor analyzed archival efforts to steward materials related to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They noted that while efforts to document materials surrounding

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[123] Salter, 'Doing Sustainable Trauma Research', p. 2.
[124] Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci, 'What We Do Crosses Over to Activism: The Politics and Practice of Community Archives', *The Public Historian*, 40, 2 (2018), pp. 69-95 (p. 82) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/737515> [Accessed 30 May 2022]
[125] Ibid., p. 71.
[126] Ibid., p. 75.
[127] Ibid., p. 85.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., p. 90.

human atrocity are happening worldwide, 'there remain ethically fraught questions of how to do this work', which, they argue, has the potential to do significant harm.[130] The authors defined traumatic collections as 'purposeful gatherings of materials that seek to include the records of disruptive, violent histories; efforts to document these events (e.g., via testimonials); and/or the subsequent activities that engage truth telling, justice, and/or reconciliation'.[131] They then analyzed the use of pluralism in archival theory, how Western practices of archival stewardship alienate users through record management choices and how trauma collection stewards might recognize and shift these practices.[132]

In the past fifteen years, archival literature has begun to consider archival theory and design for archivists working with trauma collections.[133] However, the need for trauma-informed approaches to handling traumatic material was only recently considered. This lapse in oversight could potentially trigger a traumatic response in both archival staff handling the material and its users. Archivists Nicola Laurent and Kristen Wright recognized this gap and developed a course on trauma-informed practice for fellow professionals. They describe their course as,

> A set of principles and tools to deal with trauma, to normalise it, and make it part of everyday work. Recognising, and responding to the challenging material that is in records, and ensuring people—archivists and other staff, users, donors, and volunteers—are supported to provide access to these items in a sensitive and respectful way.[134]

Laurent and Wright acknowledged that recent discussions in archival literature include considerations of feminist ethics and radical empathy, however, these theories were not explicitly identified as trauma-informed, although they argue the two are intertwined. Their course considered the strengths of trauma-informed practices for training staff, assisting patrons, and informing language in records and finding aids, while also discussing organizational approaches to aid archival staff working with traumatic material.[135]

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[130] Lisa P. Nathan, Elizabeth Shaffer, and Maggie Castor, 'Stewarding Collections of Trauma: Plurality, Responsibility, and Questions of Action', *Archavia*, 80 (2015), pp. 89-118 (p. 90, 92) <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13545> [Accessed 30 May 2022]
[131] Ibid., p. 94.
[132] Ibid., p. 89-118.
[133] See, for example, Michelle Caswell, 'Khmer Rouge Archives: Accountability, Truth, and Memory in Cambodia', *Archival Science*, 10 (2010), pp. 25-44, doi:10.1007/s10502-010-9114-1; Michelle Caswell, 'Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Records Documenting Human Rights Abuse: Lessons from Community Archives', *Archival Science*, 14 (2014), pp. 307-322, doi:10.1007/s10502-014-9220-6; Sue McKemmish, Shannon Faulkhead, and Lynne Russel, 'Distrust in the Archive: Reconciling Records', *Archival Science*, 11 (2011), pp. 211-239, doi:10.1007/s10502-011-9153-2
[134] Laurent and Wright, 'A Trauma-Informed Approach to Managing Archives', p. 80.
[135] Ibid., p. 82-84.

New approaches to social justice and activism in the archive, along with radical empathy and care-centered archival work, have the power to transform archival practices in the aftermath of crisis, impacting what is collected and how it is used. This thesis explores these approaches to collecting and analyzing interviews to demonstrate the power of strategic, survivor-centered project design, offering a model for other universities and communities who turn to oral history to document traumatic events.

I.5: Contributions to knowledge

This multi-disciplinary project combines archival studies and archival theory, crisis oral history, and collective memory to investigate why mass shooting narratives are under-documented and underutilized in the archives sector. I then expand on my original argument by determining how these narratives hold value for future researchers in their documentation of communities and their recovery, and by promoting their future collection and use as community research collections. In this section, I will focus on how I combined these disciplines during my research, as well as how I use methods and insights from history, ethnography, and information studies within this work. I will also elaborate on my original contributions to knowledge to the aforementioned disciplines.

First, I use the lens of postmodernism to view twenty-first-century archivists who are choosing to collect oral history interviews with mass shooting survivors. Postmodern archival theory reframes archivists from detached gatekeepers to those with agency over what they collect.[136] The modern archivists and oral historians interviewed for this thesis are employing that agency and using new approaches within archival studies to begin mass shooting projects with ethical care. This study considers how the interviewed archivists and oral historians use feminist ethics and trauma-informed approaches, both recent additions to academic scholarship in archival studies[137], to develop 'good practices' for documenting community mass shootings. This study is the first to interview multiple archivists and oral historians who have developed, implemented, and are stewarding mass shooting collections. By offering detailed descriptions of

[136] Flinn and Alexander, 'Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft', pp. 329-335.
[137] Caswell and Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics', pp. 23-43; Kristen Wright and Nicola Laurent, 'Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice', pp. 38-73; Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart, 'Building a Trauma-Informed Community of Practice', pp. 27-32.

project design, ethical considerations, and feminist approaches within the work being carried out across the country to record mass shooting narratives, this research offers tangible outcomes that archivists beginning crisis oral history projects can draw from.

This study also considers the role of the activist archivist and the inclusion of social justice initiatives in archival work. Two of the archivist narrators interviewed discussed the politicization of gun violence, particularly in the American South, and how politics affected their work. These insights are valuable for any professional beginning a crisis oral history project in America in 2026, with current threats to federal funding in higher education[138] and a whitewashing of history in general.[139] Their experiences also help to explain why mass shooting narratives are under-documented in the archive and why many archivists could be wary of beginning such a project. In 2018, oral historians Sarah K. Loose and Amy Starecheski discussed a notable lack of scholarship surrounding 'the intentional use of oral history to make change in the world in the context of social movements, activism, and advocacy'.[140] To this end, I use chapter five to discuss social justice in the archive, arguing that crisis oral history can impact activism and social justice initiatives. While there are no examples of activist initiatives utilizing gun violence archives yet, I use examples from social justice archives and activist movements to argue that the voices of mass shooting narrators have the potential to aid in the fight for gun control in America. This chapter is also pivotal reading for activist archivists, as it suggests ways

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[138] In the last two years, the American Council on Education introduced a page on their website to track the Trump administration's attack on higher education to 'help institutions track developments, assess risk, and prepare for continued disruption'. The group notes that 'Trump's return to office has ushered in significant changes to federal policy affecting colleges and universities', which in turn are 'undermining research, curbing global engagement, and threatening the sector's public funding foundation'. American Council on Education, 'Higher Education & the Trump Administration', (2026) https://www.acenet.edu/Policy-Advocacy/Pages/2025-Trump-Administration-Transition.aspx> [Accessed 16 August 2026]

[139] On 27 March 2026, The White House's Domestic Policy Council released the 'Saving America's Story' report in response to President Trump's Executive Order 14253, 'Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History'. The Executive Order directed federal agencies like the Smithsonian and National Park Service to remove exhibitions which it considered 'ideological indoctrination' and 'divisive narratives'. 'Saving America's Story' blamed museum professionals for the 'shift from history to activism' and asserts that the story told at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History is one of 'regret, tragedy, and shame'. See: United States, Executive Office of the President, Executive Order 14253 (27 March 2025) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/> [Accessed 16 August 2026]; Domestic Policy Council, 'Saving America's Story', The White House (27 March 2026) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Smithsonian-Report-Saving-Americas-Story.pdf> [Accessed 16 August 2026]

[140] Sarah K. Loose and Amy Starecheski, 'Oral history for building social movements, then and now', in *Beyond Women's Words: Feminism and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta (Routledge, 2018), pp. 236-243 (p. 236) doi:10.4324/9781351123822

archives might connect with their broader communities to use archival collections for social justice initiatives.

Secondly, I designed this project as a crisis oral history project, notable as the interviews were conducted in the recent aftermath of the 30 April shooting at UNCC and required additional ethical considerations. I conducted interviews with survivors with careful attention to ethics and trauma, relying on archival studies scholarship on feminist ethics and trauma-informed approaches to work with my narrators. I worked with UNCC to offer narrators the chance to donate their interviews under a Creative Commons license, allowing them to retain copyright of their stories. As an addition to my ethics application, I put safeguards in place allowing narrators to drop out of my study and to revise their transcripts and interviews. While I do not consider this an ethnographic study, I did employ methods of the discipline for my research. Ethnography is a research method used to study human culture, making it a useful lens for analyzing mass-shooting-affected communities and their recovery. I used observational fieldnotes during my interviews, noting body language and movement, and I spent as much time in Charlotte, North Carolina as possible.

As a result of these safeguards and considerations, I have successfully developed the NNROHP into a longitudinal project, making it the first mass shooting collection to conduct follow-up interviews with survivors while fully documenting the process within academic scholarship. This is a notable contribution to knowledge, as project design and implementation are often overlooked or not discussed in depth for an academic audience. By elaborating on potential risks, ethical considerations, and the 'good practices' we used to move the NNROHP forward, this thesis provides practical examples for communities wishing to develop their own crisis oral history projects.

The narratives collected in this longitudinal study solidified my original argument that the interviews held value as a means of research and were an excellent source in documenting community recovery and living through a mass shooting. This is the first study to analyze a large collection of mass shooting oral history interviews spanning five years and returning to original narrators. Using Carolyn Lunsford Mears' three areas of community recovery, it offers future researchers a method for analyzing mass shooting narratives in terms of community impact.[141]

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[141] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma,* p. 218.

Lastly, this study examines the collective memory of UNCC's 30 April tragedy through student and professor narratives—also the narrators who were often closest to the shooting. Returning to key narrators was critical to this research, as it allowed me to trace the cultivation of collective memory in the wake of tragedy. My analysis found that many students and professors redefined their lives in the aftermath, with key emphasis on their mental health and activism among Gen Z narrators. The narratives also led me to argue that school shootings and active shooter drills are becoming embedded in the cultural life scripts, or 'culturally shared' timings of major life events, of America's youth.[142] The analysis from student and professor interviews solidifies their importance in documenting the history of mass shooting tragedies and their evidential value as archival collections for future researchers. This is the first study to analyze a large collection of mass shooting oral history interviews, and the findings show how valuable this collection is to understanding the collective memory of tragedy.

[142] Robyn Fivush, 'Autobiographical Memory', in *Research Methods for Memory Studies* ed. by Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 14-21 (p. 15-16), doi:10.1515/9780748683475

Chapter 1: Methodology

1.1: Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology and framework used to investigate the overarching argument and ultimately demonstrate the value of mass shooting crisis oral history collections. Chapter one is subdivided into sections on authorial decisions and terminology usage, ethical considerations, research methods and thematic analysis, reflexivity and positionality, and the limitations of this research project. Ultimately, this chapter explains how I chose to examine the under-documentation and underutilization of mass shooting oral history interviews through an ethical lens to determine the value these collections have for mass shooting affected communities.

Given the gaps in current literature on the use of crisis oral history in the recent aftermath of mass shooting tragedies and its archival collection, I questioned how best to study both the archiving of these collections and the content of the narratives themselves. No researcher has attempted to access and analyze an entire collection of oral histories detailing the experiences of survivors of mass shootings,[143] and the Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project collection held over fifty interviews at the beginning of my thesis research. To engage the collection and answer overarching research questions about the archiving of mass shooting repositories, but also the thematic makeup of narratives, I chose to conduct oral history interviews with both archivists and UNCC survivors, using NVivo to support analysis and structure subsequent chapters. This allowed me to reflect on my original argument of not only why these narratives are underrepresented in archives, but also the potential value they bring to archival holdings.

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[143] In their study surrounding survivor networks after mass shooting events, criminal justice scholar Jaclyn Schildkrau, mental health counselor Evelyn S. Sokolowski, and trauma psychologist John Nicoletti found the majority of studies of mass shooting survivors centered on PTSD and related symptomology, utilizing only quantitative methods. They note that these studies lack connection with survivors after a three year period as well, and that, coupled with a lack of qualitative methods, has yielded very little insight into survivors' posttraumatic growth. While this thesis is not a psychological study of survivors, it seeks to contribute to the literature by using survivors' narratives to understand community recovery and resilience. See: Jaclyn Schildkraut, Evelyn S. Sokolowski, and John Nicoletti, 'The Survivor Network: The Role of Shared Experiences in Mass Shootings Recovery', *Victims & Offenders*, 16, 1 (2021), pp.20-49 (p. 21), doi:10.1080/15564886.2020.176426

1.2: Authorial Decisions and Terminology

Prior to a discussion of research methods, it is necessary to discuss authorial decisions and chosen terminology within this thesis. For narrative perspective, I have chosen to use the authorial *I*, aligning with other feminist practitioners who consider their personal narratives intertwined with their research interests. Geographer and feminist researcher Pamela Moss defined feminist research as 'a complex amalgam of perspective arising both from the location of the researcher […] and from multiple feminist theories that employ different techniques to collect data, bring the researcher into the research process, and effect social change'.[144] In the *Handbook of Feminist Research*, sociologist Kathy Charmaz discussed the trend of incorporating personal experience within feminist ethnography and social science research, noting researchers are encouraged to pursue topics of personal interest. She explained, 'as feminists, we position ourselves, lives, and goals in relation to the topic'.[145] As I discuss further in this chapter, I am part of the community I research and I was affected by and heavily involved in documenting 30 April and its aftermath. The use of the authorial *I* in this thesis is a way to acknowledge my own positionality and subjectivity in terms of the UNCC community, or my community. I hope to remind the reader throughout this work of my personal connection with the people I discuss, physical locations, and social justice issues plaguing Charlotte.

It is also important to elaborate on the chosen definitions for commonly used terms, as definitions are not always consistent between organizations, activist groups, and academics. The definition of 'mass shooting', for example, is contested in America and changes slightly depending on the organization using it. In 2024, the Congressional Research Service issued a report acknowledging 'no widely accepted definition' for the term, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) considering an 'active shooter incident' a 'mass killing' if the event included 'at least three fatalities in a single incident, not including the shooter'. The Gun Violence Archive (GVA), a nonprofit committed to collecting gun violence data, defines mass shooting as 'an incident where there is a minimum of four victims shot, not including the shooter'. This thesis

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[144] Pamela Moss, 'Emergent Methods in Feminist Research' in *Handbook of Feminist Research, Theory and Praxis*, ed. by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Bieber (Sage Press, 2007), pp. 371-391, (p. 371), doi:10.4135/9781483384740

[145] Kathy Charmaz, 'Writing Feminist Research', *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, 2nd Edition, ed. by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Kathy Charmaz (Sage Publications, 2012), pp. 475-494 (p. 477), doi: 10.4135/978148338470.n22

aligns with the GVA definition, arguing that both casualties and fatalities together are what make these acts of violence so extreme and traumatic, with most active shooters attempting to harm as many individuals as possible. Moving forward, the term 'mass shooting' will be applied to the UNCC shooting and the perpetrators of mass shooting incidents will be identified only as the active shooter or perpetrator. I made this decision out of respect to victims of gun violence and to further deny agency to those responsible for inflicting these acts of violence.[146]

The term 'survivor' also varies depending on the source material and even narrators questioned its validity as a descriptor of their experience. Dr. Jaclyn Schildkraut is the Executive Director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Rockefeller Institute of Government and authored a report after the 2020 Nova Scotia attacks. Her research centered on supporting survivors and communities in the aftermath of mass shootings, however, she acknowledged 'there is no single way in which the term "survivor" is conceptualized in the concept of mass causality incidents'.[147] It is often self-applied by those impacted or studying a shooting and can be extended to include individuals in the larger vicinity of the active shooting incident, extended family members (as in the case of Columbine and other school shootings), and all student enrolled at a University where a shooting takes place, regardless of their presence on campus at the time (as in the case of Virginia Tech).[148] This thesis uses the latter, broader definition of 'survivor' noting that individuals can be both directly and indirectly affected by a mass shooting event and in the aftermath of conducting interviews with narrators who exemplified this, I have chosen to identify narrators as survivors.

1.3: Ethical Considerations

Before beginning this project, I weighed several ethical considerations regarding the research process, my narrators, and the emotional labor involved in working with traumatic subject matter. I submitted my ethics application and received conditional approval from the

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[146] See: Jordan B. Cohen, 'How to Define Mass Shootings: Potential Policy Implications', Congressional Research Service, 19 November 2024, pp. 1-13 (p. 1-2) <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48276> [Accessed 20 July 2025].
[147] Jaclyn Schildkraut, 'Supporting Survivors and Communities after Mass Shooting: A Report Presented to the Mass Casualty Commission (2022), pp. 1-39 (p. 1) <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Mass-Casualty-Commission-Report-Supporting-Survivors-and-Communities-after-Mass-Shootings.pdf> [Accessed 12 August 2025].
[148] Ibid.

committee on 15 March 2022, pending some changes to the data management plan and storage of audio and visual material.

The utmost priority was the safety and wellbeing of my interviewees, and I worked to put safeguarding measures in place for narrators. I had experience with this process through my time as a contract oral historian at UNCC and I used resources developed with the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services in 2019 when contacting narrators. I had relationships with some of the narrators from the original NNR project, which made it easy to reconnect with them through email to discuss the project and the informed consent process. After initial discussions about the project and their participation, I emailed the informed consent agreement along with a participant information sheet explaining the project, safeguarding measures, interviewee rights, and other frequently asked questions. I altered the standard participant information sheet to include a paragraph on sensitive and upsetting topics, assuring narrators that they did not need to discuss anything they were uncomfortable with and reiterating their right to withdraw at any time, without reason or consequence. It also included their right to remain anonymous in my work and their right to redact and edit their transcripts following our interviews. In addition to language in the participant information sheet, I reiterated these safeguards both in email correspondence while scheduling the interviews and verbally before the interview itself. Lastly, I wanted narrators to retain ownership of their narrative if they chose to donate it to the NNROHP. I felt comfortable asking narrators to donate interviews to UNCC because the University switched to a Creative Commons license for all oral history interviews in 2019, ahead of the first NNR interviews. This allows narrators to hold the copyright for their words, while also sharing their narratives globally.[149]

Regardless of this preparation, there was still a possibility that participants may have a trauma response during or after the interview, and I took steps to prepare resources for that. Many of the narrators were affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and were aware of the counseling services available to them. I also included a link in my email signature to the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services, signposting that this is where students and staff could find available mental health resources. I outlined a number of other resources within

[149] Creative Commons describe themselves as ‘an international nonprofit organization dedicated to helping build and sustain a thriving commons of shared knowledge and culture’. ‘Who We Are’, creativecommons.org (2026) <https://creativecommons.org/who-we-are/> [Accessed 10 May 2026]

my ethics application for narrators outside of the University and also engaged in trainings and workshops dedicated to trauma-informed practices and recognizing the signs of a trauma response. I also detailed a brief action plan to use if interviewees became upset and needed a break from the interview or wanted to stop completely.

I outlined several resources for myself to help offset the emotional toll of recording and transcribing survivor narratives of mass shootings. I joined the Emotionally Demanding Research Network, which met online monthly to discuss difficult research topics and offer support. I attended workshops on researcher self-care and outlined resources available to me through the University and during my time in North Carolina. I attended monthly meetings with my supervisors where we also discussed strategies for coping with the emotional nature of the research.

1.3: Research Methods

It was important to gather and analyze unique, qualitative data for this thesis. Using semi-structed oral history interviews, I focused on two unique groups. First, I interviewed archivists in Las Vegas, Orlando, and Charlotte to learn about their mass shooting oral history repositories. Understanding various factors such as funding, project creation and workflows, interview processes, and archival users helped to aggregate details of commonalities and differences in their approaches to mass shooting oral history repositories. Secondly, I developed UNCC into a more compressive case study by expanding the NNROHP into a longitudinal study. I interviewed, and in some cases re-interviewed, an additional twenty-six narrators, to gather further faculty and student voices. I then analyzed the personal experiences and reflections of those who survived thematically, the results of which shaped the forthcoming chapters.

Las Vegas, Orlando, and Blacksburg experienced three of the most fatal and tragic mass shootings in America and archivists at the University of Las Vegas, Nevada, Orange County Regional History Museum, and Virgina Polytechnic Institute and State University documented these tragedies through condolence archiving and oral history interviews. In terms of the number of interviews collected, these projects represent the largest mass shooting oral history collections

in America.[150] Interviewing archivists in Las Vegas and Orlando provided valuable information surrounding oral history project design and workflows, as well as insight into narrator participation and user communities. I previously conducted interviews with the archivist and oral historian at UNCC for my 2021 master's thesis, and these interviews, along with my own notes and insight into the project, helped determine a linear timeline of project design and implementation. The NNROHP currently contains fifty-four interviews, twenty-five of which I conducted between 2019-2020 as an oral history project assistant. Using Mary Marshall Clark's post September 11th oral history project as a model,[151] I chose to conduct a second interview with ten key narrators from the collection. These narrators were chosen based on their physical proximity to the shooting, their activism in the aftermath, or their involvement with the Niner Nation Remembers Commission. Additionally, another sixteen interviews were conducted with new narrators to capture under-represented voices such as teaching faculty, students, local leaders, and others involved in the memorial and demonstration events after 30 April 2019.

It was crucial to remain close to the UNC Charlotte community for this research and I took four separate trips to North Carolina between 2022 and 2025. In 2022, I spent three months in the Charlotte area, spending multiple days in UNCC's archive, viewing the UNC Charlotte April 30 Tragedy Memorial collection[152] and meeting with University Archivist Katie Causier Howell.[153] I conducted three in-person interviews during this time period. UNC Charlotte provided me with a small stipend which allowed me to donate any new interviews narrators wished archived to Charlotte's NNROHP collection.[154] The University also issued me a university email account which enabled me to follow university news, reconnect with previously

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[150] Thirty-nine interviews were collected by the University of Nevada at Las Vegas for the Remember 1 October oral history repository. The Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project contains seventy interviews. The Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project currently contains fifty-four interviews. See: Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]; Tamara Kennelly and Susan E. Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', (p. 69); Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy: An Ongoing Case Study', (2020) National Council on Public History Conference.

[151] Clark's project is also an example of 'insider' interviewing, as oral historians living in New York who experienced the 9/11 tragedy conducted interviews for the project. Clark, 'A Long Song: Oral History in the Time of Emergency and After', in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 257-259.

[152] UNC Charlotte April 30 Tragedy Memorial collection, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, MS0584 <https://findingaids.charlotte.edu/repositories/4/resources/1535> [Accessed 30 September 2025]

[153] UNC Charlotte April 30 Tragedy Memorial collection, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, MS0584

[154] Fourteen of the twenty-six new interviewees agreed to donate their interview to the archive at UNCC.

interviewed narrators, and ultimately provided a sense of belonging that possibly made narrators more comfortable and accepting of being interviewed.

I conducted most of the interviews over the Zoom platform, as the majority were scheduled and conducted while I was living in Glasgow, Scotland. Interviews with archivists outside of Charlotte also needed to be online. Given the time constraints of the project, the sensitive nature of the content, and coordination of interviewees with respect to various time zones, focus group meetings with archivists were not considered a feasible option. There are also so few archivists stewarding mass shooting repositories, that focus groups were not a rational choice. I chose one-on-one interviews for both groups because the questions asked reflected the narrator's personal, sometimes emotional, experience. Given the scope and time-frame of this project, chosen narrators were limited to four archivists and twenty-six UNCC affiliated narrators, selected through purposive sampling.

The chosen methodology of semi-structured interviews draws on preexisting qualitative research methods, utilizing comprehensive, hour long interviews through Zoom to discuss crisis oral history projects and the effect of the UNCC shooting on narrator's lives. Characterized by informal, open dialogue, semi-structured interviewing is 'concerned with people's knowledge, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions', allowing researchers to gather informed, qualitative data.[155] The semi-structured interview method also allows more freedom to ask detailed questions when certain topics arise in conversation, deviating from predetermined questions but maintaining the same themes for each interview. For example, the more open-ended approach gave UNCC interviewees space to explore adjacent topics like disillusionment with the University or changes in their sense of safety on campus. This led me to consider the project through a lens of advocacy and empowerment, a current topic of interest in field of oral history work.[156] While mass shooting survivors are not a defined marginalized group, the stories narrators shared, along with details of their activism and service to their community, prompted my exploration of using memory and narrative in social justice work.

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[155] Michale S. Lewis-Beck, Alan Bryman and Tim Futing Liao (eds) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (SAGE Publications, 2004), p. 1021.

[156] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson dedicated a section of *The Oral History* reader to scholarship on advocacy and empowerment, noting the transformative nature of oral history to impact history and society. They argued, 'Oral testimony is frequently used alongside other sources to recover neglected or silenced accounts of past experience, and as a way of challenging dominant histories that underpin repressive attitudes and policy'. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 'Advocacy and Empowerment', in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edn., ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 2016), pp. 569-580 (p. 569), doi:10.4324/9781315671833

I believe this approach yielded more valuable data than what may have been generated by structured questions, a two-dimensional survey, or large focus group. Unstructured interviews and life histories were also considered but ultimately rejected as an interview methodology because I hoped to draw some parallels between the archivists being interviewed, and between the new and original NNROHP interviews. Semi-structured interviews guaranteed some consistency between interviews and made it easier to extrapolate themes. As librarian Virginia Wilson concluded in her article on interviewing as a research method, 'Because the conversation can, and is expected, to go anywhere, comparing data between interviews becomes more difficult' without structured interviewing.[157]

During each interview, I employed observational fieldnotes as a means to reflect on what the narrator expressed verbally and through body language and facial expression. In his work *Ethnography*, cultural anthropologist Anthony Kwame Harrison noted that 'systematic in-the-field writings are inextricably linked to participant-observation in that they serve as a primary means of recording the detailed observations and insights gleaned' during research.[158] As such, the quality and character of fieldnotes are important for subsequent analysis. I used observational fieldnotes as a means to reflect on what the narrator expressed verbally and through body language and facial expression, also noting hesitations and pauses. Harrison suggests that contextual factors such as these, not only 'have a bearing on the way an interview plays out', but ethnographic practitioners 'may find as much value in what a person chooses not to talk about, as in what they emphasize'.[159] In the days after the interview, I wrote a reflection of each interview, adding quotes once transcripts were produced and revisiting video footage recorded over the Zoom platform. These reflections helped to shape the themes emerging during the thematic analysis portion of the research.

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[157] Virginia Wilson, 'Research Methods: Interviews', *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice,* 7, 2 (2012), pp. 96-98 (p. 96), doi:10.18438/B89P5B
[158] Anthony Kwame Harrison, 'Interviews' in *Ethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford Academia, 2018), pp. 1-38 (p. 24), doi10.1093/oso/9780199371785.001.0001
[159] Ibid., p. 26.

1.4: Thematic Analysis and Application of NVivo

With the number of qualitative research projects increasing, researchers are utilizing qualitative analysis software in an effort to maintain reliable and rigorous research standards.[160] Researchers are turning to coding software, such as NVivo, to import data, create coded themes, and essentially create an audit trail of their thematic research. Whereas qualitative research does not contain the raw data which allows for replicability in quantitative research, coding software allows some degree of transparency into the qualitative research process and an understanding of how researchers determine certain conclusions.

For the transcription process, I relied on Baylor University's 'Style Guide', which is an industry standard in the United States for oral history transcription.[161] I produced verbatim transcripts in the weeks after initial interviews, and all narrators were provided copies of this and their interview. I allowed narrators to make redactions of any material they did not want used and to clarify spelling where necessary.[162] While verbal tics were initially included in the verbatim transcripts, I have eliminated them for clarity when using direct quotes within the thesis. Movement, such as head nods and shrugs, were also documented in the transcripts, however, since the majority of interviews occurred online over the Zoom platform, it was difficult to judge how body language affected the narrator's words. Therefore, there are no references to physical movement within the direct quotes utilized here.

Having conducted the first twenty-five interviews for the NNROHP and written questions for the semi-structured interviews, I was aware of many of the themes I would be coding using

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[160] Social science researchers David B. Allsop and others identified a fifteen-fold increase in qualitative projects within the social sciences between 1995 and 2016, driving the use of software like NVivo within qualitative research. David B. Allsop, Joe M. Chelladurai, Elisabeth R. Kimball, Loren D. Marks and Justin J. Hendricks, 'Qualitative Methods with NVivo Software: A Practical Guide for Analyzing Qualitative Data', PSYCH, 4, 2 (2022), pp. 142-159, (p. 142) doi:10.3390/psych4020013

[161] Created by the Institute for Oral History, the style guide has evolved over the last fifty years. Using this guide helps to create consistency within transcripts, as it guides the transcriber on spelling, punctuation, how to capture nonverbal sounds and movement in interviews. See: 'Oral History Resources: Transcribing Style Guide', Baylor University Institute for Oral History <https://library.web.baylor.edu/visit/institute-oral-history/resources> [Accessed 21 July 2025]; 'Style Guide: A Quick Reference for Editing Oral History Transcripts', Baylor University Institute for Oral History (2018) <https://library.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj1806/files/2025-01/style_guide_may_2018.pdf> [Accessed 21 July 2025]

[162] Only one narrator initially interviewed but decided not to participate by asking that their interview not be used within this thesis. I would like to express my gratitude for this person's time and for their emotional and enlightening interview, acknowledging that although participants decide to leave projects, the information they impart is still viable and useful in understanding the experience of a community.

the NVivo software.[163] I utilized Social Science researcher David B. Allsop and others' model for coding interviews, performing open coding and the entire interview method[164] by reading each transcript and assigning codes to broad portions of dialogue. I attempted to assign broad termed codes, and some examples include 'April 30 first hand reflection', 'physical memorials', 'political demonstration', 'Niner rhetoric', and 'mental health'. The aggregation of references to each code helped determine the chapter content moving forward and helped me select suitable quotes to reference.

1.5: Reflexivity and Positionality

To begin this project, I had to recognize my own positionality, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and how my social identity intersects within the broader context and setting of this research. Abrams defined intersubjectivity as 'the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer or […] the interpersonal dynamics of the interview situation and the process by which the participants cooperate to create a shared narrative'.[165] In her article on intersubjectivity in oral history interviews, oral historian Amy Tooth Murphy suggested,

> Our ability to engage with and explore both our subjectivities as researchers, and the subjectivities of our interviewees, is vital in understanding what impact these dynamics have on the interview: on what our interviewees do or do not say, and the questions we do or do not ask.[166]

These concepts were vital to the interview analysis and to the process of the interview itself, as I chose to redirect the conversation and ask follow up questions.

I am a cisgender white woman in my late thirties. I am also an alumna of UNCC's master's public history program where I worked as a graduate assistant in Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives from 2016 to 2017. In 2019, the library hired me to research mass shooting oral history repositories and I conducted the first twenty-five oral histories that

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[163] Dimitri Mortelmans describes codes as labels, or 'short terms or phrases given to your data'. Dimitri Mortelmans, *Doing Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo* (Springer, 2025), p. 58, doi:10.1007/978-3-031-66014-6

[164] Allsop and others define the entire interview method as applying to 'projects focused on analyzing transcripts from the beginning to end, each and every word'. Allsop and others, 'Qualitative Methods with NVivo Software', p. 144.

[165] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p.54.

[166] Amy Tooth Murphy, 'Listening In, Listening Out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews'*, Oral History*, 48, 1(2020), 35-44 (p. 35), doi:10.2307/48568046

became the NNROHP. My position was funded through the Chancellor's office and the Chancellor chose some of the administrative personnel who were initially interviewed as a way to capture stories of those who sat on the 2019-2020 Remembrance Commission.

I am a North Carolinian and have deep ties to the Charlotte community and to UNCC in particular. My history in the state and my understanding of the local government and issues facing the city helped me contact narrators and interpret their stories. Speaking on the impact of community in oral history interviewing, Murphy recalled she had 'experienced first-hand the powerful and significant impact of "insider" identity' as a lesbian woman interviewing members of the LGBTQ community.[167] Murphy acknowledged that belonging to a minority group, especially one 'formed in response to discrimination and oppression', provided her insight into facets of intersubjectivity.[168] I believe my 'insider' status at a native North Carolinian and Charlotte alumna aided my connection and rapport with potential interviewees. These factors also put them at ease during interviews and allowed them to freely express themselves. Many narrators expressed gratitude that my project might bring insight into the effects of a mass shooting in their place of work or study. However, I also have to recognize that I have lived in Glasgow since 2020, away from the community of Charlotte. Despite my connection to the city, it is possible that narrators felt I was an 'outsider', removed from their city and viewing them as subjects to be studied. It is also possible the removal allowed narrators to open up in other ways, acknowledging that my research would be published abroad and distancing themselves from the political stigma associated with providing opinions on gun control.

Social and political activism are key themes in this thesis and I used purposive sampling to reach current faculty, former students, and people of color who are more likely to have liberal social views on the American gun violence epidemic. My identity as a former UNCC student and an academic who lived in Charlotte in 2019 and experienced the shooting off-campus but in real-time, provided a shared, comparable experience to narrators. Using this as a lens to engage with my narrators through informed listening further solidified that the narrator and myself were both part of a community grappling with tragedy. In her work with Columbine parents, Mears found that trauma often isolates affected communities and leaves survivors reliant on each other to

[167] Ibid., p. 36.
[168] Ibid.

make sense of the tragedy, as opposed to the broader public.[169] In this way, being an 'insider' within the UNC Charlotte community offered a level of comfort to narrators sharing their stories. I also believe many narrators made correct assumptions about my personal political leanings, and in some cases, I validated these during interviews by having insight into the topics they discussed.

In 2014, the city of Charlotte published the Charlotte Opportunity Initiative, an economic mobility study in which the key takeaway was that the city had 'the lowest rate of upward mobility of the largest 50 metropolitan areas in the country'.[170] Poverty, homelessness, crime, and inequality remain a constant in the headlines of the local newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer*. Two years after the Opportunity Initiative study, Charlotteans responded with outrage to the fatal shooting of a local Black man, Keith Lamont Scott, by a Charlotte police office. Peaceful protests and marches evolved into civil unrest and scrutiny over the reaction by Charlotte Mecklenburg Police officers.[171] At the time of the shooting and protests, I was living in Charlotte, studying the history of Black-White interracial relationships in the piedmont region of North Carolina. Some narrators in both my master's thesis project and the NNROHP mentioned the event in terms of race relations, gun violence, and policing in the city. The shooting which occurred at UNCC did not happen in a vacuum and Charlotteans are aware of the gun violence and social justice issues plaguing certain parts of their city. Living in the city and being a student at UNCC during the protests and riots surrounding the Keith Lamont Scott shooting have given me an understanding of issues afflicting Charlotte and of student reactions to policing, economic hardship, and gun violence in general. My understanding of these issues made thematic analysis of their narratives surrounding these topics easier to understand and interpret.

The 30 April shooting happened in the wake of the Scott shooting and subsequent riots. While I did not attend the vigil on 1 May held at UNCC, I did experienced shock and grief along with the community of Charlotte and followed social media closely for updates. Just months after the shooting, I joined the staff at J. Murrey Atkins Library to research crisis oral history projects and specifically oral history projects in the aftermath of campus shootings and tragedy.

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[169] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, 'A Columbine Study: Giving Voice, Hearing Meaning', *The Oral History Review*, 35 (2008), 159-175 (p. 163-164).
[170] Opportunity Insights, Charlotte Opportunity Initiative' (2020), p. 2 <https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OI-CharlotteReport.pdf> [Accessed March 10, 2022].
[171] Holly Yan, 'Keith Scott Killing: No Chargers Against Officer', *CNN*, 30 November 2016 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/30/us/keith-lamont-scott-case-brentley-vinson> [Accessed 10 May 2025]

Much like Folkert's findings with archivists at NIU, my close to ties to the University and larger community provided me an insider status with narrators, all twenty-five of whom agreed to be interviewed between 2019 and 2020.[172]

I came to this research project through an academic background in public history, archival work, and oral history interviewing around topics involving politics, inequality and experiences of veterans. I spent two years studying Black-White interracial relationships and racism in North Carolina for my UNCC master's degree. I then accepted a contract position interviewing Black Charlotteans facing neighborhood gentrification and agreed to conduct interviews for the NNROHP. Lastly, in my position as a collections specialist, I interviewed Vietnam veterans diagnosed with PTSD. I worked as an archivist for three years and completed a master's degree in Information Management and Preservation in 2021. This degree led to my interest in postmodernist archival theory and a scrutiny of resources surrounding conducting and archiving crisis oral history projects, specifically in the wake of mass shooting. My professional training and career experience informed many of my conversations with archivists, as well as the semi-structured questions developed for their interviews.

Lastly, I feel it is appropriate to outline my relationship with guns while growing up in the American south. I was raised in the Piedmont region of rural North Carolina, where most male members of my extended family own firearms and participate in a culture of hunting and angling. This cultural fit is common for rural, white North Carolinians and when evaluating the number of minority sportspeople in the state, researchers Christopher Serenari and M. Nils Peterson found that 'the existence of tradition and heritage is an influential driver of hunting and angling participation rates' in North Carolina. 'They are especially important to White Americans confronting cultural dissonance associated with declining lifeways and social ethics linked to these activities [hunting and angling].'[173]

As a rural North Carolinian, I grew up not only eating the animals hunted by relatives, but also lived in a household with a hidden and locked gun safe, where it was rare to ever see a firearm. While there is a deep rooted tradition of hunting within my family, neither myself or many of my female relatives were indoctrinated into it. My knowledge of hunting practices in the

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[172] Folkerts, 'The Documentation of Tragedy in the Archives' (unpublished master's thesis, Western Washington University, 201), p. 36.
[173] Christopher Serenari and M. Nils Peterson, 'Evaluating the Cultural Fit of Hunting and Angling Among Minority Sportspersons in North Carolina', *Leisure Sciences*, pp. 1-16 (p. 3), doi:10.1080/01490400.2018.1458262

state, as well as my rural roots, provided a commonality with narrators that eased conversation around guns and gun ownership. For example, anthropologist Adam Johnson who was the professor in Kennedy 236 at the time of the UNCC shooting, spoke openly about his childhood in Broadway, North Carolina and the respect his father exhibited toward gun ownership. He discussed the practice of hunting being 'intimately tied to their lives' and a common food source, while also explicitly disputing the necessity of civilians owning semi-automatic rifles.[174]

These aspects of my life were less important when interviewing other narrators. Faculty members viewed me as an academic pursuing research interests. They understood the nature of the project, fieldwork involved, and agreed to participate in what would become an academic work on oral history and mass shooting. I established rapport with many of the student narrators who were re-interviewed for the project. Despite the age gap between myself, a Millennial, and the student interviewees, Generation Z, they chose to speak candidly about activism, their own anxieties around the gun violence epidemic, and their mental health. According to John Della Volpe, this is a commonality for Gen Z, who are aware of social justice issues and vocal about their opinions and involvement. [175]

1.6: Interviewee Selection

The first area of this research involves semi-structured oral history interviews with archivists at institutions which have collected oral histories in response to local mass shootings. I had established working relationships with the archivists in Las Vegas and Orlando. They were consulted in 2019 when designing the NNROHP and agreed to follow up interviews for this project. Education and practice scholars Sharon M. Ravitch and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl define practitioner research as 'a range of systematic, inquiry-based research efforts directed toward creating and extending professional knowledge, skills, ideas, and practices'.[176] These interviews with archival professionals provided context surrounding crisis oral history project design, archival theory, participant selection, and designated user communities. The goal of practitioner

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[174] Johnson, oral history interview, 2022, p. 4.
[175] See: John Della Volpe, *FIGHT: How Gen Z is Channeling their Fear and Passion to Save America* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2021)
[176] Sharon M. Ravitch and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl, *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological*, 2nd edition (SAGE Publications, 2021), p. 23.

research in this thesis is to gain insight into various components of these trauma projects, including areas of concern, challenge, reward, the role of archivists, and 'the parameters, possibilities, and constraints of their work settings'.[177] Analyzing these interviews will inform and shape future archival professional's work with crisis oral history, while also allowing archivists stewarding similar collections to better understand the complexities of their own work in relation to one another.

The second group of narrators were those connected to UNCC. The fifty-four pre-existing NNROHP interviewees range from UNCC students, faculty, administrations, and public officials. They are also overwhelmingly white.[178] Interestingly, issues of Charlotte's history of gentrification, inequality, poverty and crime in Black and Latinx communities, as well as the shooting of Scott, become intertwined in stories of the 30 April 2019 campus shooting. This thesis further explores the links between these issues and how narrators reflect on the UNCC shooting to gauge the extent to which archival collections might inspire social change and social justice movements. Understanding issues facing the city of Charlotte helped me to analyze the collection held at UNCC and the twenty-six additional interviews thematically. The experience of narrators also led to the formation of chapters surrounding the safety and security of UNCC and collective memory and activism in the aftermath.

Using an interpretivist framework informed by feminist social theory, I contextualize how the narrator's role and social identity inform their stories of 30 April. Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl argued, 'Within qualitative research, people's experiences and perspectives are embedded in the contexts that shape their lives, and how people experience aspects of their lives and the world is subjective and can change over time'.[179] Conducting follow up interviews with ten participants

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[177] Ibid.

[178] Over the last four years, discussions surrounding concepts of whiteness in oral history have emerged within the Oral History Association and in current oral history scholarship. Working with a group of international historians, the OHA organized a symposium to assess the role of race and power in oral history theory and practice in 2022. Writing in *The Oral History Review*, oral historian Holy Werner-Thomas used whiteness as a category to examine the Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore from 1976. Thomas argued, 'whiteness-as-power […] is therefore a concept with which oral historians must reckon in their own practices and institutions, if we want to understand how structural racism (the very architecture upon which America was built) has affected the field of oral history, and how white oral historians—and the institutions for which they work—unwittingly uphold the status quo'. She ultimately questioned whether oral historians should be asking if oral history is white and instead suggested asking 'how can oral historians help to make whiteness visible?' Holly Werner-Thomas, 'Is Oral History White? The Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore, an Oral History Project from 1976, and Best Practices Today', *The Oral History Review*, 49 (2022), pp. 377-398 (p. 378), doi:10.1080/00940798.2022.2096474

[179] Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl, *Qualitative Research*, p. 10.

from the original collection allowed me to gauge change over time and offer a more reflective commentary on narrator's lives, experiences, and views. This was most notable in interviews with Gen Z former students.

I employed purposive sampling to determine the ten narrators selected for a second interview. Anthropologist Pranee Liamputtong defines purposive sampling as 'the deliberate selection of specific individuals, events, or settings because of the crucial information they can provide that cannot be obtained so well through other channels'.[180] Narrators included student leaders, local policy makers, counseling professionals, and students and professors in close proximity to the 2019 shooting who have coped with that experience and or trauma in various ways. While the initial NNROHP directive was to interview members of the Remembrance Commission and administrators, I felt the voices of students and faculty, many of whom were locked down in buildings surrounding Kennedy for hours on 30 April, would be more telling of the experiences of survivors.

I used personal connections to identify and contact narrators related to UNCC. These connections were either previously established during the 2019-2020 NNROHP or were initiated through connections to UNCC. My colleagues and I designed the NNROHP project utilizing components of archivists Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's feminist ethics and radical empathy archival approaches. Caswell and Cifor viewed archivists as 'caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility'.[181] The UNCC team incorporated this approach by adopting clearer information and consent language, allowing narrators to retain copyright over their narratives, allowing redactions and embargos, and keeping narrators informed of the archival process. Making these changes enabled us to effectively build rapport with narrators, and that rapport helped me gain a second interview with this group of narrators. All of the repeat narrators agreed to a second or third interview when approached.

I located additional student narrators through social media profiles, like Facebook and LinkedIn, and approached potential student narrators by explaining my affiliation with UNCC and my doctoral research. This method was mostly met with positive interactions. At the outset of this project, I anticipated a moderate level of success contacting and interviewing the fifteen

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[180] Pranee Liamputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods,* 5th edn. (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 21.
[181] Caswell and Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics', p. 23.

new narrators from the UNCC project. Mass shootings continue to be an epidemic in America, and potential interviewees continue to live with this grim reality. Many are still teaching and learning at UNCC or are involved in activism or local politics, where this reality faces them daily. In terms of the project's subject matter, and the process of being cold-called, it was possible narrators would feel too traumatized or personally unable to participate. Using this method, only two of the twenty-eight potential narrators declined to participate, citing that it was somehow more difficult to speak about the shooting years later, and another citing the public's general apathy around gun violence, feeling as though it would not be beneficial to re-live their experience.

To generate comparable and measurable qualitative data, I created core question list for both UNCC interviewees and archivists which was approved by the University Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects. The semi-structured set of questions used in both sets of interviews were developed to be broad and provide ample time for the interviewee to recount their experiences fully and add any additional anecdotes they wished. This also allowed me to ask follow up questions related to their recollections. The UNCC interviewee questions closely matched the original NNROHP questions. This helped me create themes in NVivo to compare older interviews with the twenty-six new narratives. To create further continuity between all narrators, each interview closed by asking narrators to reflect on the memorialization and remembrance of mass shooting events in their community.

For UNCC, the semi-structured questions were generated to gain insight into three main themes. Narrators were asked about their personal connections to the University. This included time spent at the University, involvement in campus organizations or roles held at UNCC, and thoughts on the University as a community. Secondly, narrators were asked to speak about 30 April 2019. This was prompted as an open ended question: 'Can you tell me about April 30th?' All narrators recounted their personal experience of that day, their reactions to campus emergency alerts, and events in the aftermath of the shooting, i.e. did they attend the campus vigil, protests, or rallies. Interviews ended with personal reflections. Narrators were asked to reflect on the three or four years since the shooting, they were asked their views on activism, active shooter trainings, and were invited to discuss gun violence in America. Lastly, narrators were asked about memorialization and how we might remember Reed and Riley.

The interview questions for professional archivists stewarding mass shooting oral history collections catered to archival practice and community tragedy. I asked archivists about project creation, including consultation with other industry experts, professional resources, funding and administrative support, challenges, goals, and objectives. Archivists discussed the implementation of projects and conducting interviews, with a concentration on mental health resources, safeguards against trauma, consent policies, and also interviewee selection. Lastly, I asked archivists for major takeaways and about the post-interview process. A key discussion point was the availability and usability of interviews. They were asked about feedback from the broader community, lessons learned and advice, as well as the importance they place on trauma collecting.

1.7: Limitations

Over the last five years, I have faced various limitations in my research. I had originally intended to conduct fifty interviews over the course of two years but quickly realized that was not a feasible sample size in the allotted time. Oral history interviews are time-consuming.[182] Many interviews took months to schedule because of holidays, professional, and personal responsibilities. Interviewees were approached two or three at a time, not all at once.[183] The five-hour time difference between the East Coast of the United States and the United Kingdom made scheduling more difficult, and interviews were often held between 10pm and midnight BST. The post-interview process was also time-consuming as I had no funding to hire a transcriptionist and instead, transcribed the work myself. Each transcript took between eight and twelve hours to transcribe using the Baylor guide and narrator redactions and edits required additional time. Given the time-consuming nature of this data collection method, I adjusted the sample size of interviewees to twenty-five, eventually collecting twenty-six interviews.

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[182] Professors Diana Kapiszewksi, Lauren M. MacLean and Benjamin L. Read write 'Given their time-consuming nature, researchers using in-depth interviews, focus groups, and oral histories are less likely to interview a sizable number of people […]'. See: Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren M. MacLean and Benjamin Read, *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.190-233 (p. 213), doi:10.1017/CBO97805f11794551

[183] I chose to stagger my interviews to allow myself time to transcribe and write field notes after each interview. I also aimed to return transcripts to narrators within four to six weeks and knew it would take ample time to transcribe each narrative. I wanted the interviews to remain fresh in each narrator's mind when they reviewed them for redaction purposes, and I knew this would be difficult if it took months to finalize and return transcripts.

For this project, the NNROHP collection was analyzed in-depth, but collections in Las Vegas, Orlando, and Virginia were not consulted at all. I was involved in the creation and implementation of the NNROHP. I also still possess the original field notes taken during each interview and had access to my original UNCC email address used from 2019 to 2022, making it easier to access dates of meetings and correspondences with original narrators. I also spent three months in 2022 with the physical and digital memorial collection archived after 30 April 2019, spending additional time with the collections in 2023 and 2024. However, the same opportunities were not possible for collections in Las Vegas, Orlando, and Virginia, which were only accessible in their respective reading rooms. Not only were there few funding opportunities to visit these collections, but in North Carolina, I had a reliable social network to aid me. I relied on family and friends for accommodation and had use of a vehicle to commute to and from UNCC. The cost of visiting the other three locations, paying for accommodation and a rental car, to spend days in their archives was not financially possible. Therefore, my only contact with archivists in Orlando and Las Vegas occurred over Email and Zoom.[184] The only access to their collections was digitized material online and various digitized library guides.

Many self-funded researchers face similar situations and their research suffers because they are unable to fund research trips. This is even more problematic when research requires international travel. Moving to the UK in 2020, I also faced living in Glasgow during a housing[185] and cost of living crisis.[186] Being forced to move several times with yearly rent increases, it was necessary to work a part-time job beginning in 2023. Despite working eighteen hours each week, I maintained my full-time student status, making the third and fourth years of this dissertation increasingly difficult.

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[184] Throughout this thesis, I was in contact with archivists at Virginia Tech, however, Tamara Kennelly retired and did not wish to participate in this project. It took years for the library to decide to open their collection of oral history interviews and as of 2024, the collection is reading room accessible.

[185] Glasgow City Council issued a housing emergency in November 2023. Issues such as the unprecedented number of un housed people, as well as housing shortages, and rent increases exacerbated the ability for students to find and maintain a flat let. See: 'Glasgow's Housing Emergency', Glasgow City Council, 18 December 2024. https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/article/11508/Glasgow-s-housing-emergency> [Accessed 10 July 2025]; 'Action Plan Launched to Tackle Glasgow's Housing Emergency', Scottish Housing News, 21 January 2025 <https://www.scottishhousingnews.com/articles/action-plan-launched-to-tackle-glasgows-housing-emergency> [Accessed 10 July 2025]

[186] According to the Scottish Government Cost of Living Analytical Working Group, 'the 2021 to 2023 cost of living crisis was the most serious inflationary shock to affect Scotland since the early 1980s,' naming students as one of the groups most affected. Cost of Living Analytical Working Group, 'Understanding the Cost of Living Crisis in Scotland', Scottish Government (2025), p. 4 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/understanding-cost-living-crisis-scotland/pages/3/> [Accessed 13 July 2025]

Lastly, the stress of researching a traumatic topic ultimately delayed the project. In his work on historians researching trauma and violence, historian James Robins noted 'Historians are distinct from survivors […] They return to the source of their trauma by choice'.[187] Whereas survivors have no say in remembering their trauma, 'every day, sometimes for decades, historians open themselves, if not willingly then by a sense of obligation, to the pain of the past'.[188] Having experienced the shooting with the collective community of Charlotte, witnessed moments of both grief and student activism in the aftermath, conducted interviews where narrators described lockdown, the chaotic Kennedy classroom, and literally being shot in detail, I felt an obligation to my narrators to immerse myself in researching and relistening to the narratives around 30 April.

As a consequence, my research impacted my mental and physical health. Despite outlining resources for myself in the University's ethics application which included working with a therapist and engaging in grounding techniques, the traumatic content, coupled with multiple high profile mass shootings which occurred in America during the research period, led me to spend weeks without engaging with my work. The Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas was particularly challenging for me. As I watched the shooting unfold in real time, my thoughts were on the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. At the time of the Sandy Hook shooting, I was teaching high school history in Newton, North Carolina and I remember the shock and grief felt by myself and fellow educators. I was optimistic that Sandy Hook would be the mass shooting that would prompt some measure of federal gun control. Uvalde reminded me of the hope I had felt in 2012, and the reality that ten years on, elementary school mass shootings were still occurring.[189]

I also felt isolated from my peers in post graduate researcher positions because of the content of my project. Historian Elena Gallina at the University of Oxford admitted to Robins, 'The extent to which my research is "dark" and therefore not polite dinner conversation means

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[187] James Robins, 'Can Historians be Traumatized by History?', *New Republic*, 16 February 2021 <https://newrepublic.com/article/161127/can-historians-traumatized-history> [Accessed 19 July 2025]
[188] Ibid.
[189] I spent several weeks away from my research after the tragedy. The mass shooting in Uvalde happened on 24 May 2022. The fatal shooting of nineteen students, two teachers, and the subsequent injury of seventeen others dominated news due to the high number of fatalities and slow response time of police officers, who left the perpetrator in the school for over an hour. Office of Community Oriented Policing, *Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School,* U.S. Department of Justice Services (2024) <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-r1141-pub.pdf> [Accessed 21 July 2025]

I'm repeatedly isolated in piecing through the material'.[190] Working with trauma is a lonely and isolating experience, which is best understood by colleagues engaging with similar topics. Investigating the emotional labor involved in oral history research, media and culture scholar Jennifer Harding and historian of mental health Verusca Calabria argued that researchers 'may experience feelings of vulnerability and distress as shaming […] only made worse by the highly competitive and individualistic climate' in academia.[191] This is true of my experience. The content of my work coupled with the pressure to complete the project only worsened the state of my mental and physical health. I continued to compare my progress with that of my peers, eventually requesting an extension to make time for my mental health.

Harding and Calabria also identify the lack of outlets for discussing and managing stress within emotional labor work as stimulants for 'chronic personal and professional unease and isolation'.[192] In my search for outlets to manage my stress, I learned of the Emotionally Demanding Research Network. Created by researchers at the University of Glasgow as a peer support network, the group hosted monthly online check-ins and general well-being talks.[193] Researcher Smita Kumar and adult development scholar Liz Cavallaro defined emotionally demanding research as 'research that demands a tremendous amount of mental, emotional, or physical energy and potentially affects or depletes the researcher's health or well-being'.[194] The pair warn that emotional demands stemming from this type of research can 'trigger emotional reactions or responses or interact with an existing emotional state, resulting in mental, emotional, and physical impact'.[195] I have experienced the depletion of physical energy, the exacerbation of preexisting health issues, and intense emotional reactions while researching mass shooting. The Emotionally Demanding Research Network helped provided a safe space to discuss research issues and share coping mechanisms, while also encouraging researchers to connect with other

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[190] Ibid.
[191] Jennifer Harding and Verusca Calabria, 'Introduction- What this book is about and how we came to write it', in *Emotional Labour in Oral History Research: The Hidden Toll*, ed. by Jennifer Harding and Verusca Calabria (Routledge, 2025), pp. 1-13 (p. 4), doi:10.4324/9781003454847-1
[192] Ibid., p. 5.
[193] 'Home', Emotionally Demanding Research Network Scotland (2022) <https://emotionalresearch.wordpress.com/> [Accessed 19 July 2025]
[194] Smita Kumar and Liz Cavallaro, 'Researcher Self-Care in Emotionally Demanding Research: A Proposed Conceptual Framework', *Qualitative Health Research*, 28, 4 (2017) pp.648-658, (p. 648), doi:10.1177/1049732317746377
[195]I bid.

postgraduates working within an emotionally demanding context. These meetings, along with supervisor meetings, helped alleviate some of the weight of the subject matter.

However, mass shooting is a distinctly American problem and I did not have a connection to American academics working on the topic. I felt this led to further isolation in my field of research. Ultimately, researching mass shooting from outside of the United States provided a level of separation from the news media. It was also a welcome reprise from living in a state with open carry laws[196] and the reality that Americans visibly carry handguns on a regular basis. After years of studying mass shooting oral history archives and doing so from abroad, the most advantageous mental health support for me was engaging in monthly support network meetings and meeting peers working topics of trauma.

1.8: Conclusion

The methodological choice to use semi-structured oral history interviews to capture both archivists' experiences and survivor narratives provided structured answers while allowing flexibility to speak freely in the interview. Adapting the UNCC design for the original NNR narrators and creating a structured question list for archivists enabled me to thematically analyze the qualitative data and organize the results into distinct chapters supporting my original argument. Ethical considerations were at the forefront of my research design, and I informed narrators about their rights to withdraw, the informed consent process, and their ability to redact transcripts and leave the study. It was important to employ trauma-informed considerations for this project, and I created resource lists similar to the UNCC handouts. Given my location, most interviews were conducted over Zoom, but my prior connection to the Charlotte community helped me reach narrators and request follow-up interviews with original narrators. While I was aware of my positionality and social identity during this project, my connection with Charlotte and status as a white, Southern academic provided me with insider status. I encountered limitations during the course of this research, including the research subject and my lack of

[196] North Carolina allows for the visible or open carry of firearms. To do so, the gun owner must be eighteen years old without a felony conviction. The state allows for concealed carry as well, which requires a permit. Renee Umsted, 'It's Legal to Carry a Handgun in NC Without a Permit, but Only in Some Cases', *News & Observer*, 7 July 2025 <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/state/north-carolina/article308391965.html> [Accessed 19 October 2025].

proximity to Charlotte and collections in America, however, I found support through fellow researchers and academic support networks.

Chapter 2:

Collecting and Stewarding Mass Shooting Oral History Archives

2.1: Introduction

This chapter examines how archivists design and steward mass shooting oral history archives to understand their underrepresentation within archival holdings. It also investigates how the narratives might be used in the future and the factors causing the underutilization of current collections. By comparing three case studies of archives around the country, this chapter argues that the individual nature of each shooting tragedy makes it difficult to define 'best practices' for organizations working to create an oral history project in the wake of tragedy. Instead, it highlights 'good practices' and considerations that allow for adaptability in the aftermath of a community mass shooting. Lastly, this chapter examines my first three research questions surrounding how oral history is used to document US mass shootings, how politicization impacts projects, and how feminist approaches and trauma-informed practices allow archivists to ethically document and preserve these narratives.

Each case study highlights different considerations for crisis oral history projects, including the need to carefully consider accessibility and the importance of community connection and stakeholder input when documenting tragedy within a community. Professionals interviewed for this project exemplified the role of activist archivist through careful project design and by actively deciding to collect politicized narratives. Their experiences offer useful insights to professionals wishing to create similar projects in areas where gun violence is heavily politicized. The findings from this chapter also bring together considerations from three experienced archivists whose combined knowledge on mass shooting oral history projects has never been collectively published to help guide others in the profession.

Stewarding a mass shooting oral history repository requires careful forethought and advanced planning. Archivists choosing to commence these projects apply different approaches which this chapter outlines by comparing three case studies in Charlotte, Las Vegas, and Orlando. The three collected repositories represent the challenges, successes, and lessons learned in stewarding crisis oral history collections. These examples also represent unique organizational approaches: the university system documenting a campus tragedy, a university library

documenting a community tragedy, and a community history center documenting a community tragedy. Each of these case studies offer evidence to support my overarching argument that oral history interviews with mass shooting survivors are under-documented and underutilized in the archives sector, and this chapter explores the reasons why this is the case in the United States of America.

2.2: Deciding to Collect

Why, as archivists and historians, are we asking to collect deeply personal and often tragic, trauma narratives? What is the value of collecting these stories? Clark considered this question within her case study on the September 11, 2001, Oral History Memory and Narrative Project for the *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. She stated,

> This genre [crisis oral history] of telling and listening in cases where the media and government have a stake in defining public meaning is especially important. It investigates the "silences" that oral historians often write about decades later as they try to recover the conversations […] that took place on street corners, in private places, in public protests, or in spontaneous memorials. The commemorative and historical value of oral history is that we have a chance to influence the development of public meaning both immediately and over time.[197]

Clark expands on the importance of crisis narrators, stating catastrophe's portrayed 'victims' are 'in fact, history's agents who define for the rest of us the multiple ways in which history is experienced and read'.[198] Collected stories of tragedy and trauma, therefore, are pertinent to a community's collective memory and necessary additions to the community's story, where the community wants that story remembered through oral history.

As outlined in the literature review, historians and archivists have covered the topic of collecting oral history in the aftermath of tragedy for decades.[199] More recently, the question of when to collect and the timing of ethically doing so became engaging issues in the archival

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[197] Mary Marshall Clark, 'Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe: Reflections on the September 11, 2001, Oral History Memory and Narrative Project', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. by Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 255-264 (p. 257), doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195339550.013.0018
[198] Ibid.
[199] See: Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, eds, *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis,* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Clark, 'Field Notes on Catastrophe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. by Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 255-264; Michael Folkerts, 'The Documentation of Tragedy in the Archives' (unpublished master's thesis, Western Washington University, 2011).

community. The Covid-19 pandemic reinvigorated the debate surrounding how soon archive professionals should begin collecting personal stories steeped in trauma and tragedy. Writing at the onset of the pandemic, Jennifer Cramer noted,

> One of the main concerns about interviewing someone who has gone through or is still experiencing a traumatic event centers on the circumstances both of the narrators and of the interviewers […]The Oral History Society advises practitioners to judge urgency of the interview as well as the condition of interviewers and narrators in regard to informed consent, intrusiveness and infrastructural support.[200]

Cramer considered this pertinent guidance and reiterated 'the obvious overarching rationale that most of these project states is the need to document and archive what people see as a pivotal point in global history'.[201] Psychologist and psychoanalyst Ghislaine Boulanger is often cited for her articles on the therapeutic power of oral history, vicarious trauma, and emotional contagion.[202] On the topic of the timing and narrator readiness, Boulanger took the approach that participants will not engage with projects if they are not prepared to discuss traumatic topics.[203]

Pamela Schwartz was new to the Orange County Regional History Center (OCRHC) in June of 2016, having begun her role as chief curator only four months prior. When the Pulse Nightclub shooting occurred on 12 June, Schwartz remembered thinking, 'this event is going to need to be preserved for the memory of this community […] this is a huge changing point for us'.[204] While Schwartz considered oral history pivotal to the event's remembrance, there was no immediate project plan. 'We didn't go into it right away', Schwartz reflected. 'It's hard when things are so fresh, and people are focused on other things. They're focused on their police affidavits and they're focused on their families, and working through therapy, and things like that'.[205]

Claytee D. White was the inaugural director of the Oral History Research Center (OHRC) for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries, which began in 2003. A longtime resident of Las Vegas, White remembered her shock upon learning of the Route 91 Harvest Festival mass shooting on October 1st, 2017. 'When I learned about this on that Sunday evening […] it never

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[200] Cramer, 'First, Do No Harm', p. 204.
[201] Ibid., 204-205.
[202] Ghislaine Boulanger, 'When is Vicarious Trauma a Necessary Therapeutic Tool?', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 35 (2018), 60-69 (p. 60) doi:10.1037/pap0000089; Boulanger, 'The Continuing and Unfinished Present', p. 115.
[203] Cave, 'What Remains: Reflections on Crisis Oral History', in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 1.
[204] Pamela Schwartz, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 2 August 2023 (p. 2).
[205] Ibid., p. 2.

occurred to me to think about an oral history project. […] I was stunned. I was in shock'.[206] Returning to work the following week, her colleagues began collecting social media posts and local museums in the area met with libraries staff to discuss how to document the tragedy. It was then an oral history project was suggested. White's initial actions were developing a question list and listening to the local National Public Radio (NPR) news station to learn about the tragedy and those responding to it.

The first interviews in both collections occurred organically. Schwartz recalled a family visiting the OCRHC about a month after the tragedy. Their child was murdered at Pulse Nightclub and they had traveled to Orlando, only to find themselves unable to visit the nightclub or memorial spaces. Schwartz recalled 'They couldn't share their grief with the world anymore. And they knew we had collected some items and they thought maybe they could come here'.[207] OCRHC staff collected condolence items from spontaneous vigils and memorials in Orlando, but those items were not catalogued. Schwartz asked the family to return the next day and spent time sifting through the collected items to find artifacts related to the family's loved one. She created a quiet space where the family could view those items in private. Schwartz explained, 'as we were talking, I just said, you know, "Would you like to share your story?" and explain[ed] to them what that meant'.[208] She justified the suggestion, noting there was much more to their story than media blurbs and posts using only their daughter's Facebook photo to represent her. 'I said, there's much more to your family, to your child, to all of your experience […] we'd like to be able to understand that in terms of what the actual impacts of this event are'.[209]

Schwartz was so new to the position that she did not know where the recorders were kept. She improvised, using her cell phone to record the interview, rationalizing, 'their child's been murdered. Are they ever going to come back to this community? They might not'.[210] This was the beginning of the One Orlando oral history project. Schwartz clarified that the project was grassroots from the start. 'We let people know we do oral histories, what they are and why we do it, and then they come to us to opt in'. There is no finality to this project for Schwartz and her team. She stated,

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[206] Claytee D. White, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 7 August 2023 (p. 1).
[207] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 2.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.

> We're still doing oral histories. We will infinitely probably do them around this story because once you're a survivor, once this event has happened to you, it never is no longer a thing in your story […] hundreds of stories go untold by the media. Hundreds of stories go untold by police reports. So our goal is just to let people tell their story how they want when they come to us to do it.[211]

White's first narrator also appeared organically. The interviewee, Stephen Round, had scheduled a meeting to discuss donating a memory book related to the 1 October tragedy. After meeting, Michelle Light, Director of Special Collections and Archives at University of Nevada Las Vegas libraries, escorted Round to White at the OHRC. 'We already had the forms done and the questions,' remembered White, 'so we sat and talked to this young man for about fifty-five, sixty minutes'.[212] Stephen Round was a self-appointed guard for the spontaneous memorial site on the Las Vegas strip, near Mandalay Bay. While standing guard to make sure memorial items were not stolen, he realized visitors to the site wanted to speak with him and share stories, for which he was not prepared.[213] White recalled, 'He ran to the closest gift shop he could find, and he found this booklet and he began to have people write memories […] He came into the library three weeks after the tragedy to give us that book'.[214]

White and her team felt prepared to begin their own project and sourced their initial participants by calling various locations around Las Vegas connected with the tragedy. 'There were people we heard on NPR,' stated White. 'There was a makeshift place at the Thomas and Mack [Center] where some of the people came right after […] putting together items [care packages] for people. And so we interviewed someone here, and once you interview one person, they will start giving you names of other people'.[215] Through this snowball effect, White and her team connected with an Uber driver who used her own car to continuously transport the injured to an area hospital. They spoke to the coroner, doctors, police officers, and concert goers, as well

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[211] Ibid., p. 3.
[212] White, oral history interview, p. 2.
[213] Claytee D. White, 'Las Vegas Healing Strategies: Mementos, Family, and Acts of Love and Kindness', in *Vegas Strong: Bearing Witness 1 October 2017*, ed. by Roberta Sterman Sabbath (University of Nevada Press, 2023), pp. 67-75 (p. 68) <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=7153271> [Accessed 10 September 2023]
[214] White, oral history interview, p. 2.
[215] Ibid.

as community members who began the Healing Garden.[216] By the end of the project, White estimated about seventy interviews were collected.[217]

The Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project at UNCC was developed as part of a larger university response to the shooting tragedy. University archivist Katie Causier Howell sat on Chancellor Philip Dubois' Remembrance Commission, a group tasked with handling all aspects of the university's remembrance.[218] The Commission's official purpose was to 'thoughtfully and compassionately lead a comprehensive process to determine how to best memorialize the students who were killed, how to best remember the tragedy that occurred on April 30th, and to make a recommendation about the future utilization of Kennedy 236'. [219] Howell and special collections personnel proposed an oral history project to document the tragedy in conjunction with the physical items collected from campus memorials. The commission approved funding for an oral history project that ultimately required months of research prior to conducting any interviews because of gaps in scholarly literature.[220]

Archivist Ashely Maynor alluded to similar issues in condolence archiving, arguing that there are few protocols guiding condolence collecting, which, along with the uniqueness of each tragedy, complicate projects.[221] This point is even more relevant to the development of an oral history project documenting a mass shooting. The growing necessity for 'good practices' is mirrored in the number of papers and sessions on trauma collecting and documenting tragedy

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[216] The Healing Garden was built by community volunteers in the four days after the 1 October 2017 mass shooting. It honors the fifty-eight victims of the shooting through a remembrance wall and various tiles donated by family members of the victims, survivors, and community members. It continues to be maintained by community volunteers. 'Community Healing Garden', City of Las Vegas (2025) <https://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/Residents/Parks-Facilities/Community-Healing-Garden> [Accessed 21 October 2025]

[217] White, oral history interview, p. 2-3.

[218] 'Niner Nation Remembrance Commission', University of North Carolina, Charlotte (2019) <https://ninernationremembers.charlotte.edu/remembrance-memorial/remembrance-commission/ > [Accessed 10 March 2024]

[219] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', University of North Carolina, Charlotte (2020), p. 3. <https://ninernationremembers.uncc.edu/niner-nation-remembrance-commission/final-report> [Accessed 21 August 2023].

[220] Archivist have expressed multiple challenges arising from beginning a project centered on tragedy. Limited academic scholarship on topics such as project creation, traumatization, interview ethics, and opening collections to users are all documented in recent articles and conference presentations. See: Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', pp. 55-73; Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]; Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy', (2020) National Council on Public History Conference, virtual; Cramer, 'First, Do No Harm', *Oral History Review,* pp. 203-213; Maynor, 'Response to the Unthinkable', pp. 582-624.

[221] Maynor, 'Response to the Unthinkable', p. 583.

emerging from public history and archival conferences in the last decade.[222] These issues also prompted the development of the Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force by the Society of American Archivists and led Pam Schwartz and team to develop their own tragedy toolkit in the wake of the Pulse shooting.

Howell began her position as university archivist in 2016, three years before the UNCC shooting. Prior to 2019, her job included guiding the campus records management program and collecting, preserving, and sharing university history.[223] After the 30 April tragedy, Howell's position became steeped in crisis collecting and remembrance archives; subjects that required intensive meetings with librarians and archivists in special collections. The day after the tragedy, Associate Dean for Special Collections and University Archives Dawn Schmitz emailed her staff, asking them to begin familiarizing themselves with the recently compiled SAA bibliography and brainstorm ways in which UNCC might document the tragedy. Christina Wright, UNCC oral historian, remembered Schmitz's assertion that, 'everybody's […] feeling terrible about this, but we also have to pursue the documentation of this event. It's really important'.[224] Wright attributed the success of the library's efforts in documenting the shooting to the support they received from the chancellor's office. She remembered, 'It didn't come to pass in quite the way that we thought because we thought we were going to be alone […] we didn't know that the university would take charge of this and help to shape the outcome of our documentation'.[225] That support proved pivotal to the collection of oral histories following the shooting.

Library staff discussed the possibility of an oral history project from the first formal meeting on documenting the tragedy. There were, however, ethical considerations and hesitancies involved in asking for these stories so soon after the campus shooting. Wright also acknowledged reservations within the archival profession around interfering with archival collecting and influencing the community narrative. She recollected, 'Archives don't accommodate oral history very well […] there's a queasiness around the idea that you might be influencing […] the narrative. It just seems bizarre to me that it [oral history] wouldn't be

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[222] Marla Millar, 'Greetings From the NCPH President', p. 4. Also see: Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]; Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy: An Ongoing Case Study', (2020) National Council on Public History Conference.
[223] Katie Causier Howell, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 17 February 2021, 00:00:57.
[224] Christina Wright, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 14 June 2021, 00:07:05.
[225] Wright, oral history interview, 00:09:11.

considered archival, but it is different. It's really going out and capturing something that's in somebody's head'.[226] This approach, of archivist as creator, has changed the role of the archivist from stewards of gathered material, to postmodern archival activists, documenting the history of their own communities.[227] Archivist Ellen D. Swan contextualized this new trend in 2003. She argued,

> Oral history continues to be an important research methodology and tapes and transcripts need to be effectively integrated into academic library collections. Archivists and librarians must assume an active role in oral history discourse […] and be attuned to current scholarship needs if archives and special collections departments are to be viable, utilized research sources in the future.[228]

Howell successfully advocated for the creation of an oral history project during her months as chair of the Remembrance Committee. However, Howell and Wright understood the potentially traumatic nature of the project. For two months, the Chancellor's office funded a research assistant position to study ethical considerations surrounding a crisis oral history project and interview other archivists who had stewarded collections related to mass shooting. I was hired as a contract employee to research and create guidelines for an ethical, trauma-informed project. In this role, we consulted archivists Tamara Kennelly, Pamela Schwartz, and Claytee White, and those conversations, along with academic literature on crisis oral history work, led to the following recommendations:

1. Hire an outside interviewer with oral history experience.
2. Consult university mental health services for suggestions on formulating questions and offering support during and after interviews.
3. Interview a broad range of community members, including emergency personnel.
4. Revise Atkins Library's current oral history interview packet to update consent language.
5. Explore the open interview model as a method for gathering interviews on campus.[229]

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[226] Ibid., 00:20:02.
[227] Nesmith, 'Seeing Archives', *The American Archivist*, 65, 1 (2002), 24-41 (p. 26).
[228] Ellen D. Swain, 'Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century', *The American Archivist*, 66 (2003), 139-158 (p. 140) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40294221 > [Accessed 6 November 2023].
[229] Moore, 'Oral History in the Aftermath of University Gun Violence', p. 31.

Staff made the decision to adopt these recommendations, however previous workloads prevented total immersion in the project. Howell requested funds from the Chancellor's office to hire an oral history assistant, funding the first twenty-five interviews over eight months and ending at the one-year anniversary of the UNCC shooting. The final report from the Remembrance Commission noted 'The Commission recommends conducting a series of oral history interviews to document this event through the eyes of our campus and community members. The Commission also recommends continued efforts to collect and preserve the records and memorabilia associated with April 30 and campus recovery efforts'.[230]

2.3: Crisis Oral History Guidance

It is clear from archivist interviews that archivists relied on their experience and confidence in oral history interviewing to plan their crisis projects. All three repositories applied feminist research practices, which integrated them into the research process and positioned them as advocates and documenters of their own communities.[231] Howell and Wright specifically relied on the work of Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, whose feminist ethics approach to archives employed radical empathy to address social justice issues.[232] Wright remembered discussions of empathy and shared authority,[233] as well as re-traumatization, in the first meetings surrounding using oral history to document the tragedy.[234]

A key difference between the Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project and others created by Atkins Library was the luxury of time. Because the shooting occurred on the final day

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[230] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', University of North Carolina, Charlotte (2019), p. 7. <https://ninernationremembers.uncc.edu/niner-nation-remembrance-commission/final-report> [Accessed 28 August 2023].
[231] Moss, 'Emergent Methods in Feminist Research', p. 371.
[232] Caswell and Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics', p. 23.
[233] American studies historian Michael Frisch discussed the idea of 'shared authority' in his 1990 publication, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History.* While Frisch's work examined the oral history interview itself and a shared authority between narrator and interviewer, his essays encouraged oral historians to consider broader themes of power and empowerment in oral history interviewing. Wright discussed a broader definition of shared authority which included collaboration with interviewees. She argued, 'good oral history practice always centered the interviewee at the heart of the project,' with the narrator's interests playing a significant role. She compared a donated oral history interview with an archival object, noting 'You've got a relationship going here. It's a little different from the relationship that you have as an archivist with someone bringing collections to you or sending collections. It's much more personal'. Wright, oral history interview, p. 7; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (SUNY Press, 1990).
[234] Wright, oral history interview, 00:27:10.

of classes for the 2019 spring semester, decisions surrounding a possible oral history project needed to be made quickly. However, re-traumatization was a major concern. Wright came into the first planning meeting having read literature surrounding crisis interviewing and trauma. She recalled, 'My feeling was, oral history has always dealt with trauma. Everybody's life has some trauma in it'.[235] She also understood the personal nature of the interview and the idea of shared authority with the narrator. While Wright viewed oral history as a potential outlet for healing, the more pervasive topic was traumatizing interviewees and PTSD. The sensitive nature of the proposed interviews, along with the possible negative consequences of being interviewed, led staff to agree more research on the subject of crisis oral history was necessary.

Another commonality was the reliance on industry professionals who had created and stewarded mass shooting repositories. Virgina Tech archivist Tamara Kennelly was considered to be an 'expert on collections of tragedy and recovery' by the time of her retirement in 2020.[236] Kennelly spearheaded the collecting of condolence items and oral history interviews following the deadliest university mass shooting in America and in many ways, fronted the movement to use oral history to collect stories of mass shooting. The Virginia Tech shooting occurred 16 April 2007. Pulse Nightclub, the deadliest mass shooting linked to terrorism in U.S. history, followed on 12 June 2016.[237] The Las Vegas Harvest Festival shooting, the deadliest in the country's history followed on 1 October 2017. The magnitude and unprecedented nature of these shootings and their relative proximity, all having occurred in the early twenty-first century, thrust their archivists into positions as industry experts.

Questions around trauma informed approaches to crisis oral history work were key considerations in the UNCC project. Howell and Wright met with Kennelly to discuss lessons learned, while also reflecting on her chapter in *Listening on the Edge*. Kennelly and Fleming-Cook spoke about the stress of crisis oral history interviewing, the traumatic nature of interviews, and their effect on interviewers. The pair wrote 'Listening to the horrors of trauma can horrify

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[235] Ibid., 00:26:30.
[236] Mark Owczarksi, 'Tamara Kennelly honored with emerita status', *Imagine Magazine*, 1 (2020) p. 38 <https://lib.vt.edu/content/dam/lib_vt_edu/magazine-fall-winter 2020/University%20Libraries%20Imagine%20Fall%202020%20web.pdf> [Accessed 11 September 2023]
[237] The Federal Bureau of Investigation labeled the Pulse shooting an 'act of terrorism according to 18 U.S.C 2331 (2009). See: Frank Straub, Jack Cambria, Jane Castor, Ben Gorban, Brett Meade, David Waltemeyer, and Jennifer Zeunik, *Rescue, Response, and Resilience: A critical incident review of the Orlando public safety response to the attack on the Pulse nightclub,* Critical Response Initiative Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2017), p. 12 <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/ric/Publications/cops-w0857-pub.pdf> [Accessed 4 August 2023]

the listener […] Interviewing a survivor of violent trauma is stressful'.[238] In addition, they acknowledged that there is also a sense of survivor's guilt knowing you are a part of the grieving community and the pair discuss coping mechanism for undertaking this challenging work.[239] The team prepared to incorporate safeguards into the project design to mitigate some of the challenges Virginia Tech faced.

When Claytee White and oral historian Barbara Tabach began preparation to collect oral history interviews surrounding the Route 91 Harvest Festival mass shooting, they consulted a therapist. White recalled, 'The therapist advised us to talk about the interviews as we collected them. The telling helps to avoid post-traumatic stress'.[240] White also advised UNCC staff to consult the psychological counseling department on campus prior to project creation. Howell and Wright were familiar with the emotional toll involved in collecting interviews surrounding the Virginia Tech shooting. They considered taking Claytee White's advice a step further by hiring a psychology graduate student to be present during interviews for emotional support or even requiring the interviewer to have some experience in psychology.[241] They ultimately prepared for crisis oral history interviewing by meeting with the Director of Counseling and Psychological Services, Dr. David Spano, who encouraged check-ins amongst library staff and post-interview reflections for interviewers.[242]

Schwartz remarked on the difference between generational trauma, historical trauma, and a recent traumatic event in oral history interviewing. Four years after Pulse, Schwartz conducted interviews with descendants of survivors of the 1920 Ocoee Massacre, a racial terror massacre, which she considered a valuable case study for her team. She believed the sort of generational trauma that appeared in the Ocoee interviews, would not be seen in future Pulse interviews because the Pulse victims were relatively young in age, but the lessons learned from Pulse heavily influenced the Ocoee Massacre project. She stated,

> We connected with seventy-six descendants who were impacted by [Ocoee]. And it was like we were able to take lessons we learned in working with people around Pulse in terms of how we asked questions and just different ways to get people thinking about their experience and how it's impacted them. But we also connected with people who had no idea that the Ocoee massacre had happened to their grandparents. And that was an

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[238] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 70.
[239] Ibid.
[240] White, 'Las Vegas Healing Strategies', p. 71.
[241] Howell, oral history interview, 00:51:50
[242] Moore, 'Archiving Mass Shootings', p. 31.

> interesting case study for us too because sometimes when you give people their history back, it's actually equally as hard as not knowing about your history at all […] and we're going to see that with Pulse too. We're going to see next generations. A lot of our victims here, because they were very young, a lot of them were just starting life out, et cetera. And so you're not going to see those same depths of generational traumas you might see from other events too. And that's again, a difference of impact.[243]

Schwartz considered herself equipped to conduct oral history interviews because she had experienced these types of trauma in interviewing and understood the damage an oral historian untrained in trauma informed approaches may cause to a narrator. 'Everybody has trauma', Schwartz stated. 'Everybody. Even somebody who thinks they've had the happiest life has probably dealt with something'.[244] Rather than turn to trauma-informed resources, Schwartz relied on her own experience with oral history for the Pulse project, stating 'at that point, I'd been doing oral histories for fifteen, twenty years. I've done them with veterans, holocaust survivors, and farmers, and truck drivers […] I sort of felt like I had the built-in knowledge'. [245] Working with a recent traumatic event like Pulse informed how Schwartz and her team handled historical and generational trauma in oral history interviewing and likewise impacted interviews conducted for the Ocoee Massacre project.

Schwartz and White were both adamant in their discussion of utilizing experienced oral historians, along with other careful considerations when beginning trauma informed projects. Mary Marshall Clark reinforced this point in her chapter 'Fieldnotes on Catastrophe', stating

> Just as psychologists and human rights workers are trained to respond sensitively to people who have suffered trauma, oral historians working in the aftermath of traumatic events should be encouraged to refine their understanding of their work in the realm of trauma.[246]

When asked about guidance surrounding trauma based oral history projects, Schwartz spoke about the benefits of experience. 'It can sound a little elitist,' she stated, '[but] please, don't just go out and start interviewing people because you can cause a lot of damage, to not only the individual, but to yourself if you don't know how'.[247] White also considered experience an asset. 'This is not the way you would want someone in training to start a career in oral history. You just

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[243] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 6.
[244] Ibid., p. 5.
[245] Ibid.
[246] Clark, 'Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe', p. 256.
[247] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 6.

would not. And we did not want students […] I think it's better for a project like this to just let the older people who've been doing the work for years and years to just take care of this kind of a project'.[248]

With the funding received from the Chancellor's office, Howell hired me as an oral history assistant for the project. Howell and Wright deemed my experience conducting interviews surrounding potentially traumatic subject matter useful for the NNR project position. As noted in chapter one, I interviewed Black-White interracial couples for a master's thesis at UNCC on interracial relationships in the state of North Carolina. These narratives included themes of racism, the Ku Klux Klan, violence against Black men, and other distressing subject matter. The oral history project also underwent a rigorous ethics review by an Institutional Review Board. I also conducted interviews with Vietnam veterans with PTSD as the collections specialist at the Carolinas Aviation Museum (now Sullenberger Aviation Museum), and worked with the historically Black university Johnson C. Smith on a project interviewing residents of Charlotte's West End to document gentrification in historically Black neighborhoods. With this experience, my connection to UNCC as an alumna, and a resident of Charlotte, I was hired to the interview the first twenty-five interviews.

2.4: Sourcing Participants

All three repositories used slightly different tactics when sourcing participants and this was mainly due to the sensitive nature of the projects. Schwartz used a grassroots approach, handing out cards at memorials and allowing those interested to seek her out for an interview. Her general approach was never to force an interview. She stated, 'I truly believe that you should never try to convince somebody to do an oral history. You should only share with them what it is and let them decide […] convincing isn't what we're doing'.[249] White sourced candidates who she knew gave interviews or spoke about the shooting in the aftermath. In the beginning of the project, she approached staff at the University and people she heard on NPR. Those interviews initiated a snowball effect, with each narrator providing names of others in the community for

[248] White, oral history interview, p. 10.
[249] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 14.

White to contact.[250] The interviews naturally tapered off, leaving White with about seventy interviews.[251]

One key difference between UNCC's campus shooting and other tragedies that occur in communities, was access to potential interviewees, since, in Howell's case, the most affected population were current UNCC students. Howell elaborated,

> The hardest thing for us was students. If this had happened at the beginning of fall semester and then we had a whole academic year to try to reach students and get their opinions, we might have gotten more of those stories but it was the last day of classes. Many people graduate or they go to different schools […] the next year we're in the pandemic so some people really haven't been on campus a whole lot since it happened.[252]

Students also proved to be difficult to find. Alumni records for students who graduated in 2019 provided defunct email addresses or phone numbers no longer in service. There were ethical questions around contacting student survivors and their families for interviews and Howell ultimately decided not to do so. To plan a project with respect to those closest to the shooting, Howell adapted the concentric circle approach initially used by the Remembrance Commission to map potential participants (see Figure 1). She explained,

> We tried to think about concentric circles of impacted persons and so there were the families of the two young men who were killed at the center, and then the injured students and their families, then the eye-witness victims who were in the classroom and kind of so on and so forth.[253]

Howell and team altered the third tier of the circle model to include individuals responding to the shooting (see Figure 2). This group included police, first responders, administrators in emergency service roles and members of the Commission who were the first to be contacted for interviews. In a conference presentation for the National Council on Public History, Howell explained, 'the thoughts and opinions of those closest to the center of the circle were weighted heaviest in our decisions. We attempted to apply this same thought process when doing oral histories and in planning for a one-year anniversary exhibit'.[254] While NNROHP only contacted potential interviewees in the outer two circles, two exceptions were made. Professor Adam Johnson was approached and interviewed because he documented the tragedy on his publicly

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[250] White, oral history interview, p. 2-3.
[251] Ibid, p. 3.
[252] Howell, oral history interview, 00:49:50.
[253] Ibid., 01:05:02.
[254] Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy', p. 15.

accessible anthropology blog.[255] Student survivor and sports journalist Drew Pescaro was interviewed nineteen months after the shooting because of his willingness to speak about his experience through the campus newspaper *Niner Times* and other mediums.[256]

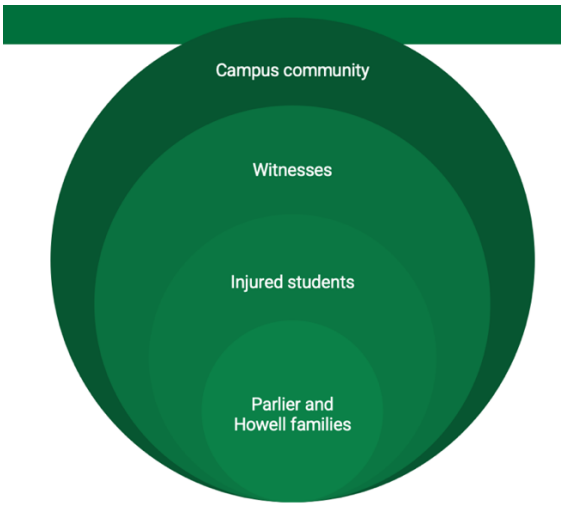


Figure 1: Remembrance Commission Concentric Circle Model [257]

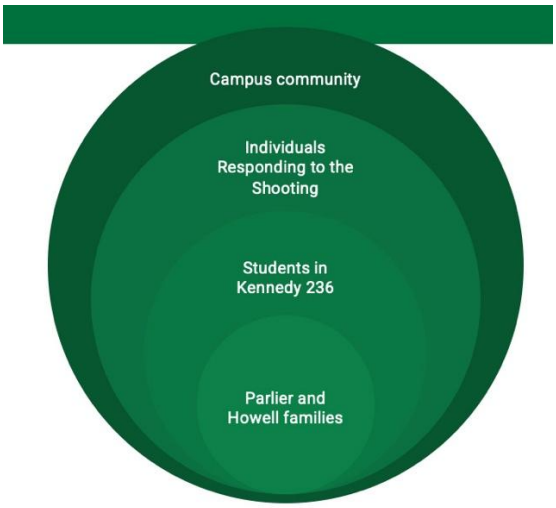


Figure 2: Niner Nation Remembers Concentric Circle Model [258]

The Chancellor also informed interviewee selection by asking Howell to interview his cabinet members and those serving on the Niner Nation Remembrance Commission for documentary purposes.[259] Along with administrators, the preliminary interview list included university police, faculty, and student leaders. Interviews were also open to anyone who wished to have their story told and many interviewees contacted Howell's team through a snowball sampling method.

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[255] Adam Johnson, 'The Story of a Mass Shooting Survivor and Anthropologist', Anthropology360 Blog, 2 May 2019, <https://anthropology365.com/2019/05/02/the-story-of-a-mass-shooting-survivor-and-anthropologist/> [Accessed 21 April 2024]
[256] Sam Palian, 'April to April: One year after the UNC Charlotte shooting', *Niner Times*, 30 April 2020 <https://www.ninertimes.com/news/april-to-april-one-year-after-the-unc-charlotte-shooting/article_dca924fc-8816-11ea-b3f5-9f7bfb48cd15.html> [Accessed 23 April 2024]
[257] Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy', National Council on Public History Conference, 2020.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Howell, oral history interview, 00:32:41.

In an effort to reach potential students without seeming to advertise the project in the wake of the shooting, Howell and Wright also offered an open interview drop-in booth in the library six months after the tragedy.[260] Modeled after a StoryCorps style interview, students or faculty were invited to give a brief interview at their convenience.[261] This only attracted a few participants and Howell noted that better marketing and more astute timing may have led to more interviews. It was also six months after the shooting, which was potentially too soon for some students, and the time period correlated with midterm exams, which was poor timing.[262]

Although it is becoming more common, this was one of the few projects where Special Collections and University Archives staff initiated and planned the project, and conducted oral history interviews for the purpose of documenting university history. In *Varsity Letters*, Samuels argues that this stance, in which archivists actively document their institutional history by predicting the value of the records they collect today, should be the goal of archivists at the university level.[263] Likewise, Wright noted that this work was entrenched in the role of an archivist documenting what they believe future users might be interested in. She affirmed, 'I think we needed to do it for our own community, for the remembrance. One of the reasons why we got that money [Chancellor's office funding] was because the Remembrance Commission knew it was a part of the remembrance work. And when they did their survey, people wanted to know the stories'.[264]

2.5: Accessibility

Decisions regarding oral history accessibility and whether to open or close collections are being made at the institutional level with ethical considerations and narrators in mind. Collections are archived in hopes that they will be made available for general use and as a research resource but these collections contain sensitive content and could be politicized or

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[260] Ibid., 00:55:34.
[261] StoryCorps is a nonprofit organization founded in 2003 with the goal of collecting and preserving stories which capture American life and the American experience. Their mobile booth idea allows participants to engage in conversations with one another surrounding various topics. The charity contracts with organizations and in 2016, NIU used the organization to document their campus shooting. UNCC loosely utilized the idea by stationing staff and student interviewers in Atkins Library to engage with students who wanted to tell their stories of 30 April in a relaxed environment. 'About', StoryCorp (2023) <storycorps.org/about/history/> [Accessed 10 January 2024].
[262] Howell, oral history interview, 00:55:34.
[263] Samuels, *Varsity Letters*, p. 12.
[264] Wright, oral history interview, 01:18:57.

exploited in ways. Schwartz noted releasing narratives of mass shootings as open access collections could have unintentional consequences. She feared narratives could be reduced to sound bites, taken out of context of the full life history interview.[265] Clark, however, chose to view narrators and their stories as agents of history, illuminating the necessity for access as these narratives expose silences surrounding catastrophe.[266] Likewise, historians Malin Thor Tureby and Yurii Kaparulin argued that not using collected narratives of crisis is a separate ethical consideration, as 'the non-use of collected materials can be experienced as a way of silencing or ignoring the voices of the marginalized, the victims and the survivors' or other vulnerable groups.[267] Many of these organizations hold state mandated open access collections and are legally obligated to release potentially traumatic material around mass shooting. For example, in 2014 the Library of Virginia faced ethical considerations around digitizing emails sent to then Governor Tim Kaine by families of students killed and wounded at Virginia Tech.[268] For each of the repositories surveyed in this work, the decision to open or close the collection depended on the institution's access policy, sensitivity surrounding the shooting event, ethical considerations, and the state's political climate.

Oral history professional organizations provide general advice on enabling digital access to oral history collections. The UK based Oral History Society (OHS) focuses on ethical stewardship of digital collections, which involves extra precaution when approaching potentially traumatic projects or those involving children or vulnerable adults.[269] While their advice does take into account British General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), their guidance is also valid for archivists outside the UK.[270] Their key components include clarity in consent forms

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[265] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 9.
[266] Clark, 'Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe', p. 257.
[267] Malin Thor Tureby and Yurii Kaparulin, 'Oral History and the Holocaust- An Introduction', *Eastern European Holocaust Studies*, 2, 1 (2024), pp. 15-23 (p. 21), doi:10.1515/eehs-2024-0011
[268] Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]
[269] 'Are you Legal and Ethical?', Oral History Society (2024) <https://www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/legal-and-ethical-preparation/> [Accessed 30 January 2024]
[270] The United Kingdom implemented General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the 2018 Data Protection Act. The Act made provisions to how organizations process and store personal data. GDPR is applicable to any organization, individual or group collection personal data, and is therefore applicable to oral history projects. The Oral History Society have added advice to their website to help oral history practitioners maintain compliance with GDPR. The United States currently has no equivalent legislation for data protection. See: Data Protection Act 2018, c. 12. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/contents/enacted> [Accessed 22 January 2024]; 'GDPR', Oral History Society (2024) <https://www.ohs.org.uk/gdpr-2/> [Accessed 22 January 2024]

about digital use and contacting narrators if collections go digital after initial donations. The OHS suggests narrators should be aware of the organization's policy concerning taking down digital materials and suggest reviewing the interview at the archival level through a sensitivity-checking form. Closing portions of the interview or allowing redactions by the narrator are also ethical choices that may help to form a trusting relationship between organization and narrator.[271] Lastly, collections should include terms and conditions for use to ensure interviews are not being misused or cited incorrectly.[272]

The American-based Oral History Association (OHA) centers on the act of 'doing' oral history, noting it 'encourages standards of excellence in the collection, preservation, dissemination and use of oral testimony'.[273] Their resource sections centers on good recording and preservation practices, archival, and community resources. While they offer advice to archivists surrounding accessibility, these decisions are mainly left to the repositories stewarding oral histories, with the OHA suggesting archives should honor prior agreements made with narrators including restrictions on access. They do, however, advise discoverability in the form of a finding aid if an institution does not wish to publish full interviews online.[274] Lacking a universal legal policy like data protection in the UK, or oversight from Institutional Review Boards for academic libraries, US archives must make judgements at the institutional level in accordance with collection plans and accessibility policies.[275]

Very few crisis oral history projects are available fully in digital form. The Texas After Violence Project,[276] a public memory project of state sanctioned violence in Texas, and the Niner

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[271] 'Frequently asked questions', Oral History Society (2023) < https://www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/legal-and-ethical-faqs/> [Accessed 15 September 2023]
[272] 'Legal and ethical archiving', Oral History Society (2023) <https://www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/legal-and-ethical-archiving/> [Accessed 18 September 2023]
[273] 'About OHA', Oral History Association (2023) <https://oralhistory.org/about/> [Accessed 18 September 2023]
[274] 'Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices', Oral History Association (2019) pp. 1-18 (p. 10-11) <https://oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-complete-manual/ > [Accessed 19 September 2023]
[275] Federal agencies worked together to revise the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects in 2017, stating that 'scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g. oral history…)' were 'deemed not to be research'. Their ruling, effective 19 January 2018, excluded oral history from human subject research and institutional review board oversight, implying ethically, the interviewer must present accurate portrayals of their narrators and should follow the field's own code of ethics. Zachary M. Schrag, 'United States of America Frees Oral History!', *Institutional Review Blog*, 18 January 2017 <http://www.institutionalreviewblog.com/2017/01/united-states-of-america-frees-oral.html#:~:text=The%20final%20rule%20preserves%20and,speech%20and%20for%20historical%20research.> [Accessed 22 January 2024]
[276] After Violence Archive, 'Texas After Violence Project' (2023) <http://afterviolencearchive.org/> [Accessed 18 September 2023]

Nation Remembers Oral History Project[277] are two of the only examples of completely open access collections, with no affiliate or organizational login required to view content. To create some access to conditionally closed collections, archives publish collection guides, finding aids, or excerpts of archived interviews. The 9/11 Memorial and Museum hold over 1,000 recorded interviews surrounding September 11th. Their website contains one transcript and ten carefully curated clips, between two and five minutes, in lieu of access to the full collection.[278] Virginia Tech collected over seventy interviews in the wake of their 2007 shooting,[279] however, litigation against the University closed the project for a period of time[280] and the oral history collection only opened for reading room access only in 2023.[281] NIU's February 14, 2008 Memorial Collection provides nine of the StoryCrops interview clips as part of a digital memorial exhibit.[282] Given the legal and ethical obstacles of open access in crisis collections, the most common method of accessibility for mass shooting oral history interviews is onsite, requiring users to physically visit an archival reading room. This approach offers accessibility while allowing the institution to collect data about the user through registration forms and photo identification. By retaining visitor records, archives have contact information for users in the event of theft or misuse.

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[277] Niner Nation Remembers Oral History Project, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/search?c=Niner+Nation+Remembers+Oral+History+Project&cc=Niner+Nation+Remembers+Oral+History+Project&ln=en> [Accessed 10 July 2025]

[278] 'Oral Histories', 911 Memorial and Museum (2023) <https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/oral-histories> [Accessed 18 September 2023]

[279] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 69.

[280] Presenting on a panel titled 'Documenting Resilience: Condolence Collection Projects in the Wake of Violence' at the 2018 NCPH conference, Roger Christman, the Senior State Governor's Records Archivist at the Library of Virginia, presented on difficult decisions surrounding the digital release of personal emails between the families of Virginia Tech's killed and wounded students, and then Governor Tim Kaine. While most Virginia Tech families reached a settlement with the Commonwealth of Virginia in April 2008, two parents pursued litigation that was not resolved until 2014. In his presentation, Christmas stated he was asked by the State Attorney General's Office not to publish records relating to the Virginia Tech shooting until litigation was resolved. The family emails were not published until October 2015. It can be assumed that the Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project was delayed or paused for similar reasons and that this impacted decisions surrounding when the collection would be made accessible. See: Christman and others 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]; 'The Library of Virginia Releases Virginia Tech Review Panel Records', *The Uncommon Wealth: Voices from the Library of Virginia,* 19 July 2017 <https://uncommonwealth.virginiamemory.com/blog/2017/07/19/the-library-of-virginia-releases-virginia-tech-review-panel-records/> [Accessed 22 April 2024].

[281] Aaron D. Purcell, Email correspondence with author, in author's possession, 9 October 2023.

[282] StoryCrops, 'Stories', Northern Illinois University Digital Exhibits <https://digitalexhibits.lib.niu.edu/s/feb-14-2008-memorial/item-set/2268> [Accessed 7 February 2026]

The oral history interviews related to the One Orlando Collection are reading room access only. However, the collection is searchable online with digital images of the condolence archival material collected and thirty-seven results for oral history interviews. These interviews include summary notes for the narrator and audio logs which summarize topics discussed throughout.[283] By adopting this approach, Schwartz could safeguard narrators and potential users. She explained,

> I do want to make a note in terms of accessibility, because sometimes you don't want to just put it online because it's very traumatic. You don't want people to accidentally listen to it. So you've got to think about disclaimers. You've got to think about the individual you've interviewed. Do they just want their voice for anyone to listen to? For any local news media to just clip and use? So for us, they're findable online but we don't have them posted so you can just listen to them. You can listen to them if you come and talk with us. We create accessibility to the collections, but there are some rules and guidelines because of the sensitivity of the information and because these are people who are willing to share their stories and so we should not abuse their willingness to share it in some forms and not wanting to share it in other forms.[284]

Another consideration for Schwartz was the political climate in Orlando, Florida. In early 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law the Parental Rights in Education bill, otherwise known as the 'Don't Say Gay' bill.[285] The bill limited discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in grades Kindergarten through third.[286] In 2022, House Bill 7 was also signed into law by DeSantis, restricting how topics of race can be discussed in K-12 classrooms.[287] The law came into effect two years after the state legislature passed a law requiring educational instruction surrounding the Ocoee Election Day Massacre of 1920, when a white mob massacred African Americans attempting to vote in Ocoee, Florida.[288] Given that two of the newest oral history collections at the Orange County Regional History Center focus on a mass shooting at an

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[283] Orange County Regional History Center, 'One Orlando Oral History Collection' <https://collections.thehistorycenter.org/MIResults.aspx?pS=Pulse&dir=ORALHIST&sletter=&dletter=&rimage=&rname=&page=1# > [Accessed 24 April 2024]
[284] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 9.
[285] CS/CS/HB 1557 – Parental Rights in Education (Chapter 2022-22, L.O.F) <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557> [Accessed 10 January 2024]
[286] Jaclyn Diaz, 'Florida's governor signs controversial law opponents dubbed 'Don't Say Gay', *National Public Radio*, 28 March 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis> [Accessed 18 September 2023]
[287] Office of Faculty Development and Advancement, 'Overview of HB 7', Florida State University (2023) <https://fda.fsu.edu/HB7/Overview> [Accessed 18 September 2023]
[288] Ileana Najarro, 'Florida's New African American History Standards: What's Behind the Backlash', *Education Week*, 25 July 2023 <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/floridas-new-african-american-history-standards-whats-behind-thebacklash/2023> [Accessed 18 September 2023]

LGBTQ+ nightclub, and on memories from Ocoee survivor descendants, the decision for Schwartz to be cautious about accessibility was understandable.

When asked about how state legislation has affected her work at the OCRHC, Schwartz stated,

> We're really dealing with that between Pulse, Ocoee, immigration stories, et cetera […] We have to be thoughtful and mindful of not putting our educators and our youth in jeopardy when we do a field trip or when we offer a curriculum. We don't want a curriculum laying on a desk to be the reason a teacher gets fired. We're just sharing history, but that, simply us giving the curriculum to a teacher, could lose them their job if it's in their email […] That's the state of Florida […] It's an extraordinary place to try to do good work right now.[289]

Schwartz was also concerned about Florida's 'Government in the Sunshine Law'. According to the state's Attorney General, the law 'provides that any records made or received by any public agency in the course of its official business are available for inspection, unless specifically exempted by the Florida Legislature'.[290] The Orange County Regional History Center is funded by the county government, meaning employees are viewed as civil servants subject to public record laws. Schwartz explained, 'everything we do and touch is absolutely open to the public at all times. We can't protect donor names […] So the advice is sort of like, just don't do an oral history […] and that's not the answer'.[291] Her team consulted legal counsel trying to determine how to move forward with donations but there are still few answers. 'It's a delicate, challenging business', she stated, 'and again, all the answers are not cut and dry, but Florida Sunshine State Law does complicate stuff for us as an institution, specifically because of that dual governance'.[292] The law has also affected how she conducts oral history interviews and the power narratives can hold. On one hand, she strives for oral histories to feel like a conversation, for narrators to feel comfortable enough to share their stories. Now, however, she feels the need to remind narrators to be aware of what they share, for their own safety.[293]

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[289] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 12.
[290] 'The "Sunshine Law"', Office of the Attorney General, State of Florida (2023) <https://www.myfloridalegal.com/open-government/the-quotsunshinequot-law> [18 September 2023]
[291] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 10.
[292] Ibid., 11.
[293] Schwartz provided a hypothetical example explaining if a narrator employed by the Walt Disney Company included an anecdote about the company or their work, under the sunshine law, the interview would be open to the public and the narrator could lose their job. Ibid.

The severity of state oversight makes Schwartz's position atypical within the archives sector. For the 1 October collection and the NNROPH, archivists relied on their institutional polices and used their own judgement for ethical considerations. The Oral History Research Center collected seventy interviews, which are accessible online with a University of Nevada email account or an affiliate login. The abstracts for each interview and some transcripts are available in full,[294] with intentions to make them available digitally once a backlog is cleared.[295] White did not discount the sensitivity of those interviews though. Her team reiterated the consent agreement terms to all interviewees and did so again when the library wanted to partner with the Healing Garden for a commemoration book showcasing interview clips. 'That's why we called everyone a second time', stated White, 'Just to make sure […] We are very sensitive about this project. And we have handled it with special care'.[296]

At its core, an archive's function is to collect and provide access to documents surrounding an organization's or community's history. Archivists stewarding crisis collections must consider access carefully. While the goal of almost all collecting endeavors is to provide open access, what are the potential consequences? To Schwartz's point, could open access to potentially traumatic narratives do more harm than good? Without restrictions, anyone with internet access can listen to unsettling depictions of gun violence. Are content warnings enough to communicate the risks involved with listening to these stories? Lastly, what do we hope to accomplish by opening collections? Clark viewed narrators as agents of history, exposing silences around gun violence that are not illuminated in other sources. Open access connects a community to their own stories, however, will making these collections available actually facilitate healing or reconciliation?

2.6: Community Connections

Oral historian at the Oral History Research Center in Las Vegas, Barbara Tabach opened her 2023 book chapter for *Vegas Strong* with questions every community asks after being

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[294] 'Remembering 1 October Oral History Project', University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries (2017) <https://www.library.unlv.edu/giving/ohrc-20th-anniversary/remembering-1-october> [Accessed 18 September 2023]
[295] White, oral history interview, p. 6.
[296] Ibid., p. 7.

impacted by a shooting. 'The Night the Music Stopped' created a timeline of the tragedy and aftermath using the oral histories collected by White and herself at UNLV. She began the chapter asking 'How could our community, any community, absorb the shock and trauma of a mass casualty event? Were our friends safe and well? Was there something each of us could do to be of help?'[297] Each archivist of the case studies outlined here asked similar questions, feeling the shock and devastation of the community surrounding them, of their community. Although two of these organizations were also at the forefront of collecting condolence material within a week of their respective tragedies, each turned to oral history as a method to work through the trauma and document what their community was enduring.

For Schwartz, her organization's connection to the Orlando community was of the utmost importance when beginning work to preserve the Pulse shooting tragedy. She reflected that it was an authentic way to serve the community, interacting with stakeholders at each step. In speaking about the museum profession in general, Schwartz acknowledged, 'I would say almost everybody that I have been around in this work, has been very thoughtful […] it has always been about its root and service to the community'.[298]

Schwartz spoke candidly about her organization's effort to involve community stakeholders, stating,

> I can only speak for our institution to say that we did little without stakeholder input. We don't know every survivor. We don't know every family member. We don't know every first responder there. We have no way to contact them to ask them […] All we know is those we have connected with have informed every part of our process. And that's, I think, very important as well. You don't just give a community what you think they want, which is what museums have been doing for a very long time […] Stakeholders are not an exercise. The community is not an exercise. They're the reason. And so there's no point in asking them if you're not actually going to listen. [299]

While Schwartz noted that it was impossible to reach a consensus when considering all community member's wants and needs, she acknowledged the need to listen, ask, and try their best as an organization to move forward supporting majority opinion. She reflected, 'you can't

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[297] Barbara Tabach, 'The Night the Music Stopped: Snapshots from Oral Histories' in *Vegas Strong: Bearing Witness 1 October 2017 ed*. Roberta Sterman Sabbath (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2023), pp.15-26 (p. 15)
[298] Schwartz, interview, p. 16-17.
[299] Ibid., p. 17.

make every single community member happy and give everybody exactly what they want, but you need to listen to everyone and do your best to find something that works.[300]

White felt the Oral History Center's credibility aided their efforts to collect in Las Vegas. She reflected,

> If anybody had any doubt about sitting down and talking about their experiences, they could easily have gone online and they could have looked at the quality of the work that we've done over the years. And they could ask many, many people here in the city about our work.[301]

White gave presentations around Las Vegas and participated in panel discussions, answering community member's questions about the various collection efforts occurring throughout the city. This type of engagement is an important community outreach opportunity that helps to builds rapport and disclose intentions.

The Remembering 1 October collection came together as a community partnership and collaborative initiative. While the Oral History Research Center began plans for an oral history collection, other local organizations also created projects with the intention of documenting the event for the Las Vegas community. Special Collections and Archives at the University of Nevada's University Libraries took on the task of web-crawling Twitter and other internet sites, using services like Archive-It and twarc.[302] They also collected community contributions of photographs, videos, and memories. The Nevada State Museum collected artifacts, memorabilia, and documentation about the Route 91 Harvest festival. The Clark County Museum accessioned memorabilia from the memorials and vigils. The Las Vegas News Bureau recorded Vegas Strong messages from sport events, commemorative memorials, and marquee tributes. Lastly, the Mob Museum documented law enforcement efforts collecting objects, images, official documents, and stories surrounding police efforts.[303] White praised the partnership as a major success in the

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[300] Ibid.
[301] White, oral history interview, p. 11.
[302] twarc is a tool in the python library arsenal used to harvest and archive tweets. The program is free to download and the primary use is academic. 'twarc', twarc-project (2023) <https://twarc-project.readthedocs.io/en/latest/> [Accessed 10 January 2024]; See Christman and others, 'Documenting Resilience', unpublished panel discussion delivered at the conference 'Power Lines: National Council on Public History' (Nevada, April 2018) <https://www.amalpin.com/griefarchives> [Accessed 20 March 2022]
[302] Ibid.
[303] M. Yunkin, 'Remember 1 October: A Collaborative Initiative to Document the Tragedy and Response', University of Nevada Las Vegas, University Libraries, 16 October 2017 <https://www.library.unlv.edu/whats_new_in_special_collections/2017/10/remembering-1-october-collaborative-initiative-document> [Accessed 18 September 2023]

documentary efforts of the largest mass shooting in US history. She noted the interconnected nature of each community site and how the participatory organizations sent donors to the correct site, depending on items they were donating. She stated, 'I think they [any city experiencing tragedy] need partners. And they should work hand in hand to collect as much as possible'.[304]

The leadership of Chancellor Philip Dubois shaped UNC Charlotte' response to the 2019 campus shooting and their connection to the larger community. Katie Causier Howell remarked on his influence, stating 'he's been in these positions as a university administrator through tragic events on campus before and when we had our first commission meeting, he opened with that. I think his personal story impacted it [the commission's work]'.[305] Dubois was President of the University of Wyoming in 1998 when Matthew Shepard, an openly gay student, was targeted and murdered because of his sexuality. In the aftermath, Dubois instituted a week of teach-ins and called for state legislators to pass bills against hate crimes amongst other University reforms—measures that drew criticism in the conservative state.[306] At the same university in 2001, a fatal car crash took the lives of eight track students, injuring a ninth. In a presentation for the National Council on Public History, Howell remarked 'His experience with a campus in mourning likely played a role in his response at UNC Charlotte, especially in understanding the role the archivist should play'.[307] Howell described Dubois' early contact with University Archives to preserve campus memorials, ultimately asking Howell to serve on the Remembrance Commission.[308]

In the days after the shooting, the Chancellor formed the Remembrance Commission. The group was comprised of faculty members with ties to Virginia Tech, student leaders, a family member of a deceased student, administrators in student affairs and emergency services, and Howell. Through listening sessions and community surveys, the Commission gathered community stakeholders for input on memorial activities, remembrance structure design, and commemorative projects. By December 2019, they had issued a report with decisions regarding how 30 April would be remembered.[309] Wright recalled, 'They had a report on the results of the

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[304] White, oral history interview, p. 11.
[305] Howell, oral history interview, 00:39:30.
[306] Susanne Rockwell, 'Gay Student's Death Triggered Soul Searching at University of Wyoming', University of California, Davis (2000) <https://www.ucdavis.edu/news/gay-students-death-triggered-soul-searching-university-wyoming> [Accessed 22 April 2024]
[307] Howell and others, 'Documenting Campus Tragedy', p. 6.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', University of North Carolina, Charlotte (2019), p. 3. <https://ninernationremembers.uncc.edu/niner-nation-remembrance-commission/final-report> [Accessed 21 August 2023].

survey and one of the results was people were interested in the narratives of the individuals. You know, individual people, students, professors, whatever narratives'.[310] She attributed the survey results as one reason funding was made available for an oral history project. And the collection of the first twenty-five interviews only served as a catalyst for continuity. The project has amassed over eighty interviews to date, with plans to continue collecting as long as narrators are willing to give interviews.

2.7: Discussion

Howell reflected on the difficult nature of the remembrance project and the need for empathy in condolence collecting, noting 'I just wish there were more universal guidelines because we looked for them at the beginning of this and to some degree, you can't, because every situation is different'.[311] Wright explained,

> That first meeting was very much influenced by a lot of the archival discussions that were going on around collecting, around trauma and Caswell's work, and I felt that the oral history world had kind of always been there. That good oral history practice had always centered the interviewee at the heart of the project and their interests were significant.[312]

Wright spoke with authority on the use of feminist practices and the necessary empathy involved in oral history work, which to her, included building relationships with narrators and working under the assumption of shared authority. She reflected, 'because you're dealing with people, it's very personal. But I was also of the understanding that working through trauma, telling your story, is actually healing'.[313] Likewise, in *Listening on the Edge*, Boulanger remarked that 'oral historians can provide the only opportunity for survivors to give an account of their individual experiences'.[314] Lynn Abrams also reflected on the precarious nature of survivor testimony, warning that official accounts can often become manipulated for political purposes. The difference with oral history is its ability to provide survivors 'permission as well as space to tell their stories, and […] be believed'.[315]

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[310] Wright, oral history interview, 01:22:49.
[311] Howell, oral history interview, 01:05:46.
[312] Wright, oral history interview, 00:27:07.
[313] Ibid., 00:28:35.
[314] Boulanger, 'The Continuing and Unfinished Present', p. 111.
[315] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 181.

However, the subject of healing through oral history is debated amongst academics. Writing in the context of interviewing victims of apartheid and genocide, oral historian Sean Field argued there are limitations on the 'healing' power of oral history. Instead of 'healing' our interviewees, we become facilitators who are 'bearing witness to their mourning various forms of loss, absence and pain'—emotions which will stay with them for the remainder of their lives.[316] Field suggested by providing narrators an outlet to share their stories, oral historians are contributing to 'regenerating the agency of survivors and their descendants'.[317] Boulanger, who utilized her training in the field of psychoanalysis and therapy to understand crisis interviewing, agreed with this logic. She argued the oral historian can occupy a dual role in interviewing, explaining, 'From the oral historian point of view, obtaining individual narratives is crucial to providing a more nuanced understanding of history. From a therapeutic point of view, being able to build a narrative is crucial to resuming a life that is no longer dominated by horror'.[318] By allowing interviewees to construct a narrative of what happened to them, the oral historian is helping the narrator regain agency. Additionally, the act of archiving and preserving these stories for future use can further enable the narrator's agency.

One topic is still unclear—how these collections will be used and by whom. To date, the NNROHP narratives have appeared as QR codes in a physical exhibit, were used as clips for the first year memorial video, and are linked to the April 30 Memorial Digital Exhibit.[319] White and team contributed interview excerpts to a book released to raise money for the Healing Garden.[320] However, these examples are the only evidence of their uses as research collections. For the One Orlando collection, Schwartz believed it is too early to tell. She connected the current lack of interest by users to the collection's inaccessibility. The tragedy also happened in recent memory. Schwartz stated, 'I think there's going to be a natural uptick, as time passes, of interest in accessing these oral histories because there's no longer individuals to just go talk to'.[321]

For Wright, documenting the tragedy in the moment took precedence over considering the collection's future utility. Documenting was important for a number of reasons. She stated,

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[316] Sean Field, 'Beyond 'Healing': Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration', *Oral History*, 34 (2006) pp. 31-42 (p. 39) doi:10.1057/9781137011480_10
[317] Ibid., 31.
[318] Boulanger, 'The Continuing and Unfinished Present', p. 118.
[319] 'April 30 Memorial Digital Exhibit', University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2020) <https://exhibits.charlotte.edu/s/ninersrememberapril30/page/home> [Accessed 24 April 2024]
[320] White, oral history interview, p. 6.
[321] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 13.

'And one of them is lest we forget […] It's important for us not to just let these events become like the normal'.[322] Wright stated we cannot possibly know what future archivists will deem important, but to her, their perpetual archival storage sent a message to the future of 'we're saving these and we think that they're important. We needed to do it for our own community […] for the remembrance'.[323]

More importantly for Schwartz is the question of how these collections might bring an end to the epidemic of gun violence affecting so many communities in the US today. Prompted by the many calls she received from other communities undergoing tragedy, she began developing a toolkit that might help, having noted, 'unfortunately, this is going to keep happening'.[324] But the weight of connecting with mass tragedy year after year also caused her to reflect on her future in that work and how mass shootings might be stopped. She confessed,

> That's something I struggle with […] I'm helping communities in the aftermath, but how is this actually translating to stopping it? [...] I don't want to do it anymore. None of these communities want to do it […] so what is that transition from helping people reflect, remember, preserve, and conserve, to we don't even have to budget for that anymore because it's not going to be a thing […] That's a lofty dream, that museums can fix the world.[325]

Perhaps the answer lies in an archive's ability to empower community activism by creating a collective memory of the event in question. The first step toward Schwartz's goal could be documenting a mass tragedy in real time through survivor's narratives. By stewarding collections of mass shooting, archivists are actively breaking the 'silences' Clark discussed. Furthermore, as Wright argued, documentation reflects what archivists considered important for their community history and for future users. While it is clear that the archival community cannot amass a collection of 'best practices' to be followed by every community working through tragedy, there are exceptional examples of 'good practices' being adapted and shared with organizations throughout the profession, as well as a growing recognition amongst researchers that adaptation of these 'good practices' will better serve affected communities.

Wright remembered a sense of duty in documenting the tragedy from the beginning of the project, lest we forget those who were lost, those who were affected, or the event itself. She

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[322] Wright, oral history interview, 01:17:43.
[323] Wright, oral history interview, 01:18:36.
[324] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 14.
[325] Ibid,, p. 14-15.

noted the importance for mass shooting events not to become the normal in America.[326] Doing the initial work of deciding that oral history narratives are invaluable resources when documenting tragedy and collecting those narratives is the first step in preserving a community's collective memory and perhaps, creating a resource with the potential to fight the gun violence epidemic in the US.

2.8: Conclusion

This chapter sought to understand why mass shooting oral history narratives are under-documented and underutilized in American archives by examining three case studies throughout the country. This is the first study to interview archivists and oral historians responsible for mass shooting collections and this chapter highlights the care and considerations involved in designing and implementing these oral history projects. The careful processes and contemplations in the project designs at Charlotte, Orlando, and Las Vegas exemplify one reason why mass shooting oral history interviews are under-documented. A second factor discussed was the various organizations' reliance on community, financial, and personnel support to realize their project goals. The time involved in planning an ethical project and the support needed from outside the archive are not always available to archivists and oral historians and this helps explain why there are so few archived collections of mass shooting tragedies today.

This chapter argues that archivists can build on their prior training to adopt 'good practices' to document a community mass shooting through oral history. Industry professionals interviewed for this chapter discussed ways in which they supplemented their own experience and knowledge to create an ethical project. Examples included finding potential narrators, revising consent agreement language, seeking advice from mental health professionals, incorporating new academic scholarship on trauma-informed practices, and most importantly, putting community stakeholders first. This chapter makes clear that archivists are turning to other archival professionals for guidance on creating their own 'good practices', which are often tailored to their specific tragedy. These conversations around documenting tragedy also prompted the SAA to create the Disaster Response Toolkit and Pamela Schwartz to author her

[326] Wright, oral history interview, 01:17:43.

own guidance, which she shares with mass shooting-affected communities. The need for these conversations and professional resources further illustrates the argument that the under-documentation of these stories is not only due to a lack of 'good practices' and guidance, but also to the challenging nature of the projects themselves. This is the first study to compare project decisions and designs across three mass shooting archives, and the insights provided will help archivists struggling with professional resources and guidance.

Lastly, this chapter examined the underutilization of mass shooting oral history collections, specifically the question of politicization and access. For Schwartz, the possibility of access was directly connected to the political nature of gun violence and the political climate in the state of Florida. There were also concerns surrounding the misquotation or misinterpretation of the interviews themselves. However, the NNROHP interviews were open access from the start, a choice communicated to and accepted by narrators during the pre- and post-interview process. Wright was more concerned with collecting the interviews than their use, recalling that the act of collecting them in itself proved their worth to the community. While the question of use and usability will be explored further in chapter five, the archivists interviewed here also acknowledged that these collections document recent community tragedies that remain in living memory. Their value as research collections and their future use in exhibitions and social justice campaigns are yet to be seen.

Chapter 3: Safety and Security in the University Community

3.1: Introduction

This chapter supports the argument that mass-shooting related oral history archives hold unprecedented value for affected communities and for future research on the impact of such events. While chapter two revealed why these stories are under-documented and underutilized, chapters three and four bear witness to the importance and significance these collections bring to a community's lived experience and the collective memory of a mass shooting tragedy. This chapter examines the NNROHP narratives thematically, assessing issues of safety and security on campus and the University's recovery efforts through the voices of those most impacted. Using Carolyn Lunsford Mears' three areas of community recovery after mass shooting, my findings argue that the University's hurried push toward recovery and resiliency after the tragedy disillusioned narrators, but that staff and students demonstrated community strength and bonding. This chapter makes an original contribution to knowledge by analyzing a large crisis oral history collection and offering future researchers a method for analyzing mass shooting narratives in terms of community impact.

For chapters three and four, I examined eighty oral histories collected after the 30 April 2019 campus shooting at UNC Charlotte, and I utilized around one-third. These chapters thematically analyze narratives while also allowing narrators to share their personal experiences through their own words. This illuminates the lived experiences of mass shooting survivors.[327] The narratives here express an array of emotions surrounding the UNCC shooting and the broader gun violence epidemic in the United States; they range from anger and frustration to depression and hopelessness to passivity and acceptance. By examining interviewees' narratives, these chapters argue for the necessity to document the gun violence epidemic through first-hand accounts and interviews with survivors. As Clark suggested within the September 11th project, this can be a powerful way to 'explore the boundaries of memory, trauma and suffering'.[328] This chapter argues that oral history better captures and exposes the emotions and trauma suffered by

[327] As outlined in chapter one, I decided to eliminate verbal tics and repeated words from quoted material to make it more intelligible, since these edits did not detract from the sentiment or meaning of what was being said. Aside from these small edits, all quotes appear verbatim and are lengthy, I have intentionally allowed each narrator to fully tell their story before providing interpretation.
[328] Clark, 'Case Study: Fieldnotes on Catastrophe', p. 2.

victims than solely collecting condolence artifacts and digital or social media posts. When used to document a mass shooting, crisis oral history collections provide researchers insight into the formation of collective memory, community recovery, and survivor self-discovery, specifically when projects are designed as longitudinal studies. The insights gained by the NNROHP case study demonstrate the significant value mass shooting oral history collections can bring to archival collections and have significant potential for future research.

3.2: NNROHP Narratives

Historically, the concept of challenging structural silences by interviewing the overlooked and marginalized was a forefront of oral history methodology.[329] However, oral historian Ricardo Santiago and philosopher Miriam Hermeto argued the field was surprised at the realization that 'creating spaces for expression would not, as a natural consequence, amount to eradicating all that is silent, ignored, or unspoken'.[330] This chapter suggests that employing oral history to document community tragedy in the recent aftermath allows archivists and their communities to collect and preserve ordinary yet significant stories overlooked in archives. As with most mass shootings in America, the mainstream media may provide coverage and sound bites for a few days, but then that coverage fades. In the five years since the 30 April tragedy, media attention has abated and UNC Charlotte's shooting only resurfaces for each anniversary's day of remembrance. Mass shooting is also a polarizing topic which could cause shooting-affected universities to avoid traumatic, detailed narratives with faculty and students. However, many archivists are using the methodology within the scope of collecting university history, and some, like the NNROHP, are supported by their administrations. This thesis suggests that these narratives provide important insights into an American epidemic and while voices of mass shooting are not being silenced, they are also not being widely recorded as oral histories.

The intention of the NNROHP was not to eradicate the silence surrounding the gun violence epidemic in the United States. Instead, its creators hoped to document a campus tragedy relevant to UNCC's stewardship of University history and the community's memory of that

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[329] Ricardo Santhiago and Miriam Hermeto, 'Introduction to Part I', *The Unexpected in Oral History*, ed. by Ricardo Santhiago and Miriam Hermeto (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 17-20 (p.18), doi:10.1007/978-3-031-17749-1_1
[330] Ibid.

event.[331] The project also provided an opportunity for survivors who wanted to tell their stories and contribute to the official memory of the event. Boulanger argued that in times of crisis and tragedy, 'oral historians can provide the only opportunity for survivors to give an account of their individual experiences'[332] which, as Tamara Kennelly concluded, can enhance our understanding of the many facets of a tragedy like a mass shooting.[333] However, Professor Adam Johnson and many of the Gen Z narrators have been vocal about their experience on 30 April. They make use of blog spaces, social media posts, reddit threads, streaming platforms, lobbyist meetings, and other forums to tell their story. While this will be explored in later chapters, I wish to make clear that these are not traditionally silenced narrators thanks to twenty-first century technology. Despite these outlets, many narrators chose to participate because they wanted their memories, experiences, and thoughts on gun violence preserved in perpetuity or they wanted to aid my research by representing what their community lived through.[334]

The narratives emerging in this project depict a myriad of experiences and emotions of survivors living through a university shooting. While the voices presented are not politically suppressed, they are nationally overlooked. NNROPH narrators expressed the need to reform gun laws and end the gun violence epidemic. However, mass shootings and gun violence are so commonplace in America that narrators view the issue as an inevitability of life in America and a problem most likely not solvable in their lifetime. These narratives also reflect the collective response of the University community and how it attempted to recover in the wake of the tragedy. In her work with Columbine parents, Caroline Lunsford Mears asserted that an oral history interview 'meets the survivor of a disaster at the point of readiness', as not everyone recovers from a traumatic experience in a linear manner. I derived my findings from reviewing

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[331] Discussing the archival standards behind archiving university and college records of sexual violence on campus, archivists Ana Roeschley and others explored the difficult realities of processing and storing traumatic materials. Ultimately, Roeschley and others argued, 'as many campus archives' mission statements unequivocally state, college and university archives are repositories of campus history and wider societal issues. This puts campus archives and archivists directly in the center of responsibility to document histories that are part of enduring difficult realities'. Ana Roeschley, Julie Miller, Alison Nikitopoulos, Morgan David Gieringer and Jessica Holden, 'Archiving Difficult Realities: A Systematic Investigation of Records Related to Sexual Violence in US College and University Archives', *Archival Science*, 24 (2024), pp. 387-414, (p. 387), doi:10.1007/s10502-024-09434-0

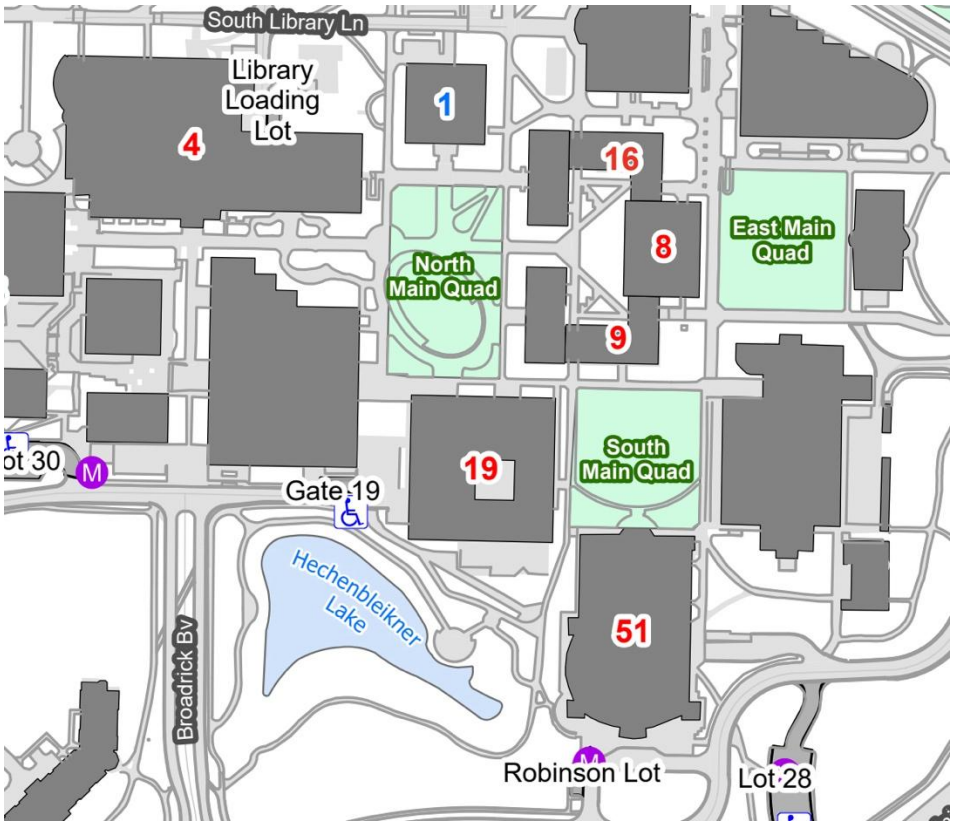
[332] Boulanger, 'The Continuing And Unfinished Present', p. 111.

[333] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 69.

[334] Boulanger remarked on interviewee motives for sharing trauma narratives, pondering how narrators navigated reliving difficult memories. She found, 'those who volunteer to give oral history testimony […] do so with the intention to make their stories public. Knowing that their narrative will be preserved holds great personal meaning for them'. Boulanger, 'The Continuing and Unfinished Present', p. 119.

over eighty interviews collected over five years at various points of readiness[335] for their narrators and the emotions they depict are all valid reactions from mass shooting survivors.

Figure 3:
Visual of UNC Charlotte Campus, Main Quad Areas [336]



Locations mentioned in interview excerpts and their proximity to the Kennedy Building:

1. Kennedy
4. Atkins Library
9. Garinger
8. Denny
16. Barnard
19. Rowe
51. Robinson

[335] While many narrators accepted an invitation to interview, or even sought an interview themselves, some declined, citing that they were not ready to talk about their experiences. Others gave initial interviews, only to decline a second, as the trauma of the day was more raw years later.
[336] 'Campus Map', Facilities Management, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, <https://facilities.charlotte.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1297/2025/07/Uncc_Campus_Map_30x42.pdf > [Accessed October 25, 2024]

3.3: Tragedy and the University Community

The day of the shooting, 30 April 2019, also marked the end of the spring semester at UNC Charlotte. By late afternoon, most of the campus community had returned to their homes or dormitories. Professor Shelley Ellis was setting up for her students' end of year ceramics show in the Rowe Building gallery.[337] Professor Dena Michael was beginning final presentations for a senior seminar in Denny.[338] Police officer Ryan Yoder, along with other members of the UNC Charlotte Police Department, was preparing for the Waka Flaka Flame concert being held at Jerry Richardson Stadium, which would mark the end of the semester.[339] Atkins Library was full of student activity as exams were days away and final projects due soon. Professor Adam Johnson was preparing for final student presentations in his liberal studies course Anthropology and Philosophy of Science held in an active learning classroom, Kennedy 236.[340]

At 5:45 p.m., students, faculty and staff received the same NinerAlert from the UNCC emergency management system: 'Shots reported near Kennedy. Run, Hide, Fight. Secure yourself immediately'.[341] In the coming hours, the UNCC community learned that a student gunman entered Professor Johnson's class and opened fire on his former classmates, killing two students and injuring four others.[342] ROTC cadet Riley Howell lost his life while tackling the shooter in an act that undoubtedly saved lives. Over the next twenty-four hours, UNCC experienced unprecedented fear, confusion, and grief as students and staff were locked down for hours, dispelling the illusion of safety and security on the University's campus.

At 10:42 p.m., Chancellor Philip L. Dubois issued a mass email stating, 'The entire UNC Charlotte community shares the shock and grief of this senseless, devastating act'.[343] He deemed

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[337] Shelley Ellis, interviewed by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 31 August 2022, p. 5.
[338] Dena Michael, interviewed by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 25 January 2023, 00:01:42.
[339] Ryan Yoder, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 22 January 2024, p. 2.
[340] Adam Johnson oral history interview 1, 2020 May 7, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 00:02:37 <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3189> [Accessed August 26, 2024]
[341] Scott Jensen, 'Shots Fired on Campus of UNCC-University Tells Students To "Run, Hide, Fight", *Charlotte Stories,* 30 April 2019 <https://www.charlottestories.com/shots-fired-on-campus-of-uncc-university-tells-students-to-run-hide-fight/> [Accessed 5 March 2024].
[342] The UNCC shooter was enrolled in Johnson's class for only a few weeks, having withdrawn from UNCC on 14 February 2019. See: Mark Davenport, 'UNCC Shooting Suspect Referenced Past School Shooting in Confession to Police', WBTV News, 1 May 2019 <https://www.wbtv.com/2019/05/01/sources-uncc-shooting-suspect-referenced-past-school-shooting-confession-police/> [Accessed 20 April 2025]
[343] Philip L. Dubois, 'Statement from Chancellor Dubois', email correspondence, 1 May 2019. Manuscript Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, UNC Charlotte Repository.

it the saddest day in University history. In five short paragraphs, Dubois explained an 'individual opened fire in a UNC Charlotte classroom, cutting short the lives of two members of our community and seriously injuring four others'.[344] He shared his gratitude for UNC Charlotte Police and Public Safety, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD), and emergency officials, noting their rapid response, which he said saved lives. He explained their work was ongoing, and police were actively releasing students and staff in lockdown. Dubois instructed those on campus to follow law enforcement directives and stay informed via the campus wide alert system, NinerAlerts. He promised more information to come soon, and pointed faculty, staff, and students to mental health resources on campus. 'The days ahead', he stated, 'will be some of the most challenging we have encountered'.[345]

Carolyn Lunsford Mears' work with Columbine high school parents maintained the importance of community structure in coping with localized tragedy. Dubois' correspondence was rife with allusions to the UNC Charlotte 'community' and how 'we', meaning the community as a whole, would overcome the 30 April tragedy. His email stated, 'This was an attack on all of Niner Nation', and the University used the phrase 'Niner Nation' to attempt to unite the community in the weeks after. However, some viewed it as empty rhetoric, which minimized the loss of two student lives and the injuries sustained by others. According to Mears, communities attempt to rebuild a sense of identity in the wake of tragedy. Using the gateway approach with Columbine parents, Mears found honoring the victims, celebrating community strengths and 'respecting the many ways that individuals process grief and pain' were vital to communities moving toward recovery.[346] The UNCC community also exhibited these factors, and using archival sources and narratives from interviewees, this chapter determines the extent to which the community recovered in these three areas post-tragedy.

Many students and faculty were critical of the University's actions after the University attack. Their grievances spanned all three categories outlined by Mears. These included accusing the university of not properly acknowledging the sacrifices of the young men who died, using the tragedy for PR, marketing, and fundraising purposes, being too celebratory of police reaction times when it was unclear their actions saved lives, and lastly, showing disrespect and disregard

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[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid.
[346] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 218.

to faculty and students who were locked down for hours, only to return to those same classrooms and spaces in the days and weeks after.

In 'A Columbine Study', Mears explained the gateway approach, a method in which researchers might use interviews and other means to glean a deeper understanding of an event's significance and meaning.[347] Working with Columbine parents, Mears found traumatic events led to feelings of alienation in communities who then turned to other survivors to process grief and heal. Mears found the gateway approach provided a means to 'observe how people are affected by events and how they reconstruct order out of chaos'.[348] While many of the narrators did not see themselves as traditional survivors because they were not in Kennedy 236 during the shooting, the trauma of lockdown and seeing their campus infiltrated by police continued to affect them and their lives. In this chapter, I explore narratives specifically through the lens of safety and security on the UNC Charlotte campus and through communal recovery efforts. I also employ Mears' three points of community recovery to measure the extent to which narratives exemplify recovery.

3.4: Respecting the Processing of Grief and Pain

Angel was days away from graduating on 30 April 2019. She had just arrived on campus with friends for the Waka Flaka Flame concert when they received the 'Run, Hide, Fight' NinerAlert. They vacated campus quickly after contemplating parking and running inside a nearby building. Instead, they drove to an off campus apartment and began watching news coverage. She did not see herself as a survivor, stating, 'I wasn't in the classroom […] I wasn't that student. I was safe. I was okay. I got off campus. […] I didn't feel like I had the right to cry or grieve or be sad'.[349] She also recalled her surprising emotional response to being contacted for an oral history interview, recalling, 'I just remember talking about it with my partner and just crying. And I'm like, why am I crying? I haven't thought about this in years'.[350]

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[347] Mears, 'A Columbine Study', (p. 162)
[348] Ibid., p. 163.
[349] Angel, interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 20 March 2023, 00:17:48.
[350] Ibid., 00:44:43.

Angel's response was not an outlier. Many narrators experiencing the tragedy off campus, from the safety of their homes, expressed sentiments of survivor guilt.[351] Others questioned their emotional reactions to speaking about 30 April. Some questioned their narrative's utility asking how their seemingly 'ordinary' story would be useful in an oral history collection about the tragedy. However, living through a mass shooting event is not an ordinary occurrence. It can be a deeply traumatic experience that breaches feelings of safety in public places. The possible trauma experienced during a mass shooting takes various forms and also depends on the physical location of those exposed to it.

In *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, psychologist Andrew J. Smith and sociologist Michael Hughes employed definitions adopted from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to clarify the terms 'traumatic exposure' and 'traumatic event'. Exposure is a 'recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost anyone', and an event is one lying 'outside the range of usual human experience' and 'markedly distressing to everyone'.[352] The definition requires that the person 'experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury' and invoked a reaction of 'intense fear, helplessness, or horror'.[353] Literature surrounding mass shooting incidents suggests that the severity of psychological response to the event is connected to a survivor's degree of exposure, whether direct or indirect, to the incident.[354] Psychology scholars Heather Littleton, Danny Axsom, and Amie Grills' interviews with female survivors of the Virginia Tech shooting refute this claim, finding that the degree of exposure had no effect on symptom severity in the aftermath of the shooting.[355] While the

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[351] Many narrators used the term 'survivor's guilt' or recognized themselves as 'survivors', despite being far away from the Kennedy Building on 30 April. In 'Survivor Guilt', philosopher Jordan MacKenzie and psychology scholar Michael Zhao define the term as 'the negative self-directed emotion that people often have not only in *surviving* something that others did not, but in faring better than them *more generally'*, noting this can affect anyone from a genocide survivor to a first-generation college student. The authors note 'their guilt responds to the simple fact that they have no self-justification in the face of surviving or flourishing while others died or languished'. Jordan MacKenzie and Michael Zhao, 'Survivor Guilt', *Philosophical Studies*, 180 (2023), pp. 2707-2726 (p. 2708, 2724), doi:10.1007/s11098-023-02002-9

[352] Andrew J. Smith and Michael Hughes, 'Challenges to the Empirical Investigation of Mass Shootings', in *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, ed. by Laura C. Wilson (John Wiley & Sons, 2016) pp. 3-19 (p. 10), doi:10.1002/9781119048015.ch1

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid., p. 19.

[355] Heather Littleton, Danny Axsom, and Amie Grills, 'Adjustment Following the Mass Shooting at Virgina Tech: The Roles of Resource Loss and Gain', *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 1, 3 (2009), pp. 206-219 (p. 217), doi:10.1037/a0017468

majority of NNROHP narrators were not in the classroom where the shooting occurred,[356] their experiences of lockdown, along with limited or misinformation, seeing their campus infiltrated by SWAT and police personnel, and witnessing an excess of real-time news coverage, are examples of traumatic exposure during a traumatic event.

In order to combat traumatic exposure, survivors often develop a trauma membrane to mentally shield themselves. Mears' work centered on the psychosocial concept. Rehabilitation researcher Erin Martz and Jacoby Lindy, Director of the Cincinnati Psychoanalytic Institute and co-developer of the idea, defined the trauma membrane as 'a temporary psychosocial structure, a buffer zone or covering that protects traumatized people as part of the healing process in the aftermath of catastrophic stress'.[357] According to their work on therapy in the aftermath of traumatic events, this membrane acts as a 'mediator, interfacing between the person and the traumatic memories and everyday reminders of the traumatic event from the external world'.[358] Mears applied this concept to school shooting survivors and their families, arguing that survivors create detachment through a communal experience of feeling distant from outsiders who did not live through the event.[359] She argued this is particularly true for schools and universities, which, as community hubs, are affected by disasters such as shootings through the interruption of routines and learning.[360]

The two survivors interviewed who were closest in proximity to the shooting exemplify Mears' observation best. Professor Adam Johnson approached the traumatic event in his classroom as an anthropologist. Two days after the shooting, he wrote a viral blog post ethnographically dictating what he remembered from the moment he arrived in Kennedy 236 at

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[356] Only two narrators were in the classroom. Shooting survivor Drew Pescaro and classroom professor Adam Johnson. See: Drew Pescaro oral history interview 1, 2020 November 19, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A7745> [Accessed August 26, 2024]; Drew Pescaro oral history interview 2, 2020 December 10, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A7750> [Accessed August 26, 2024], Adam Johnson oral history interview 1, 2020 May 7, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3189> [Accessed August 26, 2024].

[357] Erin Martz and Jacob Lindy, 'Exploring the Trauma Membrane Concept' in *Trauma Rehabilitation After War and Conflict: Community and Individual Perspectives*, ed by Erin Martz (Springer, 2010) pp. 27-54 (p. 28), doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-5722-1_2

[358] Ibid., p. 27.

[359] Carolyn Lunsford Mears, 'Gateways to Understanding: A Model for Exploring and Discerning Meaning from Experience', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2008) pp. 407-425 (p. 409), doi:10.1080/09518390701470412

[360] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 7.

5:15 p.m. to that evening.[361] In the days after writing the blog, more memories became clear, although he determined never to share those with anyone except his students 'who were there, who could understand'.[362] In an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, he explained the isolating feeling of becoming someone different after experiencing a mass shooting trauma, stating, 'there are human experiences that can be understood by loved ones, scholars, and strangers who didn't live through them. This isn't one'.[363]

To support Johnson, UNCC chose to pay for counseling services in the immediate aftermath. While the University opened more counseling opportunities to students and faculty through the Center for Counseling at Psychological Services (CAPS) and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Johnson chose to see a private therapist. 'What I ended up finding', he noted, 'was that […] counselors are not trained to deal with this sort of trauma'.[364] Their approaches were too 'generalistic' when it came to dealing with the level of trauma he had suffered, and the experience left him feeling frustrated and, in some ways, worse.[365] Instead, he sought support in mentors, colleagues, and his partner. He discussed, 'The thing that helped me the most wasn't […] sitting down and talking to somebody that doesn't really have the experience of it, but having a good support system, and my partner […] who was faculty at UNC Charlotte during the shooting'.[366]

For Johnson, connecting with people closer to the tragedy was more helpful than seeking counseling from an outsider. Mears found this same form of insular trauma response in Columbine parents. The trauma of the shooting had alienated parents from broader society, leaving them reliant on one another's shared experience to combat grief.[367] Johnson explained, 'having the good support system was just like […] I can get through this because I'm not getting

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[361] Adam Johnson, 'The Story of a Mass Shooting Survivor and Anthropologist', Anthropology360 Blog (2019) < https://anthropology365.com/2019/05/02/the-story-of-a-mass-shooting-survivor-and-anthropologist/> [Accessed March 10, 2024]
[362] Emma Pettit, 'The Transformation of Adam Johnson', *Chronicle for Higher Education*, 30 January 2020 <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-transformation-of-adam-johnson/> [Accessed March 10, 2024]
[363] Ibid.
[364] Adam Johnson, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 5 September 2022 (p. 15).
[365] Vinall argues that not all therapist are trained to work with mass shooting survivors, noting they should be 'educated to the unique trauma sequalae of civilian survivors of a mass shooting,' and adding that 'survivors deserve to be availed of the best-practices trauma therapies that will not serve to re-traumatize, but to reduce the symptoms of re-experiencing and hyperarousal'. See: Vinall, 'Massacre Survivor Syndrome' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Behavioral Sciences, California Southern University, 2020), p. 17.
[366] Ibid.
[367] Mears, *Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research,* p. 71.

through this alone […] my students experienced it and were, especially in the early days, talking a lot. And then I've got a wonderful partner' who was also a part of the insular UNCC community.[368]

Drew Pescaro was a student victim who survived after spending twenty-seven days in a Charlotte hospital. He also found strength and healing in his long-term girlfriend, now wife, who was also a student at UNCC. He recalled that she could relate mentally to what he was feeling, having been a student and by his side during the entire hospital stay, and credited her support to completing his degree within two years of the shooting. He remembered the intense anxiety and loneliness he felt upon his return to campus in the fall of 2019. He described that semester as a lonely existence, where his peers acted as though the shooting never happened. However, Pescaro could not stop thinking about 30 April. He recalled his feelings that semester, stating, 'All I can keep thinking about is the fact that that just happened and now I'm back, sitting here in a classroom at the same school and like, who's to say it won't happen again?'.[369] Mears suggested acts of violence perpetrated by a classmate can complicate the recovery process as survivors may feel betrayed or begin questioning their trust in their classmates. These issues further necessitate the creation of a trauma membrane, causing survivors to withdraw from peers or feel distant from those who did not experience the same traumatic event.[370]

Pescaro remembered no noticeable differences upon his return to campus. No physical changes like an increased police presence or metal detectors were visible to indicate the University had experienced a tragedy.[371] For Pescaro, this lack of change signaled that the University was not taking actionable steps towards preventing future active shooters.[372] Ultimately, Pescaro decided to complete the spring 2020 semester online because of his anxiety and the state of his mental health.[373] Mears found that returning to school after a tragedy was a necessity, as school 'provides structure, a sense of order, and an opportunity for social support' from peers.[374] This is also known as the continuity principle.[375] UNCC students did not return to

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[368] Johnson, oral history interview, p. 15.
[369] Drew Pescaro, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 23 January 2023, 00:46:22.
[370] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma,* p. 7.
[371] Pescaro noted specifically that the shooter had arrived to campus via the University's Light Rail station, which connected the University to uptown Charlotte. He questioned University security around the station and why the campus did not install metal detectors after the tragedy. Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 00:49:46
[372] Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 00:48:13.
[373] Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 00:46:33.
[374] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 9-10.
[375] Ibid.

campus in the immediate aftermath, as the shooting occurred on the last day of classes. If they did return for Fall 2019 semester, by March of 2020, the University had moved classes online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and state lockdowns.[376] Many narrators discussed how disjointed and isolating it felt to leave campus so quickly after the shooting, only to do the same a year later during Covid lockdown.

Students and faculty sheltering in the vicinity of the Kennedy Building also recounted traumatic memories, mostly of fear and confusion, but with lasting consequences. Professor Dena Michael was teaching in the Denny Building, adjacent to Kennedy, that evening. Her career with UNCC spanned decades and she was looking forward to the culmination of student presentations that evening, which would signal the beginning of summer. Halfway through final research presentations, Michael remembered an interruption occurring. She stated, 'One of my students, in the middle of somebody else's presentation said, "I'm so sorry, Dr. Michael, to interrupt, but I see police running everywhere out in the quad outside of Denny." And then they said, "And we see some students running, and we see some people with their shirts off and what looks like blood"'.[377]

Over the next few hours, Dr. Michael remained locked down with her students, with no information on whether the shooter was apprehended or remained at large. She remembered the quick and experienced actions of her students and the conscious thought of staying calm regardless of their position in an exposed classroom. She recounted,

> I give my students a lot of credit because sadly, they are way more experienced in training for this sort of situation than I myself had been. And so they immediately said, 'Okay, we're going to turn off the lights.' They started throwing furniture against the door of the classroom. Pretty quickly emergency warnings started going over the screen in the classroom. And we just all tried to get up against the walls and be as quiet as possible, sitting in the dark, trying to stay away from the windows because we were on the first floor of Denny, pretty exposed with windows looking out into that courtyard where all this activity was happening. And really we had no idea what was going on, just that there was an active shooter on campus. We were all, I think, assuming that the person was at large and given the fact that the emergency people were so close to our classroom, we feared that it was happening nearby.[378]

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[376] Amanda Zhou, 'UNC Charlotte, Other Local Colleges Send Students Home with Plan to Hold Classes Remotely', *Charlotte Observer*, 10 March 2024 <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article241038961.html> [Accessed 20 April 2025].
[377] Michael, oral history interview, 00:05:47.
[378] Ibid., 00:06:42.

Michael and students waited for over an hour for news from the university. She spent that hour comforting one student who was visibly upset and responding to family through text message to assure them of her safety. [379] She remembered the sound of helicopters overhead, assuming these were aiding the effort to find the shooter, only to later learn it was the local news media. Michael remembered,

> I think the worst part for me was there were helicopters circling overhead the whole time. And that just kind of added to the anxiety because for the longest time I thought that the helicopters were trying to help find the active shooter. […] Again, we were just assuming still that the person was at large and eventually I think we realized that it was news media. I will never understand or really forgive the news media. There was nothing to see and it just really increased the sense of anxiety for the people who were still on campus, waiting to know exactly what was going on.[380]

After an hour in lockdown, the class heard banging on the door, and someone shouted, 'Police! Open Up!'. Michael remembered, 'I just looked at the students like, I don't really feel comfortable opening this door right now. How are we supposed to know it's the police? There's no people for us to be able to confirm that'.[381] After a Black student expressed discomfort over opening the door, Dr. Michael alerted the people at the door that her class would remain in lockdown until the University gave the all clear to vacate the classroom. Michael discussed feeling anxious about the way the police pounded on the door with no reassurance or offer of assistance.[382]

Professor Shelley Ellis had a similar experience with the police during lockdown. Ellis had taught ceramics at UNCC for nineteen years in the Art and Art History Department at the time of the shooting. On 30 April, Ellis was on campus for her student's end of year ceramics show, held in the side gallery of the Rowe building, across the quad from Kennedy. She was speaking to students and their parents when she heard shouting in the lobby, which a student interpreted as 'There's somebody shooting'. After witnessing students running outside, she returned to her office to check her cellphone, where she found no notifications, and dialed campus police. She recounted her irritation at being told, 'I can't give you any information at this

[379] Ibid., 00:08:29.
[380] Ibid., 00:09:27.
[381] Ibid., 00:10:41.
[382] Ibid., 00:10:55.

time' by the emergency operator.[383] That's when she began moving students, parents, and anyone using the stairwell by her door, in the end sixteen people, into her office.[384]

Prior to 30 April, Ellis attended an active shooter training led by the Office of Emergency Management. From this training, she learned that the University would communicate emergency alerts through the LiveSafe application and that she could use it to update her and her student's locations. She applied her training to keep students calm, asserting, 'I'm trained for this […] we have the perfect place […]. We have a way out through one of the classrooms. We have a way out through the other classroom. We have a way out through the kiln room if we need to leave […] we can hide several places'.[385] As police began actively clearing buildings, Ellis recalled that officers would require students to leave with empty hands. She also remembered that police would have keys to locked doors and trainees were instructed not to open the doors for anyone. However, in Rowe, police pounded on the door until Ellis' colleague opened it. Ellis emphasized that the clearing of classrooms itself was traumatizing. Police entered with guns drawn, shouting for hands up. When Ellis tried to lower her hand to signal that some students were locked down in the adjoining room, an officer pointed a gun at her and yelled, 'Hands up, hands up!'.[386]

Ellis noted other criticisms of the police response. Officers escorted those locked down in Rowe through the building, single file with hands raised. They left students, parents, and faculty at Hechenbleikner Lake, directly behind Rowe, with no further instructions. The police forced everyone in Rowe to evacuate without personal belongings, leaving some students with no cellphones or keys to their homes.[387] Ellis waited with the gathered students by the lake for hours as each student found a way home safely. She shared her criticism of police action, stating,

> The left hand did not know what the right hand was doing that day […] Nobody that seemed to be in charge knew what was going on, where we were supposed to be, what we were supposed to do. And then later on […] the patting themselves on the back, knowing that in general […] that kid [the shooter] did not have a gun in his hand when the police entered the room [to arrest him]. That those students had basically talked him into putting it down.[388]

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[383] Ellis, oral history interview, p. 6.
[384] Ibid.
[385] Ibid.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid., p. 7.
[388] Ibid., p. 12.

Dr. Andrew Hartley was attending a spring commemoration ceremony for the school's theater students in Robinson Hall, across the quad from the Kennedy building, at the time of the shooting. Hartley remembered dividing students into small groups and moving them into spaces with locks, after hearing rumors of an active shooter from a colleague. The group used social media for information and eventually decided to disperse themselves when no police arrived to escort them out of the theater. He recounted,

> The building is sort of a labyrinth and I guess they never found us, the police never came. So even when we came out, we didn't know for sure that it was actually done. But then, by the time we actually started leaving the building, we could see students being escorted off campus […] I've never seen so many police cars in my life.[389]

Hartly recalled feeling 'weirdly calm and level-headed' during lockdown and attributed this to feeling responsible for the students. He remembered looking around the room for anything they might use as a weapon and assessing students for who might be most useful if an armed assailant entered the room.[390] It was days later that Hartley began experiencing a trauma reaction. He felt himself become 'unreasonably emotional' over seeing a gun on television. Hartley recalled,

> Some of the time I was perfectly fine and not even really thinking about it, but I was sort of rattled. And then I would have strange moments of panic. I remember I went to the grocery store, and I suddenly had this impulse to tell everybody to get out of the building because it wasn't safe.[391]

Much like Angel, Hartley was also experiencing survivor's guilt. He struggled with his own emotions after the lockdown, remembering 'part of the weird thing about it was that I didn't see anybody get shot. I didn't even hear a shot, so it didn't feel like I had any right to feel traumatized'.[392] It was difficult for Hartley to justify feeling as though he deserved to feel a trauma reaction. He grappled with speaking about it, fearing it would feel performative.[393] A published fiction author, Hartley instead, turned to creative writing as an emotional outlet. The end result was *Impervious*, a young adult fantasy novel in which the main character is battling is

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[389] Andrew Hartley, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 5 October 2022, 00:05:59.
[390] Ibid., 00:11:40.
[391] Ibid., 00:13:50.
[392] Ibid., 00:15:35.
[393] Ibid., 00:17:45.

a school shooter as the antagonist. The book contains an afterward explaining his connection to the story, and Hartley dedicated it to Riley Howell and Reed Parlier.[394]

Mears' research found that people have a difficult time processing tragedy individually and that 'providing a variety of opportunities for people to get together with friends, family, and colleagues to reflect and share experiences can help bridge the isolation and disorientation' accompanying a traumatic event. These opportunities can also promote 'a sense of shared purpose and understanding', which can help move the community toward recovery.[395] While UNCC openly shared counseling opportunities for students and staff, the shooting occurred on the last day of the semester, limiting the ability to provide such opportunities.

The only planned community event after the shooting was a vigil for the grieving campus, organized by student leaders who transformed the end of year senior party overnight. Angel, a student leader at the time, recalled, 'I think once [student leadership] put out the flyer, the school realized, "Oh, that's a great idea." And then looped [student leadership] in to make it a bigger thing so they didn't have to do two [vigil events]'.[396] Chancellor Dubois spoke about unity at the vigil, stating the UNCC community would not be defined by the tragedy but by their response.[397] Dubois' response to the shooting centered on creating the Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, which determined how to remember the victims, hold remembrance ceremonies, and the future of Kennedy 236.[398] Neither he nor the Commission focused on creating opportunities or outlets for the community to gather over summer break. No further vigils or talks were planned, and for many students and staff, the next time they returned to campus, if ever, would be for the Fall 2019 semester in August.

From the interviews conducted with faculty and staff, it is clear that most have experienced some level of trauma as a result of 30 April. From survivor's guilt to personal struggles of feeling like a victim, narrators used their interviews to discuss how they reacted to lock down and general trauma. Whether they were in Kennedy or not, traumatic exposure and living through a traumatic event personally affected each of them in ways that continue to present themselves in their daily lives. While the University provided some help in orchestrating

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[394] Ibid., 00:22:07.
[395] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma,* p. 218.
[396] Angel, oral history interview, p. 4-5.
[397] Philip L. Dubois, *Details Matter: UNC Charlotte, 2005-2020* (University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2022), p. 513
[398] Ibid., 531.

a vigil and many participated in that event, most students would not return to campus until fall semester.

In her study of Columbine parents, Mears' interviewees discussed grief in the wake of tragedy. Parents found it crucial that school administrators and those outside the community of Columbine respected their period of grieving. NNROHP narrators discussed this crucial period in detail, with almost all narrators experiencing and processing their grief in private, away from the University. While the University provided counseling services, narrators using the service were critical of the care received. Likewise, faculty found the return to campus difficult. Teaching in the same classrooms where they experienced lockdown was not addressed and other physical locations across the University felt violated.

But how well did the administration respect how faculty, staff, and students experienced and processed the grief and pain from that day? In interviews, some staff and faculty at UNCC repeatedly discussed feeling overlooked by administration.[399] While they were offered counseling through the EAP, narrators such as Johnson and Michael felt ignored in the months after the tragedy. In a 2019 meeting to discuss a preliminary oral history project surrounding 30 April, Director of CAPS David Spano acknowledged that he felt students had been resilient in the aftermath of the shooting, while also reporting a high volume of students attending counseling in the two weeks after the shooting.[400] Faculty, he recalled, continued to seek counseling services, which is understandable since they would continue to teach at the University the coming year. Spano rationalized that students were accustomed to active shooter drills and the threat of gun violence in places of learning. In contrast, faculty were not and felt a responsibility towards their students.[401] Despite this observation, Spano noted that CAPS met with close to five hundred students in the two weeks after the shooting tragedy, clearly indicating they were affected by the shooting and subsequent lockdown on their campus.[402]

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[399] See: Michael, oral history interview, 00:34:49; Jules Keith-Le oral history interview, 2020 May 12, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3194> [Accessed August 26, 2024]

[400] While CAPS saw an increase in the number of students attending counseling, the majority of students left campus for the summer, explaining why students did not return for follow-up appointments. Spano, oral history interview, 00:08:30.

[401] David Spano meeting notes, in author's possession, 5 September 2019.

[402] David Spano oral history interview, 2019 December 13, J. Murray Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 00:08:30. <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/record/27125?ln=en&p=david+spano&v=%2Caud> [Accessed 10 January 2025]

Professor Michael emphasized that other faculty members continued to feel residual effects of 30 April. She stated, 'I just want a little bit more acknowledgement from the administration. Most of those students are gone now, but a lot of faculty are still here'.[403] She felt faculty were entitled to acknowledgement for what they had been through on 30 April and during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic, when so much was demanded of them emotionally and in terms of time. She pointed to the administration's treatment of professor Adam Johnson as well, stating that his low pay as an adjunct professor combined with the administration's lack of reaction was unacceptable.[404]

Equally, to her knowledge, faculty continued to teach in rooms where they experienced lockdown on 30 April. Student narrator Margaret Murphy discussed the difficulty her friend, a graduate teaching assistant, felt upon return to the classroom where he was teaching on 30 April.[405] Ryan Harris also described how uncomfortable he found the library after returning, feeling that the space had been violated.[406] Professor Michael revisited the Denny classroom for a meeting at the end of 2022, over two and a half years after her lockdown experience, and was surprised by her emotional reaction to the room. She recalled, 'I did go to a meeting in there the end of last semester, so it had been a while. And I have to say, I was so uncomfortable. And I didn't expect that. It's one of those things where you think you're over it, and something like that happens, and you realize, oh no, it's still there'.[407] Even reconnecting with the panicked student from the 2019 lockdown was emotional. Michael remembered, 'She came back to visit me […] And it was really great to see her, but it left me pretty much in tears […] Again, I hadn't quite realized how the experience was still lingering'.[408]

Jules Keith-Le worked in the Kennedy Building as part of the Center for Teaching and Learning, and managed the Active Learning Academy, which designed and used rooms 234 and 236. She described her initial reaction to the NinerAlert message and the scramble to locate colleagues, one of which was locked down in his office in Kennedy during the shooting. Keith-Le remembered how difficult it was to return to Kennedy just seventy-two hours after the

[403] Michael, oral history interview, 00:34:41.
[404] Ibid., 00:35:12.
[405] Margaret Murphy, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 22 November 2022, 00:46:38.
[406] Ryan Harris, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 21 September 2022, 00:04:14.
[407] Michael, oral history interview, 00:36:54.
[408] Ibid., 00:37:19.

shooting had occurred.[409] She recalled that Human Resources brought together faculty and staff who worked in Kennedy for a group counseling session with EAP counselors.

> [They] talked to us about being resilient, about being able to go back in the building and go back to work. Then we all walked together in mass back to Kennedy and went back into the building and back to work. They did not expect that to be normal and if you did not want to go back to work, you didn't have to, but they were encouraging it.[410]

When asked how this made her feel, she replied 'angry', noting she specifically remembered a counselor assuring faculty and staff that they did not have PTSD.[411] She recalled this as the moment that she knew administration's priority was their employees' return to work and not the mental health of their staff.[412]

Upon returning to Kennedy after the human resources meeting, Keith-Le noticed classroom 236 was still accessible. She recalled the visceral scene awaiting the returning staff and faculty and forcing herself to spend time in the room to mentally and emotionally prepare to work in that space again. She remembered,

> The doors to the room were open. They had come in and they had removed the carpet from the area of the room where the students had been shot, so there was no bloody carpet. And they had had the room cleaned by professionals. Any furniture that had been damaged had been removed. […] But it was very obvious, because they had only taken up the carpet where the students had been shot, it was like, this is where the students died and this is where the students who were injured lay. And I made myself go stand in the room that day. And I made myself go stand in the room every day after I came to work, until they locked the room.[413]

Chancellor Philip Dubois knew faculty and staff were concerned about returning to work in the Kennedy building. He personally contacted the five members of faculty and staff in the Kennedy building during lockdown to check on their well-being, learning 'the trauma affected a larger population of Kennedy Building employees […] even those not present in the facility at the time of the shooting'.[414] Vice Chancellor for Information Technology Mike Carlin organized the group counseling session[415] and Dubois noted that the decision for workers to return to Kennedy together was important, stating, 'that was said to sort of be helpful in them knowing

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[409] Keith-Le, oral history interview, 00:24:25.
[410] Ibid., 00:25:00.
[411] Ibid., 00:25:36.
[412] Ibid.
[413] Ibid., 00:27:13.
[414] Dubois, *Details Matter,* p. 517-518.
[415] Ibid, p. 518.

that they could retake the Kennedy building and be safe'.[416] When asked if faculty and staff expressed concern working in the rooms and buildings in which they were locked down, Dubois acknowledged, 'I'm sure there must have been people who had those feelings. But they were not directly expressed to me'.[417] Keith-Le, however, remembered the emotional toll of being in the building, stating that some faculty members avoided going to the restrooms across the hall from 236 because they did not want to see the room. Eventually, staff from the Center for Teaching and Learning requested the University place paper over the room's glass windows to shield the interior from sight.[418]

The narrator experiences in administrative and police and public safety roles on 30 April diverge from student and faculty voices. Their recollection of 30 April are heavily tied to their professions and their actions in the minutes and hours after they learned of the active shooter situation. I interviewed five University police officers within a year of the shooting. Patrol Lieutenant Richard Gundacker was the first officer to arrive at Kennedy 236 and was the officer responsible for handcuffing the active shooter.[419] Gundacker retired from the New York Police Department after twenty years of service before moving to Charlotte to raise his children.[420] His interview felt like a police report as he meticulously documented his actions upon entering Kennedy.[421] When asked how 30 April was different from his normal policing duties, he remembered, 'The change with this was that I was by myself [….] for two or three minutes. I was at peace. I was good. I was focused on what I needed to get done. I felt very confident in my training'.[422] Detective Sergeant Ryan Yoder was on campus working security for the Waka Flaka Flame concert. When asked about his emotional state at the time of the active shooter alert, he stated,

> I joke sometimes that it sounds cold. But I've done this for thirty-four years now. So I wasn't emotional. It was just get into work mode, which is kind of what we do. I've been to hundreds of homicide scenes, working investigations up north. So it was just a crazy day but kind of at the same time, it's what we're paid to do. It's another day at work.[423]

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[416] Philip Dubois, oral history interviewed by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 3 June 2024, 00:39:17.
[417] Ibid., 00:40:48.
[418] Keith-Le, oral history interview, 00:29:36.
[419] Richard Gundacker, oral history interview, 2020 January 15, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A2845> [Accessed 9 September 2024]
[420] Ibid., 00:00:33.
[421] Ibid., 00:08:10.
[422] Ibid., 00:21:10.
[423] Yoder, oral history interview, p. 4.

Officer Celeste Goodwin was the only officer to become emotional when speaking of what she witnessed on 30 April. Her career with UNCC's police force began in 2015, and she was working the Waka Flaka Flame concert when she learned of a possible active shooter.[424] She and other officers drove an unmarked police car from the stadium toward Kennedy where they began escorting students from Kennedy 236 to the Colvard building. She recalled entering Kennedy as one of the first officers to respond and feeling terrified, as she heard students crying and screaming.[425] She recalled, 'The people coming from that room, they're shaking, they're crying, some of them could barely walk. It was actually heartbreaking'.[426] When asked about her own training and preparation for handling an active shooter situation, she acknowledged, 'We do training scenarios every year, at least once a year. We're training for active shooter situations […] it's nothing like real life. There's no way to prepare for that kind of situation'.[427]

For days after the event, officers used roll call meetings to discuss the tragedy and their experiences, a positive example of Mears' suggested recovery activities. Goodwin remembered this being helpful for her personally. She stated, 'You go home and you can talk about it to your family, but they don't understand. Nobody understands unless they were here. Especially from a law enforcement perspective, your family doesn't understand your job'.[428] Speaking with other officers and having opportunities for one-to-one talks helped Goodwin process what she experienced that day.

Chris Gonyar, Director of Emergency Management, highlighted the successes of UNCC's emergency planning and preparedness plan in his interviews. He reiterated that both the internal and external after-action reports of the university's actions on that day suggested that 'nothing that anybody did after the initial shots were fired [by the active shooter] on April 30th caused anybody to get hurt or lose their life'.[429] To Gonyar, this helped him to feel as though he and his team did as much as possible to ensure the safety and security of those on campus that day. But,

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[424] Celeste Goodwin, oral history interview, 2020 February 25, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3086> [Accessed 10 September 2024]
[425] Ibid., 00:08:30.
[426] Ibid., 00:09:22.
[427] Ibid., 00:10:30.
[428] Goodwin, oral history interview, 00:17:15.
[429] Chris Gonyar, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 19 June 2023, 00:07:00.

he also recognized the problematic nature of a tragedy occurring on the last day of classes. He acknowledged,

> Many students that left campus after the lockdown was lifted on April 30th did not return to campus until August 15th […] Those of us that were here through the summer, we thought we were in a different place. We had walked by the Kennedy Building a number of times. We had done trainings. We had been doing these town hall meetings. We had done an internal after-action report. We had engaged the external after-action. We were months down the road. The students came back and they hadn't been near the Kennedy Building since they ran out of the Kennedy Building that night or since they ran out of the library. And they were in a different place in those first weeks and months of the start of the semester. That always struck me as something that we weren't necessarily expecting or ready for, I guess, was the different rate that people were recovering.[430]

It is clear from the narratives presented that UNCC did not place students, faculty, and staff first with respect to their processing the trauma of the shooting and subsequent lockdown. Using the terms defined by Smith and Hughes in the *Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, most narrators were victims of traumatic exposure, while those in Kennedy 236 and some in adjacent buildings suffered a traumatic event through their closer proximity.[431] Both Pescaro and Johnson discussed their waning mental health after the shooting and many narrators sought help from CAPS and EAP therapists. While Mears discussed the continuity principle as pivotal to providing structure, order, and social support after a shooting, Charlotte's student body and faculty had three months away before returning to campus. Upon their return, there was no evidence of the shooting, no increased safety measures, and zero planned talks or events to promote the community's healing—a necessity for recovery according to Mears.[432] Only UNCC's police implemented daily check-ins and opportunities for one-on-one talks.[433] Gonyar expanded upon the discrepancy between those students and faculty who left campus for three months, and his team and other staff who used that time to process the tragedy. He observed a varying rate of recovery in students and staff returning in August, noting 'they were in a different place those first weeks and months' and admitting that the University was not prepared for an influx of people still in recovery.[434]

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[430] Ibid., 00:51:04.
[431] Smith and Hughes, 'Challenges to the Empirical Investigation of Mass Shootings', in *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, p. 10.
[432] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma,* p. 218.
[433] Goodwin, oral history interview, 00:17:15.
[434] Gonyar, oral history interview, 2023, 00:51:04.

3.5: Honoring Loss and Celebrating Strength: The University Response

On 7 May, Chancellor Dubois announced the development of The Niner Nation Remembrance Commission. The Commission was tasked specifically with remembrance, which fell into the category of Mears' recovery goals by finding ways to honor the victims through a memorial structure and annual remembrance days. Another goal of the Commission was to determine the future use of the Kennedy classrooms. While most narrators felt positive about the planned memorial structure, some were critical of the University's message in the aftermath and the extent to which it honored Reed Parlier and Riley Howell. Narrators felt the University response used rhetoric that placed the UNCC before the deceased students. Every narrator spoke of the heroism of Riley Howell and how his actions saved lives, however, they questioned the extent to which the University honored his actions while also mistrusting the intentions behind their 'Niner Nation' rhetoric.

The Commission was personally selected by Dubois and tasked with 'thoughtfully and compassionately leading a comprehensive process to determine how to best memorialize the students who were killed, how best to remember the tragedy that occurred on April 30th, and to make a recommendation about the future utilization of Kennedy 236'.[435] Comprised of fourteen student and community leaders, administrators, faculty linked to the Virginia Tech shooting, the university archivist, and Ellis 'Reed' Parlier's uncle, the commission solicited input from the community, consulted tragedy-affected institutions, and visited memorial sites in an effort to determine how to remember Reed and Riley and move the community toward recovery.[436] The Commission met from August to December of 2019, subdividing into four committees centered on memorial recommendations, remembrance, the future use of Kennedy 236, and engagement. Their work began with a six-week engagement process in which they met with families of the deceased students, injured students, students in the Kennedy classroom, and anyone who attended one of four campus-wide listening sessions. Committees also received feedback through an online survey in which 4,500 community members participated.[437]

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[435] 'Niner Nation Remembrance Commission', University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://ninernationremembers.charlotte.edu/remembrance-memorial/remembrance-commission > [Accessed March 23, 2024]
[436] Ibid.
[437] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2020), p. 5. <https://ninernationremembers.uncc.edu/niner-nation-remembrance-commission/final-report> [Accessed 20 March 2024].

After six months of meeting, the Commission sent its final recommendations to Chancellor Dubois for consideration. The final report recommended Kennedy 236 be physically transformed and not utilized as a classroom in the future. It also suggested building a permanent memorial to remember the deceased and injured students, as this would evoke 'the unity, strength, and resilience of the UNC Charlotte community'.[438] Lastly, they proposed that 30 April should be remembered through exhibits, a day of remembrance, named scholarships, and through the collection of oral histories and archival artifacts. In the Commission's Final Report to the chancellor, chair Emily Zimmern wrote, 'It is the Commission's great hope that the proposed recommendations bring comfort to the families of Reed and Riley, advance recovery and healing for those who experienced trauma on April 30, and reaffirm the enduring spirit of Niner Nation'.[439]

Interestingly, Zimmern's comment is one of the only references in the Final Report to the trauma experienced by those on campus during lockdown. While the Commission did its due diligence reaching out to shooting affected communities and universities and visiting memorial sites, many narrators felt the efforts of the University fell short in its mission to move the community toward recovery. Likewise, the June 2020 Summary of the External After-Action Review reflected the narrator's feelings as well. It found,

> While the messaging and support services provided by UNC Charlotte since the incident have been laudable and positively received, the university should begin transitioning to a long-term plan for supporting victims, families, witnesses, first responders, and other relevant stakeholders. Many employees continue to exhibit trauma from the incident, and others involved in the response to the incident have not taken the time they needed to sufficiently care for their own mental health and wellness. UNC Charlotte should consider providing long-term on-campus mental health services and resources for faculty and staff to supplement its existing Employee Assistance Program.[440]

Chancellor Dubois knew the Kennedy Building and its future plan would signify campus recovery. The quad area outside of Kennedy was designated to host the memorial to the deceased and injured, connecting the building forever with the mass shooting. When asked about tasking the Remembrance Commission with Kennedy's future, Dubois recalled, 'I knew enough from

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[438] Ibid., p. 5.
[439] Ibid., p. 3.
[440] It is unclear whether the University adopted the recommendations from the outlined text of the Executive Summary. 'Executive Summary of After-Action Review', Office of the Chancellor UNC Charlotte, 29 June 2020, pp. 1-5 (p. 4).

having watched places like Virginia Tech and others that the classroom was basically going to be off limits, probably forever'.[441] However, this isn't the case for all educational spaces tainted by mass shooting. Virginia Tech is an excellent example of revitalization in the wake of tragedy. In 2007, the University worked to renovate Norris Hall, where a student shooter took the lives of thirty students and faculty. In an interview with NPR in 2009, the head of the Engineering and Science Department, Ishwar Puri, stated, 'If Norris Hall was a boarded up building, it would stick out like a sore thumb on campus for the tragedy'.[442] Instead, the building was renovated with study spaces, labs, a teleconference room, and the University's newly developed Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention. Professor of horticulture Jerzy Nowak became the director of the Center which seemed fitting as he lost his wife in the Virginia Tech shooting.[443] Five years after the shooting, the Kennedy classrooms continue to sit vacant within the building, which is accessible only to staff by key card entry. In 2024, Dubois confirmed UNCC's plans to remodel the second floor but, by this time Chancellor Emeritus, he was unaware of what the space would become.[444]

On the fifth anniversary of the shooting, the University erected a memorial structure known as the Constellation Garden in front of the building containing the names of the deceased and injured students. Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber noted its erection was a promise not to forget Riley Howell and Reed Parlier, and should be a 'daily reminder for students, faculty, staff and visitors of Niner Nation's resounding resilience'.[445] While I conducted interviews for this project before the memorial unveiling, the chosen design and concept art for the Constellation Garden were known to them.[446] The constellation design incorporated impressions of nature and

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[441] Dubois, oral history interview, 00:40:48.
[442] Adam Hochberg, 'Two Years After Massacre, Va. Tech Reopens Hall', *National Public Radio*, 10 April 2009. <https://www.npr.org/2009/04/10/102950727/two-years-after-massacre-va-tech-reopens-hall> [Accessed 9 September 9, 2024]
[443] Ibid.
[444] Dubois, oral history interview, 01:09:41.
[445] 'Remembrance Memorial', University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2024) <https://ninernationremembers.charlotte.edu/remembrance-memorial/> [Accessed 9 September 2024]
[446] The University announced the selected memorial design, the Constellation Garden, at the virtual second Day of Remembrance program in 2021. Brook Muller, chair of the Memorial Jury and Dean of the College of Art and Architecture explained its relevance to the deceased and community stating, 'The depiction of the stars, portrayed by lights that are activated when people touch the memorial's arched structure, the adjacent gathering spaces that feature plants imbued with deep symbolism represent emotions such as sorrow, divine sacrifice, strength, hope, love and peace. […] And stone benches etched with the names of Reed and Riley create an atmosphere of contemplation and reflection, with textured earthbound elements complementing those that are high-tech'. See: Jodie Valade, 'UNCC Unveils Memorial Design At 2-Year Remembrance Program for Mass Shooting', *WFAE* Charlotte, 30 April

technology to mirror Reed and Riley's interests and the structure is lit at night to reflect the 30 April 2019 night sky.[447]

Ryan Harris viewed the memorial favorably, approving that the Commission sought input from the families and certain faculty. He felt the space would be appropriate for students gathering and reflecting, stating, 'You can't memorialize it, but if you do it in a way that's going to be a space maybe people feel good being in, I think it will be nice'.[448] Chris Gonyar also felt positively about the memorial. As Director of Emergency Management, the administration asked him to speak at the third Day of Remembrance, and he recalled it being difficult. However, he felt it necessary for the people most intimately involved in 30 April to remember their pledge to not forget Reed and Riley. He recalled, 'It's really important to me as well not to define Riley and Reed by the way they died, but how they had lived their lives up to that point'.[449] He felt the Constellation Garden achieved that goal and would prompt everyone who walked by to consider the lives lost.[450]

The proposition and building of the Constellation Garden yielded an overwhelmingly positive response from narrators, but some felt the University focused too much on its own image and not enough on the lives lost in the tragedy. Adam Johnson had a unique perspective on the University's handling of the tragedy and how they referred to the victims after 30 April. In the aftermath, Johnson felt the University spun the narrative in its favor, praising police action and quick response times and failing to fully credit the actions of victim Riley Howell, who tackled the shooter and prompted him to stop firing his weapon. Johnson recalled, 'The narratives of they [the police] were so brave, and they rushed in there, and they got this guy. After Riley tackled him, he put his gun down, and he sat on the floor, and waited for the police to come. They literally just had to walk in and put handcuffs on him'.[451] Johnson acknowledged that Riley had rightfully received praise for his bravery and actions that day, but also believes the police attempted to share in that praise, which he felt was wrong.[452] Before the shooting, Maya Wells worked with chapters of Amnesty International and MFOL at UNCC. She also felt the

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2021 <https://www.wfae.org/education/2021-04-30/uncc-unveils-memorial-design-at-2-year-remembrance-program-for-mass-shooting> [Accessed 21 April 2025].
[447] 'Remembrance Memorial', University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2024).
[448] Harris, oral history interview, 00:13:09.
[449] Gonyar, oral history interview, 2023, 01:20:12.
[450] Ibid., 01:22:27.
[451] Johnson, oral history interview, p. 20.
[452] Ibid.

University placed too much emphasis on praising police response time and the idea that police actions helped save lives. She stated, 'It boils my blood when people try to say […] the police actually saved their lives [on 30 April]. No, they got the shooter […] after he already killed those two students. They don't deserve, at least for that instance, they don't deserve any kind of praise'.[453]

Adjunct professor in Women's and Gender Studies Aman Agah spoke of their concern for the well-being of their students. On 1 May, they cancelled the final film screening planned for the end of the year and instead, gave students an open, optional invitation to meet together, process the shooting, and talk to one another. This opportunity for students to gather and share their experiences aligns with Mears' model.[454] Agah recalled they wanted to provide an opportunity to come to campus to meet with other students and professors who were 'not a part of the fucking PR campaign starting immediately to try and make this somehow pretty and presentable'.[455] They justified their decision to reach out to students and offer a place to talk, stating, 'I just need you to know there are people on this campus who care and want to offer support'.[456]

The ensuing discussion between students, Agah, and other history faculty, questioned the University's treatment of facility staff after the shooting and how students of color might feel about a heightened police presence on campus. Students also discussed how the University might spin the tragedy by highlighting police response times and how they felt about Riley Howell becoming an instant martyr. Agah recalled feeling as though Riley's death was a point of publicity for the University and that Reed Parlier was being totally ignored. In response, Agah asserted,

> It's like, no, fuck you. This kid should not have died. Neither of them should have died. This other kid should not have been able to come on campus with a gun, and you can't just turn these two boy's murders into something that makes you feel good about how you've responded.[457]

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[453] Maya Wells, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 30 October 2023, 00:30:00.
[454] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 218.
[455] Aman Agah oral history interview, 2020 May 29, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 00:10:24 <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3223> [Accessed August 26, 2024]
[456] Ibid., 00:09:26.
[457] Ibid., 00:11:53.

The University, they felt, was trying to assure everyone's safety when students and faculty on campus were traumatized and did not feel safe.

Apart from the student led vigil, two of the best examples of honoring loss while engaging the larger UNCC community came from faculty acting of their own accord. Amy Tipton was the Assistant Director for the UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens in 2019. During her time at UNCC, Tipton had observed the community's use of the garden and the solace and comfort it brought. She and her team wanted to use the gardens to contribute to the healing process in the aftermath.[458] She recalled thinking, 'We have to do something. Because we know that people are going to come into the Gardens. And we need to show that we're a member of the community, that we're here for our community, and also that we are grieving too, that we're processing too'.[459] The team decided on the concept of remembrance stones, bags of flat river cobbles accompanied with Sharpie markers in which the public could draw or write their own remembrances of 30 April and place them along the Botanical Gardens trails. She remembered,

> It was a very simple idea and we had so much response. It was heartbreaking, breathtaking, inspiring to see all of the stones that had been placed and to see how many people came to the Gardens for solace, how many people had something they needed to express. And it really gave a sense of community because although people were creating their stones independently, for the most part, they were doing it in mass with a result that was very striking and very cohesive.[460]

The response was so overwhelming and moving that Tipton and staff decided to make a permanent memorial within the Botanical Gardens, using the inscriptions from selected stones. Tipton connected with sculpture professor Marek Ranis and professor of interdisciplinary 3D studio and digital fabrication Tom Schmidt in UNCC's Art and Architecture Department.[461] They created a proposal for the structure, four twelve-foot-tall horizontal steel beams resembling a tree trunk with large carved stones resting inside. They incorporated the project into the classroom and UNCC students etched each stone, embedding 'the moment in time when the original stones were made, into a more permanent and more substantially sized reproduction'.[462] Freshman art

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[458] Tipton's team at the Botanical Gardens included marketing manager Christen Hoover, education coordinator Wendy Wilson, and gardener Meredith Hebden. Amy Tipton, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 7 July 2023, 00:12:05.
[459] Ibid., 00:08:59.
[460] Ibid., 00:10:30.
[461] Meg Whalen, 'Memorial Recognizes Strength of Community After April 30', University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 28 April 2022 <https://gardens.charlotte.edu/memorial-sculpture/> [Accessed 22 September 2024]
[462] Tipton, oral history interview, 00:21:32.

student Danielle Walden worked on the project and remarked, 'Ultimately, every contribution to this memorial, those who made back then and those who made recently in our class, reflects the legacy of Niner Nation Remembers and forms connections with the school, with Riley and Reed, and with each other'.[463]

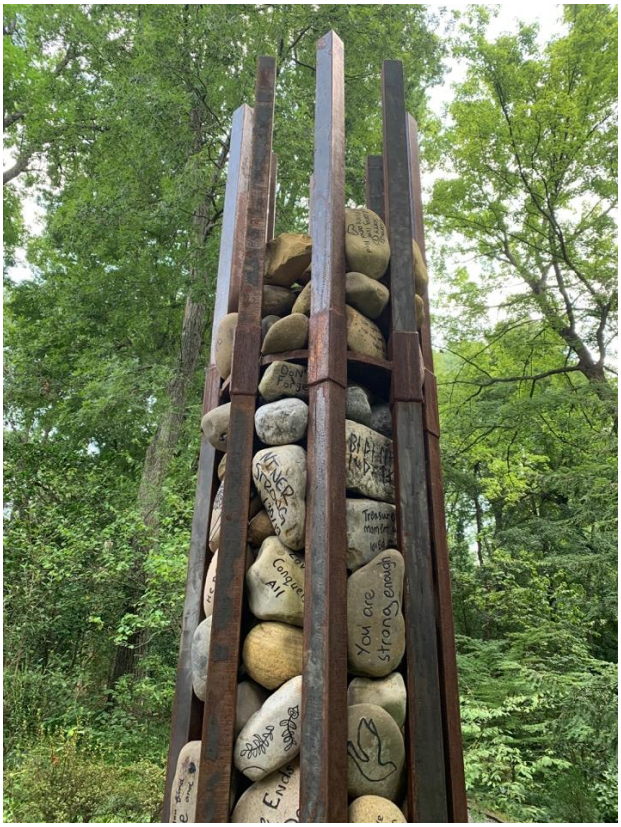


Figure 4: UNCC Botanical Gardens Memorial Structure 1[464]



Figure 5: UNCC Botanical Gardens Memorial Structure 2 [465]

Audrey Baran was an Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Dance at the time of the tragedy and used the Department's 2019 fall concert to choreograph a piece representing that day.[466] She remembered thinking about the piece over the summer, noting it almost felt like an

[463] Whalen, 'Memorial Recognizes Strength of Community', 2022.
[464] Photo taken by the author, 7 July 2023.
[465] Ibid.
[466] Audrey Baran oral history interview 2020 April 28, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3183> [Accessed 22 September 2024]

obligation to use her art as a platform to speak about the shooting.[467] Each of the twelve dancers selected by Baran was a student on 30 April. Baran explained her intention for the piece was to show 'we are not unique and that this is really infuriating and unfortunate that this is the reality [in America]'.[468] The piece opens with six students lying on the ground while others limp away, embrace, or run. The dancers on the ground represent the injured students and all but two eventually rise.[469] Baran noted the physicality involved, reflecting that the dancers used their bodies and their movements as an outlet for grief that they may not have known they even had.[470]

In their interviews, I asked all narrators to reflect on how the University celebrated community strengthens and attempted to unite the broader community. Narrators recounted mixed feelings about the messages of strength and unity, and on both branded messaging from the university and spontaneous Twitter hashtags that became commonplace when discussing the tragedy. Principal of Columbine High School, Frank DeAngelis, wrote about the difficulty facing a school community post-tragedy in Mears' *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*. While it is impossible to compare any two school shooting tragedies, there are adaptable takeaways for other communities struggling to cope. Like UNCC, Columbine students did not return to the school until the beginning of the 2000 school year, where they encountered new flooring, new paint schemes, and an updated facility.[471] Columbine held an upbeat 'We Are Columbine' rally to allow students and staff to 'reclaim' the school, an event viewed negatively by some parents.[472] For Drew Pescaro, alterations like the ones made at Columbine would have been a welcome change at UNCC. The lack of noticeable differences on campus, such as an increased police presence or metal detectors, contributed to feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. Unlike Columbine, where all students were affected in some way, Pescaro's return to campus felt lonely, and like other students were not affected by the shooting which almost took his life. [473]

Jules Keith-Le called the campaign to bring the UNCC community together in the aftermath a success. She noted the phrases 'Niner Strong', 'We are all Niners', and 'Charlotte

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[467] Ibid., 00:08:43.
[468] Ibid., 00:11:08.
[469] Ryan Pitkin, 'UNC Charlotte Dance Students Confront Shooting Trauma in New Performance', *Queen City Nerve*, 11 November 2019 <https://qcnerve.com/unc-charlotte-dance-students-confront-shooting-trauma-in-new-performance/> [Accessed 22 September 2024]
[470] Baran, oral history interview, 00:11:49.
[471] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 95.
[472] DeAngelis recalled that grieving parents felt the rally 'should have had a less triumphant feeling'. Ibid., 93-94.
[473] Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 00:42:22.

Strong' as key to uniting the community. The phrases were also used as Twitter hashtags, allowing users to search for mentions of UNCC's tragedy and recovery on the platform. Dena Michael felt differently. She chose not to attend the campus vigil, instead focusing on being home, where she felt safe. She also admitted her disgust with the university's response was part of her reasoning for not engaging with the vigil and memorials. She recalled,

> In terms of the announcements coming from the university, I was very frustrated and frankly angry by the kind of 'rah rah' Niner Strong rhetoric. I can't stand that that's kind of our response to these mass shootings, is that we're all supposed to stand strong and united and have this kind of nationalistic 'rah, rah' response'.[474]

The memorial artifacts collected at spontaneous vigils around campus show that students collectively mourned the loss of Reed and Riley while also utilizing Niner Strong and Charlotte Strong rhetoric. A letter left on the steps of Kennedy by Kyle Grier, class of 2022, read 'Reed Parlier and Riley Howell will be forever remembered on this campus as long as it stands. […] a true Niner will never forget'.[475] Letters from the archive's condolence collection speak of Riley's bravery, contain Bible verses, allude to the gun violence epidemic, and include many words of apology. Posters overwhelmingly contain messages of community unity, with the phrases Charlotte Strong, Niner Strong, and We Are Niners being most prevalent. They also include the names of Reed and Riley and the injured students. Posters collected from spontaneous vigils also represented the theme of gun control stating 'PARENTS SHOULDN'T FEAR SENDING THEIR KIDS TO SCHOOL' and 'POLICY AND CHANGE' written under a scored out 'THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS.'[476]

Keith-Le was one of the few narrators who noticed more school spirit on campus and in the community in the months after.[477] Interviewed a year after the tragedy, she noticed students still intentionally stop at the Kennedy Building to look, possibly reflect, and take pictures. Students also returned to campus to pay their respects on the first anniversary, after the Day of Remembrance was moved online because of Covid-19 lockdowns. They left flowers and other materials on the steps of Kennedy. However, Keith-Le felt relieved that the University held the

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[474] Michael, oral history interview, 00:19:55.
[475] Charlotte, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, UNC Charlotte, UNC Charlotte April 30 Tragedy Memorial Collection, MS0584, F09.036.04.06.
[476] Charlotte, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, UNC Charlotte, UNC Charlotte April 30 Tragedy Memorial Collection, MS0584, F09.012.06.01.
[477] The majority of narrators recalled there being no change to school spirit or the community in the aftermath of the tragedy.

first Day of Remembrance online. Working in the Kennedy Building, she recalled she did not want a day's worth of remembering and reliving that emotion and she had planned to take the day off work. She felt that the event positively affected her as a person, as it put her focus back on helping others in her work.[478]

Baran also recalled seeing a sense of unity and school spirit on campus in the year after the tragedy, and specifically at the beginning of the 2019 school year.[479] She noted it was an unspoken representation of 'Niner Strong' and community solidarity. She also attended town hall meetings held to determine the future use of Kennedy, remembering,

> The things that students were saying were really astounding and beautiful and sincere and really impassioned to say 'This is something that happened, not just to these two and four other people, but to all of us. So we want to be a part of it. To make sure it's commemorated in a way that's respectful and appropriate'.[480]

3.6: Discussion

Mears' work with Columbine parents was the first scholarly examination of community grief in the wake of a school mass shooting. Using the gateway approach to conduct oral histories with the parents of Columbine students, Mears learned of the community's insular nature, relying only on each other, and how developing a trauma membrane helped them cope. Her interviews resulted in a model for community recovery after a campus shooting with Mears identifying three key indicators of recovery. These evaluators included honoring victims of community gun violence, celebrating community strengths and respecting the processing of grief and pain.

Regarding Mears' three recovery evaluators, narrators engaged the most with the topic of how the University respected the way its students, faculty, and staff processed the grief and pain associated with the tragedy. According to some narrators, the University did not extend that respect to faculty or the wider student community. In the immediate aftermath, the University's focus was on the families of the deceased students and those who were injured. The day after the shooting, in his first meeting with his policy group, Dubois shared four guiding principles that he

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[478] Keith-Le, oral history interview, 00:35:32.
[479] Baran, oral history interview, 00:19:14.
[480] Ibid., 00:19:58.

believed would help the group focus on the aftermath of the tragedy. The first principle reiterated that the University's utmost concern should be the victims and their families. 'Putting their interests first', he wrote, 'would help the institution avoid distraction by other issues.'[481] To this end, the University did its due diligence by including the Howell and Parlier families in decisions about commencement, the remembrance events, the memorial, scholarships, and by providing monetary allocations from the Niner Nation Unites crowdfunding site.[482]

Given the many issues University leadership faced after the shooting, it is understandable their focus was on the Howell and Parlier families, as well as establishing the Remembrance Commission and conducting After-Action Reports. In *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Crisis*, Mears wrote, 'Carrying their own personal trauma, educational administration must oversee the unusual business of school with the added demands of responding to heightened student and staff needs, intense scrutiny by media, police investigations, [and] questions of liability,' amongst other things.[483] To support students, staff, and faculty in the days after the shooting, the University directed its students and employees to campus counseling services for their mental health needs. CAPS counseled over five hundred students in the week after the tragedy and more than three hundred faculty and staff sought EAP support. The student numbers were more than double that of usual counseling sessions around the same period in years previous.[484]

The high increase in the use of mental health services in the weeks after the shooting is evidence that the community needed support.[485] However, University administration offered little else in terms of support or opportunities to allow the community to grieve. Wright remembered, 'The University just disappeared. We had the memorial [vigil] on May 1st, and then there were some other group gatherings at the campus that were more political or religious in nature, but the students were gone. They just left. […] We had this big trauma and then we lost all the people'.[486] Wright also felt that the University controlled how the community grieved, which she

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[481] It is clear that one of the 'other issues' Dubois alludes to is gun control. Dubois, *Details Matter*, p. 505.
[482] A donation fund was set up shortly after the tragedy for members of the public wishing to donate their support. Donors raised nearly $147,000 for the donation fund. Upon consultation with the families, injured students, and one student in the classroom, the money was disbursed between all parties, with $35,000 each going to the Howell and Parlier families. Ibid., p. 521.
[483] Mears, *Reclaiming Schools in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 195.
[484] Dubois, *Details Matter*, p. 516.
[485] Spano, oral history interview, 00:08:30.
[486] Wright, oral history interview, 00:32:29.

recalled some community members found problematic.[487] With students and staff away for the summer, the University did not host additional remembrance events and instead, began moving toward a recovery strategy.

Another example of the University disrespecting the grieving process of its staff and students, is the lack of concern or even acknowledgement that faculty and students might find it difficult to return to classrooms where they experienced lockdown. Mears asserted, 'For survivors, any trauma in school or on campus will forever be associated with the physical location where it occurred and with all sensory stimuli that were experienced during the event'.[488] She noted that reconfiguring rooms and altering paint schemes may be appropriate while also providing those affected an opportunity to express an opinion about changes to learning spaces.[489]

According to faculty narrators, those changes and the opportunity to voice their opinions would have been welcome. Harris recalled that the library space felt 'violated' after staff returned to doors broken or kicked in by police. Michael recalled a visceral reaction to returning to the classroom in Denny where she was locked down. Student Margret Murphy remembered a teaching assistant expressing trepidation upon returning to the classroom where he and a group of students experienced lockdown. She remembered, 'They made him teach in the same classroom next semester. […] They didn't really think about the community. This TA was traumatized […] The fact that there was no check-in with people […] there was no following up'.[490] Murphy suggested the least the University could do would be to reassign classrooms. Agah recalled their final class ending at 5 p.m., just before the shooting occurred, and stated that, thankfully, they had not kept students late because the classroom in which they taught had no cellular reception. Had their class ended late, they and their students would have had no way to receive NinerAlerts or contact loved ones.[491] Speaking about the relationship between faculty and administration in the aftermath of the tragedy, Michael stated,

> I do really like most parts of my job, but I do feel like there's been this broken relationship with the University. […] I don't think there was a lot of asking people to

[487] Ibid., 00:32:18.
[488] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 198.
[489] Ibid., p. 198-199.
[490] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:46:35.
[491] Agah, oral history interview, 00:04:36.

> come in and talk to the administrators about how they're feeling in the aftermath or not a lot of dialogue that I remember.[492]

In their final report, the Commission acknowledged they were specifically aware of the needs of students who had been on campus on 30 April. They concentrated on planning for the first three anniversaries of the shooting to meet these needs because the affected students may still be enrolled at Charlotte.[493] Their statement, however, did not account for the trauma experienced by all who lived through the tragedy. That trauma is mentioned only as an author's note to the twelfth chapter of Chancellor Dubois' autobiography, where he acknowledged 'the horrendous experience' of the victim's families, the impact the shooting had on the students in Kennedy 236 and survivors, and 'the widespread trauma suffered by hundreds who were locked down in campus buildings for hours'.[494] Despite understanding that the lockdown was traumatic for the community, the only actionable step the University took was to remind the UNCC community of available counseling services.

Another point of contention for some narrators was how the University chose to unite the community and move it toward recovery using the phrase 'Niner Nation' and 'Niner Nation Unites'. The rhetoric was originally developed as a brand-building effort for the University's annual giving program. The University quickly adapted the slogan for the 30 April crowdfunding site, which raised money for the victims, injured, and students in Kennedy 236.[495] A pin with the slogan was given to each graduate to wear at the spring 2019 commencement ceremony[496] and the slogan eventually moved to 'Niner Nation Remembers' and then 'Niner Nation Rises' after commencement.[497] Dubois noted that 'Niner Nation Rises' was more uplifting and forward-looking, reflecting the recovery of the University just weeks after the shooting occurred.[498]

The move to using words of recovery was alarmingly fast. It was also instituted over the summer, while students and staff were away. This, coupled with the lack of opportunity or outlets for the greater community to come together in the wake of the shooting, may explain why faculty like Professor Michael felt as though the 'Niner Nation' message was about marketing the

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[492] Michael, oral history interview, 00:28:57.
[493] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', p. 3.
[494] Dubois, *Details Matter,* p. 497.
[495] Ibid., p. 521.
[496] Ibid., p. 528.
[497] Ibid., p. 531.
[498] Ibid.

University. She blamed the University's response as being a key reason why she did not engage with the 1 May vigil, recognizing, 'It's partly my own problem that I didn't engage and mourn with the community, but I also really didn't like a lot of things about the University response'.[499] Professor Shelley Ellis also remembered 'Niner Nation' as superficial, questioning what actions, if any, the University was taking to make the community safer. She remembered, 'Your Facebook page changed, and you had the little Niner Nation thing [profile frame], and hell, even the school sent us like pens and a little flag [with Niner Nation]. […] That's superficial, and 'yay us', but what are you really doing?'[500]

Narrators were overall content with how the University honored the lives of Riley Howell and Reed Parlier, even though Johnson, Wells, and Agah felt the University had not properly acknowledged the victims in the recent aftermath. It is clear the University were fully focused on the victims and their families for the memorial, working with the families to erect a monument representing the interests of both young men and erecting it within five years. In his autobiography, Dubois explained that the strategy that became the Remembrance Commission and how he created the Commission to 'properly memorialize the loss of the victims and the impact of the shooting' on the community.[501] When asked about plans for the memorial, narrators were pleased with the outcome proposed by the Commissions and the concept, which became the constellation garden.

Michael discussed the use of 'Niner Strong' and how rhetoric about uniting was used in the tragedy's aftermath to show community strength and resilience. She and Aman Agah felt the University adopted the slogans for public relations or marketing purposes. Michael, Agah, and many of the narrators who commented negatively on the University's response alluded to its superficial memorialization of the deaths of Reed and Riley. Brianna McGruder attended the vigil as a student. She remembered, it 'felt like it was more University centered than individual centered'.[502] Agah commented they had turned the deaths into 'something that makes you feel good about how you've responded'.[503] The University did not follow up on that rhetoric with any sort of events, talks, or plans. Instead, they used the summer and fall semesters to complete after-

[499] Michael, oral history interview, 00:20:36.
[500] Ellis, oral history interview, p. 19.
[501] Dubois, *Details Matter*, p. 537.
[502] Brianna McGruder, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 2 November 2023, p. 3.
[503] Agah, oral history interview, 00:11:53.

action reports and install active shooter kits in classrooms. In fact, the only physical changes students saw as a direct response to 30 April were active shooter kits in every classroom and an inaccessible Kennedy building.[504]

In the years since the shooting, remembrance events have become smaller, and the tragedy is rarely discussed. Dubois saw the first anniversary remembrance event as a way to engage the larger community beyond the University. The Head of the Fine Arts Department helped plan the event, which involved UNCC students in art and art history, dance, music, and theater working with the Charlotte Symphony. [505] The performance was scheduled to be held uptown at the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center while the University organized other activities on campus for the Day of Remembrance.[506]

Had the first Day of Remembrance proceeded as intended, it would have been the perfect example of Mears' suggested community engagement opportunity. Mears noted that while a large community event acknowledged the reality of a tragic occurrence, 'providing a variety of opportunities for people to get together […] to reflect and share experiences can help bridge the isolation and disorientation' accompanying trauma.[507] Campus activities for the first remembrance day included individual and group listening sessions, yoga, therapy dogs, community remembrance gatherings, a candlelight vigil, and a chance to record personal reflections.[508] Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the event to move to an online platform and while many community members watched the scaled-back version, they did so in physical isolation, away from other grieving members of their community.

Successive Days of Remembrance have been much smaller in comparison and fewer of the affected population attend. Chancellor Dubois stopped attending after the second anniversary, stating, 'Personally, I was trying to move past my own personal experience with the tragedy, and I didn't necessarily want to relive it every year'.[509] While attending the first two remembrance events virtually, Drew Pescaro was not contacted about the third anniversary. Instead of attending

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[504] The Emergency Management team installed 700 active shooter kits over Thanksgiving and Winter break in 2019. They contained either a door wedge or a cut piece of fire hose, meant to help secure doors from the inside in the event of an active shooter scenario. Each bag contained an instruction card for how to use the items and Emergency Management produced a video visual training for how to use them, however, Gonyar noted the training was not part of the mandatory trainings for staff, faculty or students. See: Gonyar, oral history interview, 2023, 00:41:55.
[505] Dubois, oral history interview, 01:04:05.
[506] Dubois, *Details Matter*, p. 550-552.
[507] Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*, p. 218.
[508] Dubois, *Details Matter,* p. 557-558.
[509] Dubois, oral history interview, 01:11:08.

any planned event, Pescaro took a trip to an eSports convention, stating, 'I'd rather try to take those steps forward, not letting this day always just be ruled by emotion'.[510]

Pescaro also commented on the remembrance of the tragedy when he returned to campus in 2019. He felt the University was trying to forget the tragedy, possibly because of student recruitment and its image. He remembered 'an overwhelming feeling of [the shooting] just kind of getting swept under the rug'.[511] Susan Harden, Faculty President, also felt this shift with Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber becoming head of the University. She recalled, 'We're very focused right now on increasing enrollment, […] and she doesn't talk about the tragedy often. She doesn't direct the University's attention toward that situation. […] The institutional memory of that, I think, is being suppressed'.[512]

Despite critical reflections on the University's recovery push, these narratives demonstrate community strength. Every narrator recalled supportive colleagues, department heads, students, and peers in the UNCC community. Drew Pescaro and Adam Johnson both credit their partners, a student and faculty member at UNCC, with helping them recover from the trauma.[513] Ryan Harris spoke to how the tragedy and subsequent Covid-19 pandemic moved him to advocate for his team's mental health and show his support and appreciation for the work they do.[514] Shelley Ellis agreed to appear in a documentary video, *Run, Hide, Fight*. Created by her student Cassie Cappello, it contained interviews with survivors who gave first-hand accounts of 30 April and discussed the gun violence epidemic in America, ending with a call to action.[515]

The most meaningful examples of community strength were occurring throughout the Charlotte campus in the aftermath of the tragedy. Amy Tipton and Audrey Baran both felt the need to give back to their community through remembrance stones and choreographed dance. Tipton wanted to provide the community with an outlet to express their grief and after collecting the personalized stones, moved to solidify their messages in a memorial sculpture. Baran brought together a group of twelve dancers to perform a choreographed piece reflecting their personal experiences of 30 April for a public audience. Drew Pescaro's fraternity adopted Hospitality

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[510] Pescaro, oral history interview, 00:56:26.
[511] Pescaro, oral history interview, 00:52:46.
[512] Susan Harden, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 25 January 2023, 00:06:57.
[513] Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 01:20:35; Johnson, oral history interview, 2022, p. 15.
[514] Harris, oral history interview, 00:14:17.
[515] Cassie Cappello, 'Run, Hide Fight', 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjYeTMfB9xo> [Accessed 23 September 2024]

House of Charlotte as their main philanthropy. A Charlotte-based nonprofit, Hospitality House offers families of those in medical crisis a place to stay for free. Pescaro's family benefited from their aid for twenty days while he was in hospital. He continues to fundraise for the charity on his own time.[516]

The value of these narratives lies in the ordinary nature of each survivor's story. Regardless of age or occupation, each of the narrators are connected by the heinous tragedy that violated the safety and security of their school or workplace on 30 April 2019. The NNROHP began as a recommendation by the Remembrance Commission to document the tragedy 'through the eyes of our campus and community members'.[517] Documenting these stories evinces a multifaceted account of how narrators experienced and have lived with the repercussions of the shooting. The accounts offer an alternative view to the University's official response to the tragedy and elucidate the value of collecting oral history narratives in the aftermath of a mass shooting.

3.7: Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the value of collecting oral history interviews after a mass shooting tragedy, arguing that the lived experiences of narrators better document a community tragedy than condolence artifacts alone. By expanding the original NNROHP into a longitudinal study, I added more student and faculty voices to the collection, many of which informed my analysis of the University's recovery efforts. Using Mears' three evaluators to analyze the University's response to the tragedy—honoring victims of community gun violence, celebrating community strengths, and respecting the processing of grief and pain—this chapter argues that the University's rapid move toward recovery and resilience disillusioned some narrators, many of whom also felt the University did not properly allow them to process their grief or attempted to control it. My findings also show that staff and students demonstrated community strength and bonding in the aftermath, working to support each other through projects, fundraising, advocacy, and emotional support.

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[516] Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 00:18:56.
[517] Niner Nation Remembrance Commission, 'Final Report', p. 7.

This chapter sought to answer my fourth research question: how narrators discuss living through a mass shooting. I found narrators used emotive language to recount 30 April and tied the tragedy to other moments of their lives. The emotion captured in the interviews is part of what makes these collections remarkably valuable for future study and future use in exhibits or social justice initiatives. The analysis of interviews in this chapter furthers my argument that these collections are exceptional sources in documenting community recovery and living through a mass shooting.

Lastly, this chapter has practical applications for future researchers who wish to analyze a mass shooting oral history collection in terms of community recovery. This is the first study to analyze a large collection of narratives centered on mass shootings, and my initial analysis led to themes of trauma, community, and grieving. Pairing these themes with Mears' three evaluators offered a way to evaluate not only the individual narratives, but also to critique the University's response to the tragedy. Future researchers can easily adapt this method to evaluate survivor narratives and community responses to tragic events.

Chapter 4: Collective Memory and Activism in the Aftermath

> One person tried to turn our home into a crime scene. Little did they know that nearly 40,000 49ers would stand together against the evil of this world. We are united and are passing the most challenging test that a college student can take. Reed Parlier and Riley Howell will be forever remembered on this campus as long as it stands. The news stories may be archived, this altar may be cleared, but a true Niner will never forget. R.I.P <3[518]

4.1: Introduction

This chapter examines the collective memory of UNCC's 30 April tragedy through student and professor narratives, arguing that many of those affected by the shooting are redefining their lives in the aftermath with an emphasis on their mental health and activism. It further examines the link between Gen Z student memory and growing up with active shooter drills and mass shootings, arguing that the threat of school shootings is becoming entrenched in the cultural life scripts of America's youth. Lastly, this chapter examines the city of Charlotte itself to understand the political and cultural context in which the shooting tragedy occurred and to understand student activism. By analyzing narratives through the lens of collective memory, this chapter further supports the argument that mass shooting-related oral history archives are invaluable to understanding an affected community's tragedy and collective experience.

Sociologist Jeanette A. Bastian linked community tragedy to the manifestation of collective memory, noting that tragedy often connects a community in ways that ordinary events cannot. Therefore, it provides a way to comprehend and study tragic events in meaningful and connected ways.[519] Likewise, in response to the endless cycle of mass media surrounding disaster and traumatic events, Mary Marshall Clark reminds us,

> The place of oral history in documenting the political aftermath of traumatic events in the present is increasingly relevant to the task of understanding the collective experience of catastrophe in human terms and preparing for a historical account that takes place later.[520]

By thematically analyzing UNCC's collected narratives, this thesis explores those overarching ideals regarding how we document and preserve the lived experiences of mass shooting

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[518] May 7 (Kennedy) Poems, Cards and Letters, 2019, Box: 1 [G15.02.03.02]. UNC Charlotte April 30 Tragedy Memorial collection, MS0584. Manuscript Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, UNC Charlotte.
[519] Bastian, 'Flowers for Homestead', p. 116).
[520] Clark, 'Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe', p. 256.

survivors and how that collective experience might be studied in the coming decades. This is the first study to analyze mass shooting oral history interviews through Gen Z and university faculty narratives, revealing the dramatic impact mass shootings have on America's youth and professors and offering avenues for further research into these collections.

4.2: Interpreting Collective Memory Post Tragedy

The ephemera collected from the steps of the Kennedy building and other spontaneous memorials throughout the campus are an integral archival collection for UNCC. The April 30th Tragedy Memorial Collection contains all of the cards, letters, signs, and ephemera placed on the steps of the Kennedy Building and at the Niner statue after 30 April. The messages collected are those of a grieving community who recognized the heroic efforts of Riley Howell and the senseless murder of both Howell and Ellis 'Reed' Parlier. The notes left by the UNCC community spoke of remembrance and never forgetting, of fighting for the two students, of coming together as a grieving campus. Many are handwritten, scribbled on torn pieces of paper, or written on the back of study note cards. They identify UNCC as a community of Niners, the Niner Nation, and speak of the school as their home. In the introductory excerpt, class of 2022 student Kyle Grier states, 'The news stories may be archived, this altar may be cleared, but a true Niner will never forget'.[521]

In *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*, archivist Francis Xavier Blouin and historian William G. Rosenberg reflected on the archive's ability to be a keeper of collective memory. The pair argued that the idea of archives playing a pivotal role in 'the formation of social or collective memories' is unfamiliar to archivists and not 'well understood' by historians.[522] Archivists and historians alike are wary of the suggestion that archives directly affect social memory because this belief 'undermines established notions of historical "truth"' or the culturally accepted view of history.[523] However, archivist Terry Cook unapologetically

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[521] Ibid.
[522] Francis Xavier Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, 'Archives and Social Memory' in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. by Francis Xavier Blouin and William G. Rosenberg (University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 165-168 (p. 165), doi:10.3998/mpub.93171
[523] Ibid.

labeled archivists as 'active agents in constructing social and historical memory'.[524] In their roles, they consider the future and conserve the past, collecting as a reflection of a society's held values instead of prominent donors or sponsors.[525] In *No Innocent Deposits*, archival scholar Richard J. Cox argued that archivists consciously shape archives, and through the selection and appraisal process, these depositories become representative of public memory.[526]This chapter questions how a somewhat cultivated collection might accurately portray a community's collective memory of a mass shooting.[527] Furthermore, what do collected narratives and archival material say about the community's social or collective memory and specifically, how the shooting shaped student narrator's lives.

As Abrams outlined in her chapter on trauma and ethics, while crisis oral history narratives may be challenging to interpret and somewhat fragmented, the benefit to the collective history of a tragedy can be great. She argued, 'By positioning the narratives within the broader context, understanding the political climate, the extent and complexion of official or state commemoration or justice-seeking, the position of the narrator within community networks and the existence of other survivor narratives from the same event,' future historians will have the means to interpret and find meaning in tragedy narratives.[528] To Abrams point, this chapter contextualizes the collected narratives thematically, exploring the connection to the physical proximity of UNCC and the broader city of Charlotte, and comparing experiences of survivors in the aftermath and their search to redefine themselves as survivors of a mass shooting.

In his study of historical trauma and meaning-making, psychologist Gilad Hirschberger linked the process of collectively remembering tragedy to the construction of meaning for survivors.[529] Hirschberger clearly distinguished between the historical 'recollection of a terrible event' and a collective trauma. A collective trauma, he argued, referenced 'the psychological

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[524] Terry Cook, 'Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory' in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar,* ed. by Francis Xavier Blouin and William G. Rosenberg (University of Michigan Press, 2006), 169-181 (p. 170), doi:10.3998/mpub.93171.21

[525] Ibid.

[526] Richard J. Cox, *No Innocent Deposits* (Scarecrow Press, 2004), p. 12, 14-15.

[527] Atkins library's Special Collections invited students to provide an oral history interview in October, 2019, however, they had few participants. Instead, the team turned to interviewing the Chancellor's cabinet and Remembrance Commission members while students were mainly selected through their positions as student leaders. Howell, oral history interview, 00:55:18.

[528] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 190.

[529] Gilad Hirschberger, 'Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), 1-14 (p. 2), doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441

reaction to a traumatic event that affected an entire society', acknowledging that these tragedies are represented in the collective memory of the affected group.[530] Part of the distinction lies in the aftermath of the tragedy, where survivors continued to reconstruct the trauma to make sense of it. 'The creation and maintenance of meaning', he argued, 'comprise a sense of self-continuity, a connection between the self, others and the environment, and the feeling that one's existence matters'.[531] Although interviews for this project were only collected in the recent aftermath of the 30 April tragedy, the narrators' actions and activism in the post-tragedy period evidence its effect on their lives.

Oral historians and future scholars consulting narratives from survivors of collective trauma must acknowledge Portelli's integral conclusion, that memory is an active process.[532] Collective trauma revolves around deriving meaning from a traumatic event and can often culminate in survivors redefining their lives and who they are. Oral historians can use this understanding of active memory creation to examine memory and 'meanings of the past in the present for individuals and society'.[533] Some narrators in this project relayed different attitudes toward Charlotte's tragedy between their first and second interviews. Their interviews show many are continuing to redefine themselves and their lives after 30 April. The most impassioned narrators tended to be those who were in Kennedy 236, on campus during the lockdown, or were students at the time of the shooting. According to Smith and Hughes' definitions, many of these narrators experienced traumatic exposure and this, coupled with their proximity to the Kennedy building on 30 April, led to a more emotional reaction in the aftermath.[534]

4.3: Memory and Cultural Script

In *Oral History Theory*, Abrams discussed the positives and pitfalls of autobiographical memory. She argued, 'Memory of a single event, and its personal or emotional experience for an individual, is less easy to recall. The memory system does not appear to be able to deal with the

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[530] Ibid., p. 1.
[531] Ibid, p. 2.
[532] Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different?', p. 48-58.
[533] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 'Interpreting Memories' in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 2016), pp. 297-310 (p. 297), doi:10.4324/9781315671833
[534] Smith and Hughes, 'Challenges to the Empirical Investigation of Mass Shootings', in *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*, p. 10.

recall of emotion particularly well. The events and experiences that caused the emotion are more likely to be remembered'.[535] The one caveat is traumatic experience, and this is evidenced in the narratives of students, professors, and those closest in proximity to the Kennedy Building.

Documenting events of crisis is central to the work of oral historians. Steeped in traumatic subject matter, these projects are more likely to occur soon after tragedy, when the narrator's experience is raw and their emotions heightened.[536] Stephen Sloan argued that 'emotion is a big part of truth, particularly in times of crisis,'[537] and seasoned oral historians pursue these projects to both document the historical record and help communities make sense of tragedy.[538] Wright, Howell, and I conducted interviews for this study from six months to four years after the 30 April shooting in the hope that memory of the tragedy and the emotion attached to it might be preserved. While many interviews captured the raw emotion of 30 April, other narratives were clinical, disjointed, or void of detail. Abrams warns that this is to be expected because trauma interviews conducted soon after the event may be recollected in great detail by the narrator, or they 'may be unable to recall the detail or to provide a coherent narrative' surrounding their experience.[539]

The intersectionality between oral history and memory studies continues to be explored by various multi-disciplined practitioners.[540] Psychologist Robyn Fivush wrote extensively on the topic of autobiographical memory, defining it as 'a uniquely human system that integrates memories of past experiences into an overarching life narrative'.[541] Autobiographical memory differs from episodic memory in that it 'includes memory of the self as the experiencer of the event', it links individual memories to form a life narrative, and it 'influences our future behavior to serve social and emotional functions'.[542] Psychologist Daniel Schacter compared

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[535] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 87.
[536] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 1.
[537] Ibid., p. 5.
[538] Ibid., p. 4.
[539] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 93.
[540] Developing over the last quarter century, the field of memory studies covers a multitude of memory experiences. Amongst the multidisciplinary contributing subjects, media, communication, and culture analysis scholars Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley list 'social psychology, sociology, history, political science, philosophy and aesthetics, drama and literary studies, and cultural and media studies' as contributors. Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, eds., *Research Methods for Memory Studies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 2, doi:10.3366/j.ctt1g0b78k
[541] Robyn Fivush, 'The Development of Autobiographical Memory,' *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62 (2011), pp. 559-582 (p. 559), doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.121208.131702
[542] Ibid., p. 560-561.

autobiographical memory to the human ordering of memory fragments into a narrative that constitutes our lives.[543] In short, autobiographical memory is a life narrative created by our experiences, which is also culturally specific and shaped by local, social interaction.

Fivush elaborated further on this phenomenon, noting that meaning and memory change over time, and in one's lifetime, memory shifts according to how memories fit into our larger identities.[544] Fivush argued that individual life experiences, or individual life stories, are defined in relation to their 'cultural life script', a concept first introduced by Dorthe Berntsen, who directs the Center on Autobiographical Memory Research at Aarthus University, and David C. Rubin, professor of psychology at Duke University.[545] Bernsten and Rubin identified cultural life scripts as 'culturally shared representations of the timing of major transitional life events'.[546] According to these scholars, humans define individual life experiences by conformity to, or deviance from, a specific culture's script.[547] These are often age-related milestones that occur in a specific order, such as graduation, employment, or marriage,[548] and should not be confused with personal experiences. The pair explain, while 'knowledge of the content and timing of transitional events is a powerful regulator of behavior in all societies',[549] cultural life scripts do not define which memories are remembered. Scripts are ultimately a structure for the recollection of autobiographical memories.[550]

Bernsten and Rubin acknowledged that society expects these life milestones to occur 'on time' for them to be interpreted as positive. 'Off time' transitional events, such as teenage pregnancy, hold a negative connotation and are seen as 'stressful and socially stigmatizing'.[551] The scholars also identify personally significant events, whether positive or negative, as lying outside cultural and traditional scripts. 'Such events', they argue, 'would be associated with no

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[543] Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: the Brain, the Mind and the Past* (BasicBooks 1996), p. 71.
[544] Robyn Fivush, 'Autobiographical Memory', in *Research Methods for Memory Studies* ed. by Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 14-21 (p. 15-16), doi:10.1515/9780748683475
[545] Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin, 'Cultural Life Scripts Structure Recall from Autobiographical Memory', *Memory & Cognition,* 32 (2004) pp. 427-442 (p. 427), doi:10.3758/BF03195836
[546] Fivush, 'Autobiographical Memory', p. 15-16.
[547] Ibid., p. 16; Berntsen and Rubin, 'Cultural Life Scripts', p. 427.
[548] Bernsten and Rubin, 'Cultural Life Scripts', p. 429.
[549] David C. Rubin and Dorthe Bernsten, 'Life Scripts Help to Maintain Autobiographical Memories of Highly Positive, but Not Highly Negative, Events', *Memory & Cognition*, 31 (2003), pp. 1-14 (p. 11), doi:10.3758/BF03196077
[550] Michele Anne and Steve M. Janssen, 'Relations Between Cultural Life Scripts, Individual Life Stories, and Psychological Distress', *Psychological Reports*, 124 (2020), pp. 521-542, doi:10.1177/00332941209134
[551] Ibid.

age norms' and, therefore, do not fit into typical life scripts.[552] However, narratives collected from the NNROHP reflect that those who experienced the campus shooting have woven it into their life narratives, and school shootings, or the threat of shootings, have become part of cultural scripts for American students during their years of education. According to Mears, survivors' assumptive worlds, or their assumptions about the world and themselves, shatter in the wake of tragedy, leading to mistrust in the world and ourselves, creating a new assumptive world that incorporates victimization.[553] Many student narrators are redefining their larger identities with the UNCC tragedy being a paramount event within their life script and impacting their assumptive worlds. Within the analysis of positive cultural life scripts, mass shootings may affect an American student's ability to meet transitional goals. However, NNROHP narrators are using their experiences to find meaning in their lives, give back to their communities, and embrace activism.

Research into cultural scripts and trauma identifies the necessity of viewing an individual's reaction to trauma through a cultural context. In 2019, cultural psychologist Yulia Chentsova-Dutton and psychologist Andreas Maercker argued the importance of attaching cultural models to traumatized populations to understand how culture influences a population's response to trauma. In terms of mass violence, such as a mass shooting, the pair argued that 'cultural contexts foreground different aspects of traumatic stress'.[554] In 2023, science journalist Zara Abrams found that the impact of living in America under the threat of mass shooting events had increasingly deteriorated the mental health of Americans, specifically America's youth. That threat, along with other challenges such as living through the Covid-19 pandemic, the escalation of the war in Ukraine and the Middle East, economic uncertainty, and contentious political divides, amalgamate to create a 'cascade of collective traumas'.[555] With the number of American youth citing the threat of a mass shooting as a key source of anxiety,[556] the effect on cultural scripts is inevitable. The response in survivors of mass shootings is even more dire, with a

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[552] Ibid.
[553] Mears, 'Experiences of Columbine Parents' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, College of Education, University of Denver, 2005), p. 6.
[554] Yulia Chentsova-Dutton and Andreas Maercker, 'Cultural Scripts of Traumatic Stress: Outline, Illustrations, and Research Opportunities', *Frontiers in Psychology* (2019), pp. 1-20 (p. 1), doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02528
[555] Zara Abrams, 'Stress of Mass Shootings Causing Cascade of Collective Traumas', *Monitor on Psychology* (2022) 53, 6 (p.20) <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/09/news-mass-shootings-collective-traumas> [Accessed 2 February 2025]
[556] Della Volpe, *FIGHT,* p. 13.

reported prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder, major depression, and other psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and substance abuse.[557]

Many of the student narrators for this project considered 30 April a formative event in their time at the University. Professor Adam Johnson and injured student Drew Pescaro were open about their struggles with anxiety and depression in the aftermath of the event.[558] Angel discussed her emotional reaction to receiving an email requesting her participation in the project.[559] Maya Wells called the reality of school shootings in America 'deeply sad […] and deeply concerning, but not surprising'.[560] Margaret Murphy described her daily anxiety that she might be involved in a mass shooting.[561] Even before 30 April, these students, all members of Generation Z, were living with the reality of school shootings in America. Gun violence and active shooter training are embedded in the American education system and in students' cultural life script since entering the school system. This reality and their general fear over school shootings have prompted their rebranding as America's 'lockdown generation'.

4.4: Disillusionment and Activism Responses in Student Narrators:

For almost a decade, the American media and even mass shooting survivors have attempted to re-brand Generation Z, or Gen Z, in more narrow terms through their affiliation with lockdown drills and school shootings.[562] In response to the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida, the *New York Times* announced 'A "Mass Shooting Generation" Cries Out for Change'.[563] The by-line read, 'Delaney Tarr, a high school senior, cannot remember a time when she did not know about school shootings'.[564] A Parkland survivor,

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[557] Sarah R. Lowe and Sandro Galea, 'The Mental Health Consequences of Mass Shootings', *Trauma, Violence and Abuse* (2015), pp.62-82 (p.62), doi:10.1177/1524838015591572
[558] Pescaro, oral history interview, 00:46:33; Johnson, oral history interview, p. 15.
[559] Angel, oral history interview, 00:44:43.
[560] Wells, oral history interview, 00:33:35.
[561] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:14:27.
[562] The Pew Research Center defines Gen Z as anyone born after 1997. Michael Dimock, 'Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins', *Pew Research Center*, 17 January 2019 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/> [Accessed 12 December 2024]
[563] Audra D. S. Burch, Patricia Mazzei and Jack Healy, 'A "Mass Shooting Generation" Cries Out for Change', *New York Times*, 16 February 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/us/columbine-mass-shootings.html> [Accessed 10 December 2024]
[564] Ibid.

Cameron Kasky, labeled the fifty million school children in America 'the mass-shooting generation'.[565] In an article postulating the effect of Parkland student activism, Bradley A. Serber defined the 'school shooting generation' as those born after 1999, who grew up with active shooter drills. Serber noted,

> Whereas they [Parkland student activists] differ from the Sandy Hook students because they are old enough to speak for themselves, they differ from the Columbine and Virginia Tech students because of the frequency and salience of other school shootings that happened before the one at their high school.[566]

In 2022, on the tenth anniversary of the Sandy Hook shooting, *Vox* headlined 'The school shooting generation grows up' referring to a broader category of children living through the 'start of the school shooting era' coming of age in the 90s and 2000s.[567] That same year, the *Associated Press* picked up the nomenclature to report on the 24 May Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, noting 'For "Lockdown Generation" School Shootings are their Reality'.[568]

In 2021, as copy chief of Seattle University's *Spectator* student newspaper, Jacqueline Maciel wrote an opinion piece about her generation, entitled 'The So-Called, "School Shooting Generation"'. As a Gen Z student, Maciel observed,

> People have traded our "Gen Z" name to one that embodies the incident that crosses our mind every now and then when we are sitting in our classrooms. "The School Shooting Generation", a fitting name for a group of students who have listened to or read stories about the 300 plus school shootings that have occurred since 1997.[569]

Almost two years later, Emmy Martin published an opinion piece in UNC Chapel Hill's *The Daily Tar Heel*, emphasizing the experience of so many students living with school shootings, declaring, 'We're Tired of Being the "Lockdown Generation."'[570] In 2023, the *Washington Post* declared, 'It's Time to Formalize "Gen Z" as the "Lockdown Generation". In the article, analyst

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[565] Charlotte Alter, 'How Parkland Teens are Leading the Gun Control Conversation', *TIME*, 22 March 2018 <https://time.com/longform/never-again-movement/> [Accessed 19 March 19, 2025].
[566] Serber, 'The Last Mass Shooting', in *Rhetoric and Guns,* p. 142.
[567] Marin Cogan, 'The School Shooting Generation Grows Up', *Vox,* 24 January 2022 <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22878920/school-shootings-survivors-columbine-mental-health> [Accessed 10 December 2024].
[568] Collin Binkley, Annie Ma and Jocelyn Gecker, 'For "Lockdown Generation" School Shootings are their Reality', *Associated Press*, 26 May 2022 <https://apnews.com/article/uvalde-school-shooting-health-texas-violence-928c177ee8e09b59507c88d9c5b6ce51> [Accessed 10 December 2024].
[569] Jacqueline Maciel, 'The So-Called, "School Shooting Generation"', *The Spectator*, 28 April 2021 <https://seattlespectator.com/2021/04/28/the-so-called-school-shooting-generation/> [Accessed 10 December 2024].
[570] Emmy Martin, 'We're Tired of Being the "Lockdown Generation"', *The Daily Tar Heel*, 1 October 2023 <https://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2023/10/opinion-office-of-gun-violence-prevention> [Accessed 10 December 2024].

Philip Bump detailed the new designation's traction in the last few years, noticing that each generation is defined by something specific to its group. 'If you ask members of the generation,' he stated, 'they'll often mention gun violence and school shootings'.[571]

Director of Polling at the Harvard Kennedy School of Politics and ardent researcher of America's youth, John Della Volpe, wrote about the political activism of America's Gen Z and the factors driving it. He regarded 'Stifling economic inequality, Donald Trump's presidency, the March for Our Lives movement, George Floyd's murder, and the specter of climate change' as pertinent factors motivating America's youth activism.[572] Della Volpe also argued that Gen Z has 'endured more adversity than any generation of young Americans in the last seventy years', citing gun violence as one of the many difficulties affecting their lives.[573]

Della Volpe interviewed high school and college students across the US through small focus groups in 2017. In response to a question about what older generations do not understand about Gen Z, a twenty-year-old biology student explained,

> An older generation would not understand walking into a classroom and thinking about how easy it would be for someone to shoot it up. The same daily weight on an adult's shoulders over bills or taxes is what children feel about living or dying.[574]

Student narrators for this project were personally selected because they had shared their story publicly in some way, held a leadership position, or because they could provide a unique experience that might offer insight into what the community experienced on 30 April. All student narrators are considered part of the Gen Z cohort, and all expressed trepidation around the topic of school shootings.

Out of the twenty-five individuals approached for this project, only two declined. The first was a library employee who sheltered students in their office on campus. They admitted that the event was somehow more difficult to discuss three years later than when it first happened. They have since left the University. The second was a student who had publicly aligned themselves with gun control after 30 April. They responded to the request with a message stating,

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[571] Philip Bump, 'It's Time to Formalize "Gen Z" as the "Lockdown Generation"', *Washington Post*, 15 February 2023 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/02/15/mass-shootings-gen-z-lockdowns/> [Accessed 10 December 2024].
[572] Della Volpe, *FIGHT,* p. 12.
[573] Ibid., p. 13.
[574] Ibid., p. 33.

> To be honest, while in the aftermath of the shooting I was scared and angry, due to the lack of any meaningful change in the US, since then, my emotions have transitioned to sadness and defeat with an eagerness to move on. It was an incredibly stressful time that doesn't seem beneficial to relive.[575]

That sense of sadness and defeat was present in other interviews as well, particularly amongst students who considered themselves activists or advocates for gun control and legislative reform. Margaret Murphy was a sophomore in 2019 and outreach coordinator for the UNCC Chapter of March for our Lives (MFOL), created on campus just one month prior to the shooting.[576] Murphy's interview centered on her activism in the years after 30 April and her continued involvement in MFOL. She was specifically vocal discussing apathy and gun violence, questioning if Americans even cared anymore. She stated, 'Columbine should have been enough, and Sandy Hook should have been enough […] I want to be like, yeah, gun violence is part of [political] platforms, but do people care anymore?'[577] Murphy noted the irony of Americans stating they're tired of hearing about gun violence when she is constantly assuming she will be shot.[578]

Murphy is not alone in her fear of being involved in a mass shooting. Six months after Parkland, the American Psychological Association (APA) released the twelfth annual 'Stress in America™ report' detailing systematic stressors faced by Gen Z. The highest amongst them were shootings, with seventy-five percent of those surveyed citing mass shootings as a significant source of stress. Seventy-two percent identified school shootings or the possibility of a school shooting as a source of stress.[579] Gen Z clearly believed mass shooting in schools to be a critically important issue facing the country. Della Volpe, along with his SocialSphere[580] co-founder and Chief Analytics Officer Jonathan Chavez, conducted another public opinion survey

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[575] Anonymous Facebook Messenger message reprinted with the permission of the author. Message correspondence in author's possession, 10 October 2022.
[576] Murphy, Margaret, oral history interview, 2020 July 30, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 00:04:42 <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/record/27157?v=vid> [Accessed 20 March 2025]
[577] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:12:15.
[578] Ibid., 00:14:27.
[579] 'Stress in America™: Generation Z', *American Psychological Association* (2018) <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf> [19 March 2025]
[580] SocialSphere is a public opinion research company founded by Della Volpe and Chavez in 2007. 'Who We Are', SocialSphere (2024) <https://www.socialsphere.com/who-we-are> [Accessed 11 March 2025]

in September 2018, finding that school shootings ranked highest amongst Gen Z when asked to 'indicate the importance of certain issues related to America's future'.[581]

According to a 2019 APA report, mass shootings are a serious stressor for most American adults, many of whom alter their lives to avoid places they feel are at risk of experiencing a shooting.[582] The APA polled American adults over eighteen in 2019, months after mass shootings in Dayton, Ohio, and El Paso, Texas, made national news. The study gauged the impact of mass shootings on stress and health, finding that 'three-quarters of adults in the U.S. say they experience stress as a result of the possibility of a mass shooting'. In the same poll, nearly one-third felt 'they cannot go anywhere without worrying about being a victim of a mass shooting'. The same number admitted that a fear of mass shootings prevented them from attending certain events or visiting specific places. One-quarter reported 'changing how they live their lives because of fear of a mass shooting'. Forty-two percent of respondents listed schools and universities as places where they are stressed about the possibility of a mass shooting occurring.[583]

Murphy recounted memories from elementary school of active shooter drills and the emotional effect they have had on her. She can vividly recall the sound her classroom door handle made as someone impersonating an active shooter during a drill jiggled the handle. She remembered that sound as the moment she realized someone with a gun might come into her school classroom and start shooting.[584] Ultimately, Murphy credited other young people speaking out and being heard by society as her motivation for becoming active in the movement to stop gun violence. She credits young activists with 'finally giving [her] generation a voice', citing their initiative as the reason she organized a MFOL group at her high school to participate in the 2018 national demonstration.[585]

At the time of the interview, Murphy's involvement with MFOL spanned four years. In that time, she had learned how to use her own story, or her 'story of self', for relatability in connecting with people over issues of gun violence. Murphy excitedly discussed how energizing

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[581] Della Volpe, *FIGHT*, p. 75.
[582] 'One-Third of US Adults Say Fear of Mass Shootings Prevents Them from Going to Certain Places or Events', *American Psychological Association*, 15 August 2019 <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2019/08/fear-mass-shooting> [Accessed 11 March 2024].
[583] Ibid.
[584] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:41:08.
[585] Murphy, oral history interview, 2020, 00:05:47.

it was to see her former boss at MFOL, Maxwell Frost (D-FL), be elected the first Generation Z member of Congress in 2022. She pointed to Frost's energy and passion, feeling as though he may one day make it to the presidency.[586] Frost's election was an exciting prospect for young voters in America who have repeatedly expressed discontent with their older, white, cis-gender representatives.[587] The *New York Times* found that gun violence was just one rallying point for Gen. Z, who have expressed through polls and surveys that they are more interested in "results […] innovative action, and sweeping change' than 'upholding institutions and restoring norms'.[588] When asked to reflect on how 30 April had affected her life, Murphy noted it was a catalyst for her activism. Ultimately she stated, 'Being part of the school shooting generation has fundamentally shaped the person I am and the person I will become'.[589]

Months after becoming a school shooting survivor, Drew Pescaro also briefly turned to activism. He continued to be vocal about his experience of being shot, feeling it was important for others to hear those details to help combat the desensitized nature of news media reporting on mass shooting events. He stated, 'I just try to make sure that that [the visceral account of being shot] doesn't go unspoken for. That that part of it is also explained because just as much as it is a physical trauma, there's so many parts of it that, of course, add up to the mental trauma of it'.[590]

Democrat lawmakers invited Pescaro to recount his story to the North Carolina General Assembly in August 2019 after shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, prompted Democrats to draft bills for common sense gun reforms. At the time, the legislation was held up in committee.[591] House Bill 454 sought to create 'extreme risk protective orders' in North Carolina, a temporary measure that would confiscate the firearms of citizens in danger of

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[586] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022,

[587] In 2021, the Pew Research Center charted the key demographics of the 117th US Congress. That year, US voters swore in the most racially and ethnically diverse congressional group, with 23% identifying as Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Native American, up from 1% in 1945. That group also saw the first Millennial senator and an uptick in Generation X Senators from 16 to 20. As of 2021, Baby Boomers continued to dominate both the House and Senate, holding 53% of the House and 68 of 100 Senate seats. Katherine Schaeffer, 'Racial, Ethnic Diversity Increases Yet Again with 117th Congress', Pew Research Center, 28 January 2021 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/01/28/racial-ethnic-diversity-increases-yet-again-with-the-117th-congress/ > [Accessed December 31, 2022]

[588] Maya King and Johnathan Weisman, 'Young Voters are Fed Up With Their (Much) Older Leaders', *New York Times* (2022) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/14/us/politics/youth-voters-midterms-polling.html> [Accessed December 31, 2022]

[589] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 01:13:24.

[590] Pescaro oral history interview, 2023, 00:10:49.

[591] Emily Davis and Rose Hoban, 'Lawmakers Attempt to Move Gun Safety Bills at the Statehouse', *North Carolina Health News*, 7 August 2019 <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2019/08/07/lawmakers-attempt-to-move-gun-safety-bills-at-the-statehouse/> [Accessed 30 April 2025]

committing violence. House Bill 86 sought to restrict bump stocks and ammunition magazine sizes and enact a three-day waiting period on firearm purchases.[592] Pescaro remembered attending with the intention of telling his story and calling for lawmakers from both parties to listen to one another and, even if legislators could not adopt the bills in their nascent form, find some common ground and compromise through open discussion. He recounted,

> I knew it was such a divisive topic. […] even just hearing the word gun rights, gun activism, instantly just pitted people against each other. So when I went in there, my goal was simply go in, tell my story of what happened in detail so these people understand, and say if what is being presented here isn't the answer, then work together and find one. Because just sitting here and not doing anything at all, it's not going to prevent it from happening again.[593]

Pescaro recalled the disheartening Republican reaction. None of the sixty-three elected Republican state legislators attended the General Assembly session that day to hear his testimony. He followed up by emailing each Republican legislator in North Carolina, only to get two responses. 'It was hard,' he remembered, 'because when nothing was getting done […] I would feel a sense of failure and like I can't get through to anyone. […] For my sanity and for my mental health, I decided to pivot away from that [form of activism]'.[594]

State Senator Natasha Marcus represented North Carolina's District 41, encompassing Davidson, Mountain Island Lake, and West Charlotte, in 2019. An outspoken advocate for common sense gun legislation, she supported Governor Roy Cooper's agenda to reduce gun violence. Marcus remembered meeting Drew Pescaro in 2019 when he spoke to the general assembly. She recalled,

> When he spoke, I was moved […] And I think the public was moved. It was the first time I had ever heard him tell his story. […] The most memorable part for me was when he was willing to step from behind the podium, where we could see his full body. And he lifted his shirt and he showed the bullet wounds […] and talked about how his body will be permanently scarred, as well as his sense of safety and his life forever changed from it. I think he talked about that weird feeling of survivor's guilt. That he watched other people get shot and they died and he lived. And we were grateful he was willing to stand with us and call for policy change. Because some people, even living through something like that, might still feel, for some reason, I wouldn't understand it, that Second Amendment rights still trump any kind of gun safety reform that we might want to have. I don't know why

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[592] Ibid.
[593] Pescaro, oral history interview, 2023, 00:15:04, 2023.
[594] Ibid., 00:17:12.

> people feel that way. It's a uniquely American feeling. But we were grateful that he was willing to use his pain and his experience to help the cause.[595]

Chandler Crean was the newly elected Student Body President when the shooting occurred on campus. During his tenure, he helped organize and spoke at the 30 April vigil, sat on the Remembrance Commission, and participated in the first Remembrance Day. The experience had a profound effect on him, shaping his choice of career after graduation. Crean recalled,

> In that year, I knew I wanted to go into higher ed [education] as a field. For me, unfortunately, having been a student during this tragedy does play a part in the experience and what we are doing within a field of higher ed, but also ensuring the safety of students. And what does this look like, to be more proactive than reactive at times, to where we can ensure things like this do not happen again. […] For us to ensure that students have a healthy and meaningful experience on campus.[596]

After graduating from UNCC in 2020, Crean pursued a master's in college student affairs administration from the University of Georgia. At the time of the interview, he was employed at Virgina Tech, working with the fraternity and sorority life communities.[597] He discussed the connection of working at yet another school that had experienced a mass shooting, stating, 'it's a connection you would hope not to have'.[598] However, Crean felt that his experience as a student at UNCC and his work on the Remembrance Commission could be an asset in connecting with students, helping him to be part of a broader conversation around each remembrance anniversary.[599]

While none of the faculty members interviewed for this project were Gen Z, they were constantly aware that school shootings were a possibility in their profession. Faculty expressed feelings of frustration that politicians did not want to address the gun violence epidemic or acknowledge its impact on teachers and students. As of 2022, most students entering college had grown up with active shooter drills.[600] The University freely offered active shooter training to faculty, student workers, and some student groups. Ceramics professor Shelley Ellis, who

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[595] Natasha Marcus, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 15 November 2022, 00:13:07.
[596] Chandler Crean, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 3 July 2023, 00:46:30.
[597] Ibid., 00:01:50.
[598] Ibid., 00:40:24.
[599] Ibid., 00:39:49.
[600] According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 96% of K-12 schools in America reported having active shooter plans and procedures for the 2019-2020 school year. Véronique Irwin, Ke Wang and Alexandra Thompson, 'Indicator of school crime and safety: 2022', National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (2022), p. 21 <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/iscs22.pdf > [Accessed 10 February 2025]

participated in one of the ALICE trainings on campus, remarked, 'Memorials are nice and talks are nice, and plans are nice, and active shooter training is nice, but when do we address what's really going on?'[601]

Ellis felt that instead of making students safer, state governments were making it easier to access firearms, potentially putting more students and faculty in danger. In 2015, North Carolina's General Assembly altered the weapons on campus general law statute to allow handguns to be kept in a locked vehicle on campuses or educational property.[602] Ellis remarked, 'that's a great rule. So Mary, who's mad and upset about their grade, can just, if she can't cool off by the time she gets to her car […] she knows where my office is', implying the ease of access to firearms might lead to shootings on college campuses in the state.[603] Ellis argued that the transition to college is already difficult for students who, free from parental control, can exhibit new behaviors with less oversight.[604]

Two of the professors interviewed took advantage of the free active shooter training provided by Emergency Management. In the wake of 30 April, Ellis began including a discussion of her personal active shooter training with all incoming classes. She felt this was an assurance to her students that she had considered her reaction and their safety in the event of another shooting. She reflected, 'I just want to address it and let them know that somebody's […] thinking about it and doing the best that we can for this to be a safe environment for them'.[605] Dena Michael also signed up for active shooter training the semester after the shooting in hopes of feeling more prepared for an active shooter event but was not confident in how it might aid her. [606] She recounted, 'I don't think I'll ever be entirely comfortable standing in front of the classroom […] You do feel very vulnerable that any time, anybody can walk into the classroom and do whatever. I just try not to think about it anymore'.[607]

Roslyn Mickelson was a Chancellor's Professor in the Department of Sociology at UNC Charlotte in 2022. At the time of her interview, her career at Charlotte spanned thirty-seven years. Mickelson's research surrounded elementary education, and she worked closely with

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[601] Ellis, oral history interview, p. 15.
[602] North Carolina General Statutes Chapter 14 Criminal Law s. 14-269.2. Weapons on campus or other educational property <https://www.ncleg.gov/Laws/GeneralStatuteSections/Chapter14> [Accessed November 3, 2022]
[603] Ellis, oral history interview, p. 15.
[604] Ibid.
[605] Ibid., p. 10.
[606] Michael, oral history interview, 00:21:39.
[607] Ibid., 00:22:54.

public schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system. Her attitude toward political inaction regarding gun violence was fervent and personal. Mickelson had a colleague whom a gunman shot as a graduate student. She recalled, 'he was shot, the bullet came within a quarter inch of his spine […] and he had to crawl out of the building, bleeding, and the police almost killed him because they thought he was the shooter […] So this is very personal to me'.[608]

Mickelson also had first-hand experience of threatening behavior and increased security in the workplace. While teaching at UNCC, a graduate student threatened one of Mickelson's colleagues, leading to an armed, uniformed officer in their department lobby for part of the semester. Mickelson acknowledged that this was 'eerie' but also noted,

> I have to tell you […] where I work out, there are armed officers. Where I go to worship, there are armed officers […]. Something is very amiss in our larger society. It's very frustrating being a sociologist who claims to understand group behavior and claims to understand what motivates people to act, and to find I can't explain this.[609]

When asked if she attended the vigil on 1 May, she concluded that the trauma of a shooting tragedy cannot be healed through vigils and memorials, with prayer and song. Instead, she discussed the need for people to be angry and pressed into action. She did not attend these events in the wake of 30 April because she believed it would be a distraction from her own anger.[610]

4.5: Charlotte Context:

Understanding the city of Charlotte is integral to contextualizing 30 April and the University's place within the broader city. Today, Charlotte, North Carolina, is a vital financial and banking hub, a 'New South' city characterized by its global reach.[611] In the 1960s, while other southern cities were fighting against desegregation, Charlotte desegregated public accommodations and, a decade later, desegregated public schools through a complex busing program.[612] Southern historian David Goldfield wrote that Charlotte's civic leaders were mainly

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[608] Roslyn Mickelson, interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 20 September 2022, p. 8-9.
[609] Ibid., p. 9.
[610] Ibid., p. 6-8
[611] William Graves and Heather A. Smith, 'Introduction. From Mill Town to Financial Capital' in *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City,* ed. by William Graves and Heather A. Smith (University of Georgia Press, 2010), pp. 1-9 (p. 1-4) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46ngw8.5> [Accessed 12 February 2025]
[612] David Goldfield, 'A Place to Come To' in *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City*, ed. by William Graves and Heather A. Smith (University of Georgia Press, 2010) pp. 10-23 (p. 15-16) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46ngw8.6> [Accessed 12 February 2025]

concerned about the city's positive image, wanting to portray 'that the most insidious aspects of Jim Crow were unwelcome in the city' lest they impede the city's rise to prominence as a business capital.[613]

Decades later, Charlotteans were under no illusion that the city managed to escape the historic remnants of the Jim Crow South. Once known as 'the city that made desegregation work',[614] by 2018, Mecklenburg County's schools were the most racially segregated in the state.[615] In 2014, a Harvard University study on upward mobility ranked Charlotte fiftieth out of the fifty largest US metropolitan cities, correlating upward mobility with five factors: residential segregation, income inequality, school quality, social capital, and family structure.[616] The study prompted lead researcher Dr. Raj Chetty to create a new research group, Opportunity Insights, to study Charlotte and understand why it ranked 'low in terms of economic mobility for its kids despite having a vibrant, rapidly growing economy'.[617]

At the same time, the city of Charlotte was struggling with issues related to police violence against Black citizens. In 2013, the killing of an unarmed Black motorist, Jonathan Ferrell, by a white Charlotte-Mecklenburg police officer almost sparked protests when the officer's trial ended in a mistrial.[618] In 2016, at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, a Black Charlotte man, sparked days of protests that culminated in police action. Brenda Tindal, Director of Charlotte's eminent history museum the Levine Museum of the New South, noted the shooting 'did not occur in a vacuum'. It came in the wake of the Ferrell trial, amid the economic mobility study, and during a belligerent 2016 election season.[619]

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[613] Ibid., p. 15.
[614] David A. Graham, 'Shattering Charlotte's Myth of Racial Harmony', *The Atlantic*, 22 September 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/charlotte-race-history/501221/> [Accessed 2 February 2025]
[615] Bruce Henderson, 'CMS Most Racially Segregated School District in NC, Advocacy Group Says', *The Charlotte Observer,* 16 March 2018 <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article205580044.html> [Accessed 2 February 2025]
[616] Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, 'Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States', (2014) p. 43, 71.<http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/mobility_geo.pdf> [Accessed 2 February 2025].
[617] Raj Chetty, 'Charlotte Opportunity Initiative 2020 Report', Opportunity Insights (2020) <https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OI-CharlotteReport.pdf> [Accessed 20 February 2025]
[618] Tindal acknowledges that a small group of protestors began to mobilize following the mistrial, but the protest ended almost as soon as it began. Brenda Tindal, 'K(NO)W Justice K(NO)W Peace: The Making of a Rapid-Response Community Exhibit', *The Public Historian*, 40 (2018), pp. 87-96 (p. 90) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/73748>
[619] Ibid.

Scott's shooting also occurred in close physical proximity to the University. Scott died in the College Downs apartment complex parking lot,[620] two miles from campus. Charlotte students participated in protests and demonstrations over the next seven days, which culminated in the use of tear gas and riot gear in uptown Charlotte, with one Black protestor killed and sixteen police officers injured.[621] Photographs, audio recordings, and oral histories collected by the University[622] and for this project depict student activists eager to join a movement against police violence in the Black community and what they saw as a widespread, systematic problem. In the days after Scott's death, students protested, marched, and took advantage of the opportunity to discuss what was happening in their community. In a one-year reflective piece, the *Niner Times'* Alexandria Sands summarized campus in the days after the Scott shooting, writing,

> Some students united. Others, divided. Whites held signs reading "I stand with the Black community." Blacks held signs reading "don't shoot." A march took over the streets of UNC Charlotte. Craver and Mary Alexander roads shut down, disrupting the flow of campus.[623]

Historian Noe Pilego Campos was a master's student in Latin American Studies at UNCC in 2016. His Latino heritage and his academic study of student activists in 1968 Mexico were major sources of his journey toward political activism in Charlotte.[624] Pilego Campos remembered joining other activists on Old Concord Road hours after the Scott shooting, remembering a mix of community members, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACPP) activists, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) officers gathered at the scene. He recalled, 'I just remember the sense of, what I would argue is righteous anger, at not only that direct incident of racism', but also over the stereotyping of Black men as 'scary and dangerous'.[625] When he learned of the planned march in uptown

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[620] Erik Ortiz, 'Keith Lamont Scott, Fatally Shot by N.C. Cops, Warned Repeatedly to Drop Gun', *NBC News*, 21 September 2016 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/keith-lamont-scott-fatally-shot-n-c-cops-warned-repeatedly-n651846> [Accessed 4 February 2025]
[621] Camila Domonoske, 'Photos: Pain, Anger and Violence Fill Streets of Charlotte, N.C.', *National Public Radio*, 22 September 2016 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/09/22/495000329/photos-pain-anger-and-violence-fill-streets-of-charlotte-n-c> [Accessed 5 February 2025]
[622] Protest of Keith Lamont Scott Shooting photographs and videos, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, MS0586
[623] I participated in the campus march in 2016, a non-violent protest walk which closed two major roads on UNCC's campus. Alexandria Sands, 'Reflecting on the Shooting of Keith Lamont Scott', *Niner Times*, 25 September 2017 <https://www.ninertimes.com/news/reflecting-on-the-shooting-of-keith-lamont-scott/article_6414804f-6cb2-50b8-909f-62ac353768f5.html> [Accessed 10 February 2025]
[624] Noe Pilego Campos, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 18 March 2024, 00:13:51.
[625] Ibid., 00:25:57.

Charlotte the next day, Pilego Campos knew he wanted to be part of it. He recalled, 'Everything I had read about as a historian was at play. And so it was really transformative for me on a personal level'.[626] Pilego Campos attended the protests in uptown the following night, distinctly remembering protestors chanting 'hands up, don't shoot'[627] and only leaving after CMPD police shot him with rubber pellets and exposed him to tear gas.[628] After completing his PhD and becoming a professor of history, activism took on a different form for Pilego Campos. He explained,

> I haven't been out in the streets as much. I still believe in these ideas. And I think […] if you're someone who cares about these ideas, you do your best to not get in the way of people actually doing them.[629]

Instead, he and his wife advocate in other ways, making monetary donations to organizations working to cover bail costs for activists and working within their own community to aid immigrants.[630]

Victoria Clark was a senior psychology major at UNCC at the time of Scott's death. Interviewed for the Black Alumni Oral History Collection, Clark was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha and was involved with the student activities board. She remembered Scott's death as an event that brought Black students and Black student organizations together.[631] Student organizations, JM Mentoring & Associates, and the Black Student Union held protests on 21 September 2016. Speakers congregated on the steps of the Student Union, speaking of the right

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[626] Ibid., 00:28:25.

[627] 'Hands up, don't shoot' first emerged in the aftermath of the 2014 officer involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The position of Brown's arms at the time of the shooting became a pivotal piece of evidence in the grand jury trial of Officer Darren Wilson's indictment. Activists adopted the phrase, symbolizing a Black man, his arms raised in surrender, as a protest chant and symbol. The phrase became 'shorthand for police mistreatment of minorities […] It has evolved into a national movement with demands centered on changing what some see as systemic problems in law enforcement that lead to mistreatment of minorities'. Emanuella Grinberg, 'Why "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" Resonates Regardless of Evidence', *CNN,* 11 January 2015 <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/10/us/ferguson-evidence-hands-up/index.html> [Accessed 19 February 2025]

[628] Pilego Campos, oral history interview, 00:30:27.

[629] Ibid., 00:14:57.

[630] Since the 2024 election of Donald Trump, Noe Pilego Campos has continued to find ways to contribute to political activism through community outlets. He and his wife work with La Conexión, a subcommittee of Humans United for Equality. They are also trying to respond to Trump's anti-immigrant and larger anti-democratic projects. In March 2025, the pair organized a food bank to provide culturally relevant food to immigrant neighbors in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Pilego Campos noted, 'while I am doing my best to continue that work with La Conexión and teaching topics and skills I find critical for life and democracy, I wish I could do more'. Noe Pilego Campos, email correspondence, 26 March 2025, email in author's possession.

[631] Victoria Clark, oral history interview, 2021 February 15, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 00:37:34. <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/record/26550?ln=en&v=vid> [Accessed 10 February 2025]

to peaceful protest and describing anti-protest tactics used by CMPD. The group continued into the Student Union for a 'Die In', where students lay silently on the ground in protest of police brutality.[632] Clark acknowledged the event was a testament to strong leadership in UNCC's Black student organizations and that similar protests would not have been allowed at other universities.[633]

Dubois recognized the impact both the economic mobility study and the Scott shooting had on the University in his memoir. In 2017, The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force Report noted that in the wake of the study, the killing of Scott 'focused [the city's] collective attention on the stark racial, ethnic and economic divides that exist in [the Charlotte] community but are rarely openly discussed,' and its effects also reached UNCC.[634] Dubois acknowledged a direct connection between Scott's death and drastic changes to the University's campus diversity efforts. He recognized, 'Although the University had nothing to do with the Scott shooting, campus protests in the days that followed renewed expressions of concern about the adequacy of the University's diversity initiative'.[635] Dubois credited the peaceful nature of the campus protests to student leadership and to the Dean and Associate Dean of Students, who established a resource to guide student protests in peaceful demonstrations that would not 'disrupt normal University operations or violate applicable University policies'.[636]

There were also personal connections with activism amongst former UNCC students. Campos and Clark were moved to activism partly because of their involvement in Charlotte student organizations and awareness of social issues in their communities.[637] Maya Wells acknowledged her Iranian-American heritage and her mother's battle with cancer as factors influencing her desire to become a community activist. She joined Amnesty International and March for Our Lives at Charlotte in 2019, holding a state-level position in the former organization upon graduation.[638] Margaret Murphy, who was also involved in MFOL at

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[632] Nick Cooper, 'Students Gather at Student Union in wake of Protests, Riots', The Niner Times (2016) <https://www.ninertimes.com/news/students-gather-at-student-union-in-wake-of-protests-riots/article_48563828-cf76-5170-8093-b2a0aadc5d8d.html> [Accessed 20 February 2024].
[633] Clark, oral history interview, 00:37:34.
[634] 'Leading on Opportunity: The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force Report', Foundation for the Carolinas (2017), p. 9 <https://www.fftc.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/LeadingOnOpportunity_Report.pdf> [Accessed 10 March 2025]
[635] Dubois, *Details Matter,* p. 297.
[636] Ibid., p. 308.
[637] Ibid.; Campos, oral history interview, 00:13:51.
[638] Wells, oral history interview, 2023, 00:11:37.

Charlotte, went on to work as a state director and national organizer for the organization. As of 2022, she had continued her activism by attending protests and speaking to congressional representatives about gun violence prevention in Washington, D.C.[639]

The connection between these narrator's ages and their stance on activism is relevant. Criminologist Jennifer Cobbina wrote extensively about protest movements in Ferguson and Baltimore after the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray. She drew conclusions about protestors in those movements, finding that young adults without full-time employment or family responsibilities were most likely to participate in protests. Their reasoning included grievances, such as experiencing inequality, having been a victim of injustice, or 'a sense of moral indignation about some state of affairs', efficacy, or the expectation that protest might lead to change and collective identity. [640]

Bearing this in mind, Charlotte students, the majority of which were Gen Z, were poised to protest against school shootings, but few did. The nascent MFOL chapter, formed only a month before the shooting, organized a rally days after 30 April, with speakers ranging from elected officials, Charlotte professors, and a student from the Kennedy classroom. Murphy remembered, 'even though it was a very scary and traumatic time, […] it felt like you were doing something, especially in a moment when you felt so helpless'.[641] However, the city of Charlotte hosted only two rallies against gun violence after the shooting tragedy, and by the next semester, few students seemed impacted.

Murphy remembered the MFOL rally as a positive experience, noting it was 'some of the best organizing' she had accomplished in her time as an activist. While around 200-300 people attended, she noted, 'I'm happy we did the rally, but I don't know if it's going to change UNC Charlotte history'.[642] Murphy also reflected on the campus community itself and the timing of the incident. She recalled, 'Charlotte doesn't have a sense of community that I feel like a lot of colleges sometimes have […] I don't think there's ever been a community reckoning of what did happen'. She stated, even as a commuter campus, universities can 'still have a campus culture […] a campus conversation […]. So it was sort of like as soon as it happened, everybody went

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[639] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:02:41.
[640] Jennifer E. Cobbina, *Hands Up, Don't Shoot: Why the Protests in Ferguson and Baltimore Matter, and How They Changed America* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), p.73-74 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12fw64b.15>
[641] Murphy, oral history interview, 2020, 00:18:48.
[642] Ibid., 00:27:00.

home and we never talked about it and we never had to live with the reality of having been a campus shot up'.[643] While most students had left the University for the summer, Murphy also conceded that a rally against gun violence may not be how everyone heals. However, upon their return to campus for the fall 2019 semester, Murphy and Pescaro both noticed that students and the University itself failed to discuss or publicly acknowledge the tragedy.[644]

Murphy recognized that part of understanding gun violence in America was also understanding the intersectionality between gun violence and socio-economic issues facing American communities.[645] Issues such as healthcare, affordable housing, job opportunities, and mental health resources all affect rates of gun violence. And the city of Charlotte is plagued with gun violence.[646] For Murphy, the disconnect between the city of Charlotte and the University itself allowed students to distance themselves from gun violence and the factors leading to it. She lamented the fact that UNCC did not use the 2019 shooting to connect itself to the city of Charlotte and to sympathize with minority neighborhoods experiencing systematic gun violence.[647]

Instead, Chancellor Dubois chose to reevaluate campus diversity objectives, partly as a response to a petition organized by a faculty member demanding Dubois hire a chief diversity officer.[648] Procuring 256 signatures, the petition called on the Chancellor to 'advance the goals of the University Diversity Plan and improve the UNCC response to incidents of violence, intolerance, and trauma that currently pervade our larger community'. The petition was a clear statement from faculty that the University had distanced itself from the Scott shooting and key issues affecting the city of Charlotte.[649] In September, 2021, the University hired its first Associate Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer, Brandon L. Wolfe. Wolfe described his position as working to 'create and nourish an inclusive campus

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[643] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:35:56.
[644] Murphy, oral history interview, 2020, 00:27:47.
[645] Scott R. Kegler, and others, *Vital Signs:* Changes in Firearm Homicide and Suicide Rates- United States, 2019-2020, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 71 (2022), pp. 656-663, doi:10.15585/mmwr.mm7119e1
[646] In 2020, homicide rates in Charlotte, North Carolina were up eighteen percent from 2019. CMPD End of Year Report (2020) <https://www.charlottenc.gov/files/assets/police/v/1/documents/reports/cmpd_eoy_2020.pdf> [Accessed 22 March 2025]
[647] Murphy, oral history interview, 2020, 00:29:55.
[648] Dubois, *Details Matter,* p. 297.
[649] Jan Warren-Findlow, 'Hire a Chief Diversity Officer for UNC Charlotte', Change.org <https://www.change.org/p/chancellor-phil-dubois-hire-a-chief-diversity-officer-for-unc-charlotte> [Accessed 30 March 2025]

environment where students feel welcome, protected, valued, and [are] given the tools and opportunities necessary to thrive'.[650]

While many narrators discussed a disconnect between the University and the larger city of Charlotte, the Keith Lamont Scott shooting and the subsequent 30 April campus shooting affected both the University, the larger community, and UNCC students. Pilego Campos and Clark participated in peaceful protests and marches on campus after the Scott shooting. Professor Jan Warren-Findlow started a petition to hire a diversity and inclusivity officer to connect the University to issues facing the larger community of Charlotte. Three years after Scott, Cade Lee established the Charlotte MFOL chapter and he, Murphy, and Wells led the MFOL rally on 3 May, bringing together student speakers and elected officials from the City of Charlotte, including House Representative Alma Adams. While momentum for these movements waned in the weeks after, their successes united students, the University community, and the broader city at a time when unity was desperately needed.

4.6: Sensory Memory

For his chapter on memory and remembering in oral history, Alistair Thomson addressed an important aspect of memory research: sensory memories in long and short term memory. Thomson summarized, 'physical, sensory elements of the original experience have lingered in memory, […] and sensory cues now elicit that associated memory'.[651] Thomson also reiterated that oral historians need to understand that the significance of certain experiences prompts their consolidation into long-term memories.[652] Many of the narrators for this project shared visceral memories that include sensory and flashbulb moments connected to the 30 April shooting, the threat of school shootings, or their own experiences with activism. Even for survivors far away from Kennedy on 30 April, these recollections are no less intense and significant.

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[650] Kathryn Caudill, 'UNC Charlotte Welcomes New Chief Diversity Officer Brandon L. Wolfe', *Niner Times* <https://www.ninertimes.com/news/unc-charlotte-welcomes-new-chief-diversity-officer-brandon-wolfe/article_d9637cc2-5095-11ec-992b-b33fde910f25.html> [Accessed 30 March 2025]
[651] Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. by Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 77-95 (p. 83), doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195339550.013.0006
[652] Ibid., 84.

In his introduction to the third edition of *The Oral History Reader*, oral historian Robert Perks acknowledged that an interest in sensory memory was 'an intriguing new development' for oral historians. He cited Abram's suggestion that 'sensory experience and memory of place' might be 'the next big interpretive shift' for the discipline'.[653] Asking questions designed to evoke sensory memory in a life history interview can reward us with detailed, descriptive narratives. However, conducting interviews on themes of crisis can also elicit vivid sensory memories, which, in turn, give us intimate access to our narrators and their experiences.

In her interviews with gun violence survivors, oral historian Holly Werner-Thomas wanted to study sensory memory, noting 'I knew that I wanted to explore the relationship between people and their environments, and how that relationship in turn shapes identity'.[654] Werner-Thomas argued that using a sensory memory approach with interviewees 'empowers our narrators by giving them the space to tell us what is important to them, a meaningful act of co-creation'.[655] Many of the narrators for this project recounted sensory experiences without prompting. For them, these recollections were important factors in understanding their reactions to events and how said events informed their identities. Werner-Thomas recounted, 'Focusing on perception within the space of the interview provides a means to collect the kind of descriptive detail that both enlivens our senses and pulls us into someone's life history'.[656] Likewise, they also illuminate some of the clearest memories during times of trauma.

Three years before the 30 April shooting, Noe Pilego Campos was using his voice to protest police brutality, specifically their use of gun violence against black citizens. He left the uptown protest for Keith Lamont Scott after being attacked by CMPD rubber bullets and tear gas. Despite describing the sound of police shooting rubber balls, or the difficulty breathing after the use of tear gas,[657] these violent police actions were not the most visceral memories he recounted in his interview. Leaving the Scott protest in uptown Charlotte on 21 September 2016, Pilego Campos recalled a scene that impacted him, and which he remembered vividly. He recalled,

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[653] Robert Perks, 'Critical Developments: Introduction' in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd Edition, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 2016), pp. 23-41 (p. 33), doi:10.4324/9781315671833
[654] Holly Werner-Thomas, 'Sensory Roadmaps: How to Capture Sensory Detail in an Interview and Why Doing So Has Exciting Implications for Oral History', *The Oral History Review*, 49 (2022), pp. 97-115 (p. 101), doi:10.1080/00940798.2022.2049586
[655] Ibid., p. 102.
[656] Ibid.
[657] Pilego Campos, oral history interview, 00:31:11

> One of the things that really upset me about that night, as I was leaving there was people at one of those super fancy bars in uptown Charlotte, looking at coverage of what was happening on their TV screen, while all of this was happening literally a block or two away from them.[658]

He felt this scene portrayed the disconnect in the city of Charlotte, where uptown was a seat of American capitalism with prominent banks and businesses, yet a fifteen minute drive led to some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the city. He remembered,

> That's one thing I'll never forget. Just this feeling of impotence as I'm walking. Of like, you fuckers. You're literally sipping your super expensive alcohol, watching it on TV as this is unfolding two blocks away from you. This is something you'd read in a dystopian novel […] the elite, partying, while people are rebelling. But it literally happened.[659]

Noe Pilego Campos' reaction in retelling this story was palpable. He was angry. To him, these people represented the severe inequality of Charlotte. Despite being just hours away from a city-wide curfew, with the Governor dispatching the National Guard,[660] the patrons in this bar felt untouchable, so unaffected that they could be on the outside looking in, just a street away. Pilego Campos was prepared for the protests and for the reaction of police in riot gear, but it was this scene, just blocks from the protest, that he will never forget.

During the University-wide lockdown on 30 April, Stacy Rue and colleagues were locked in the lower level of Atkins Library for hours. While she considered herself and her colleagues safe as they were in a staff-only access area, her experience being escorted out of the building with her hands up, and what met her on the main floor of the library, was one of the most poignant of that night. She remembered,

> One of the things that probably has had the biggest emotional effect on me was […] [walking] up to the first floor so we can walk out of the front building. […] We come to the first floor, and you see the atrium and you see, […] I guess it is kind of like what you see in a horror movie where everyone disappears, where everything's been abandoned. I mean there weren't like chairs knocked over or anything, but you see everything students had been working on. You see laptops and cell phones and purses and backpacks. And I mean, this one thing that's kind of like, I don't want to say it haunted me, but it's one of the tables, there was an open container of Panda Express. And clearly the person had been in the middle of eating it because the Styrofoam thing was open. It was a big thing of fried rice or something. And just to see how people left everything behind. […] It's a

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[658] Ibid., 00:32:05.
[659] Ibid.
[660] Kelly Doty and Jerrika Insco, 'National Guard Provides Reinforcement for Local Law Enforcement in Charlotte', ABC News, 23 September 2016 <https://abc3340.com/news/nation-world/national-guard-provides-reinforcements-for-local-law-enforcement-in-charlotte?photo=1> [Accessed 1 April 2025]

> natural human reaction to clutch your belongings, even in the face of an immediate life threatening tragedy. And so to see how everything was abandoned in the atrium, that just shows the sheer sense of terror that these kids went through. That totally overrode that sense of I must gather my belongings. It was just like, drop everything and run. […] I think my greatest professional failure or regret will be not stopping the cop behind me and asking, can I photograph this scene? Because this scene lives in my head. And it's something that people looking back at this in twenty years, that scene would just be able to communicate so much to future generations. As an archivist, […] it's my biggest regret that I did not ask if I could take that photograph. […] I had a responsibility to document that and I didn't. I was so caught up doing exactly what the police tell us to do when they tell us to do it that I didn't stop and say, 'Please let us document this for the University's history and for future generations'.[661]

Rue grew up in Charlotte and was a UNCC alumnus, working as a Digital Production Assistant in Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives at the time of the shooting. Rue was also the social media content developer and used the platform to connect followers to UNCC history.[662] Having studied at UNCC and worked for the University for ten years at the time of the interview,[663] her reaction to seeing the library's large atrium abandoned would be shocking. Other narrators spoke of the library space feeling violated by police, with doors kicked in and the front glass door shattered. To Rue, this was a similarly wrong condition for the library, void of students but still possessing all their belongings as they ran for their lives.

Margaret Murphy remembered having a certain level of detachment from active shooter drills throughout elementary school. When asked to reflect on her experience with drills in the education setting, Murphy remembered one distinct experience that continues to affect her today. She recounted,

> When I think of active shooter drills, I think of this one specific one that happened to me in fifth grade. I was able to have a level of detachment to what was going on when the shooting drills would happen. I feel like they got progressively more scary […] Around elementary school I think is when it most affected me. But it was specifically the fifth grade one that I remember. And so I remember I brought my textbook under the desk and I was doing my work while it was happening. And I remember the jiggle of the knob on the door because what would happen is, they would go to make sure everything was locked. Still, that sound haunts my nightmares. Even though I know it was a drill […] that sound scared me so bad as a kid. And even though I didn't understand […] really what shootings were, that essence of it being fully a thing that could happen to me. It wasn't until I got older I would tell my dad, 'You know, it's not an if, it's a when'. And then he thought I was dramatic until my school got shot up. […] They were terrifying and

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[661] Stacy Rue, oral history interview by Casey Bumgarner Moore, 21 August 2023, 00:18:33.
[662] Ibid., 00:40:17.
[663] Ibid., 00:02:09.

> in some ways, I think of that one when somebody asks me this question. Because I remember the sound and I remember my teacher and I remember us being small and I remember the class really, really clearly. And I remember the lights all being off. And I have a hard time saying it's traumatic because it feels very small and minuscule. But I can imagine it's probably in the definition of trauma of how scary it is because, one, being told, 'Oh hey, somebody might come into your—' it was always presented to us as like, 'Oh, someone in the community did gun violence and so that's why we're locking down'. Never is it like, 'Oh, someone's coming into your classroom'. And I think that was the first moment where I was realizing, oh my God, they would come in to my room, they wouldn't just be like, strolling the halls. And so, yeah, I think that's probably when it clicked for me. I would say they're very traumatizing.[664]

Murphy's vivid recall of her classroom, teacher, other students, and what she was doing when she heard the door jiggle make this memory incredibly visceral and clear. Psychology scholar Christopher R. Madan commented on the nuanced nature of emotional memory but noted that the academic understanding of emotion and memory is predicated on the fact that emotional experiences are better remembered than those lacking emotion.[665] In *Oral History Theory*, Abrams suggested that one aspect of the oral historian's work is to facilitate remembering.[666] Abrams argued,

> The quality, vividness and depth of an individual's memory of a specific event or experience will be dependent upon the encoding that happened at the time and the circumstances in which the remembering is taking place. It seems that people remember what is important to them.[667]

Murphy was only ten or eleven years old when she encoded this recollection, yet it was obviously important to her. Her recognition of, and fear of, learning how a school shooting might affect her was traumatic for her as a child. This was a pivotal moment within her identity as a gun violence activist, a moment she points to when asked about active shooter training and lockdowns during her childhood. As Abrams noted, 'memory is key to our identity; without our memory we have no social existence'.[668] This memory for Murphy is one she continuously returns to, describing how grateful she is that her current apartment does not have door knobs that make the sound she heard at ten, hiding under her desk.

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[664] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:41:08.
[665] Christopher R. Maden, *Memories That Matter: How We Remember Important Things* (Routledge, 2024), p. 157, doi:10.4324/9780429032028
[666] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 82.
[667] Ibid., 86.
[668] Ibid., 82.

4.7: Discussion

With so few communities having documented mass shootings with oral history projects, the future utility of these repositories remains unclear. The captured narratives, however, provide an unprecedented insight into America's gun violence epidemic and the generation most alienated by it—Gen Z students and American teachers. The April 30th Tragedy Memorial Collection contains evidence of a school in mourning, who vow never to forget Reed and Riley, who recite the rhetoric of the University's chosen mantra, 'We are Niners'. The collective memories archived in the NNROHP reflect deep emotions and evocative stories of living through a mass shooting and its effect on personal lives.

While chapter three examined UNCC in the aftermath of the tragedy and its recovery, this chapter delved deeper into the collective memory of students from the 'lockdown generation' or Gen Z, finding that in some ways, narrators redefined their lives after surviving a mass shooting event. While tragedy often links community in ways other events do not, the years between Keith Lamont Scott's death in 2016 and 30 April 2019 saw the city of Charlotte and the University struggle with gun violence and activists protesting for gun legislation reform. Gen Z narrators turning to activism also aligned with Della Volpe's findings, arguing that the adversity faced by Gen Z, including threats of mass shooting, were motivating America's youth activism.[669] Gen Z narrators also expressed apprehension over being involved in a mass shooting, which supported the APA's findings in 2018 and 2019.[670]

These fears, coupled with adversities like socio-economic pressures, climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement, and contentious politics, drove Gen Z students to activism, transforming many of their lives and identities in the process. In the wake of the Scott shooting, students in the Black Student Union turned to protest on campus, which included a march, student and faculty speakers, and a 'Die In'.[671] After the UNCC shooting, MFOL members organized a rally equipped with speakers to protest the epidemic of gun violence. Multiple student narrators used their experience with collegiate activism groups to continue that work

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[669] Della Volpe, *FIGHT,* p. 12.
[670] Stress in America™ : Generation Z', *American Psychological Association* (2018); 'One-Third of US Adults Say Fear of Mass Shootings Prevents Them from Going to Certain Places or Events', *American Psychological Association*, 15 August 2019.
[671] Clark, oral history interview, 00:37:34.

after graduation for non-profits like MFOL and Amnesty International.[672] Others used their experiences to fight for the normalization of mental health[673], accepted positions working with students in higher education[674], or entered into master's programs to continue to educate themselves in social science or health related work.[675]

The threat of gun violence has entered into American students' cultural life scripts, with school shootings becoming an inevitable reality. Lockdown drills and school shootings impact transitional events in school-age years through graduation. When viewed through an American cultural lens, with the political and social anxieties which have only amplified in the twenty-first century, it is clear that this 'cascade of collective traumas' is impacting American students.[676] The total impact of school shootings remains to be seen, however, Della Volpe argues that the threat of shootings positively correlates with Gen Z's fervent political activism.[677]

Without archivists and community groups formally documenting stories like the narratives collected in the NNROHP, these shootings become geo-located statistics. We remember the place, the date, and the number killed; statistics that lack any human element. We certainly never think about a box of Panda Express fried rice, half-eaten in an abandoned library atrium, or the terror a jiggling locked door might incite for a ten-year-old child. In *The Silence of the Archive,* archivist Simon Fowler critiqued the utility of archives, acknowledging, 'Our view of the past is subtly skewed by the existence, or more often the lack, of archival material'.[678] As archivists, do we hold a responsibility to document the voices of mass shooting survivors from our own communities? Just as we collected narratives from the Covid-19 pandemic, a moment in history we knew needed to be recorded for the collective, this thesis argues mass shooting repositories have value in their potential for understanding collective memory and the American gun violence epidemic in general. Critiquing archival impact in terms of social justice, Duff and others argued,

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[672] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022; Wells, oral history interview, 2023.
[673] Pescaro, oral history interview, 00:46:33
[674] Crean, oral history interview, 00:39:49.
[675] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022; Angel, oral history interview, 2023.
[676] Zara Abrams, 'Stress of Mass Shootings Causing Cascade of Collective Traumas', *Monitor on Psychology*, 53 (2023) <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/09/news-mass-shootings-collective-traumas> [Accessed 2 February 2025]
[677] Della Volpe, *FIGHT,* p. 12.
[678] Simon Fowler, 'Inappropriate Expectations' in *The Silence of the Archive* by David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valier Johnson (London: Facet Publishing, 2017), p. 42.

> In addition to the *information* contained in the archival records, they also have value as *evidence* of actions. The evidential value of archival records give them greater power—as legal documents, as evidence in court, and as agents of accountability, Even if one person only accesses a record, it may have wide-reaching impact.[679]

As archivists, we must question what we collect for future scholars and recognize the value of the evidence of action in our repositories. We must also question how well we are capturing this terrifying moment of time in America, the only country with commonplace mass shootings. But also, importantly, we must question if we have the trauma-informed training[680] and workplace wellbeing guidelines in place to do this type of work safely.[681] Lastly, we must return to the question of a repository's utility and ask ourselves, to what extent might this collection be used to inspire change? How might this survivor's voice, this 'story of self', motivate a societal shift? To these questions, there are lessons to be learned from other archives with social justice missions. By examining the use of archives for political action and empowerment, we may begin to postulate the future utility of mass shooting oral history collections and the impact they might one day have on social change.

4.8: Conclusion

This chapter supports the argument that mass shooting-related oral history archives are instrumental for future research into affected communities. The narratives discussed are essential to understanding the community's collective memory and lived experience, arguing that many of those affected by the shooting are redefining their lives in the aftermath with emphasis on their

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[679] Duff, and others, 'Social Justice Impact of Archives', p. 332.

[680] Over the last five years, trauma-informed practices in archives have become a major discussion point amongst archivist stewarding records related to trauma. In 2021, Wright and Laurent proposed the use of a model for trauma-informed practice in the archive to encourage safe and empowering handling practices for both archivists and users. The same year, archivist Nicola Laurent and digital archivist Michaela Hart argued for the necessity of a 'global community of practice to support people enacting trauma-informed practice within the archival profession', to provide safety, empowerment, and an atmosphere that protects against vicarious trauma. Kristen Wright and Nicola Laurent, 'Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice', *Archivaria*, 91(2021), pp. 38-73; Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart, 'Building a Trauma-Informed Community of Practice', *Education for Information*, 37 (2021) pp. 27-32 (p. 27-28), doi:10.3233/EFI-190363

[681] Fleming-Cook, the main interviewer for the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, wrote about her personal struggles after each interview, developing a ritualistic debriefing with her husband to cope with the stress. Similar check-in sessions were used by myself and team working on the NNROHP, just as Clark and her team working interviewing around September 11th found weekly group meetings in the wake of interviews to be helpful ways to alleviate the stress of trauma interviewing. Kennelly and Fleming Cook, 'Exhuming the Self', p. 70; Clark, 'A Long Song', p. 255.

mental health and activism. Analyzing these narratives revealed a link between Gen Z student memory and the active shooter drills and mass shootings collectively experienced during their formative years, leading this chapter to argue that the threat of mass shootings are embedded in the cultural life scripts of Gen Z Americans. Many of the narrators in this chapter were also student activists, or turned to activism after the UNCC tragedy. Exploring the city of Charlotte's complicated history with policing Black lives, protest movements, and socio economic mobility also helped to establish the political and cultural context in which the UNCC shooting occurred and helped contextualize Gen Z activism in the city. Given the findings in this chapter, future scholars might expand upon the connection between Generation Z, mass shooting threats and activism in America, with specific emphasis on activism leading to public policy changes.

The collective memory of UNC Charlotte's mass shooting is well documented through the collected ephemera and oral history interviews captured in the last five years. Analyzing the NNROHP collection provided insight into the fourth research question, querying how narrators discussed living through a mass shooting event. These narratives not only demonstrate the value of what Mary Marshall Clark viewed as 'the collective experience of catastrophe in human terms' but also evidence their importance as archival collections for future researchers. [682]

[682] Clark, 'Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe', p. 256.

Chapter 5:

The Realization of Activist Archiving

5.1: Introduction

This chapter investigates the fifth and final research question, considering how mass shooting oral history collections might be used by future researchers, specifically within social justice movements. While the former chapters considered why interviews with survivors are under-represented in the archives sector, this section questions their utilization and potential significance as archival collections. Chapter five argues that expanding access to these collections and networking with activists may increase their usability in ways that positively impact social justice movements aimed at gun control. Lastly, this chapter argues that while there are no examples of activists using gun violence archives yet, examples from social justice archives and activist movements show that the voices of mass shooting narrators have the potential to aid in the fight to end gun violence in America. These findings are significant for activist archivists in their suggestion of ways archivists can connect with their broader communities to use archival collections for social good.

5.2: Questions of Access

Interviewing archivists and oral historians collecting and stewarding mass shooting condolence archives illuminated the rich material held within their collected narratives, however, questions of access continue to plague projects of this nature. Out of the few repositories holding mass shooting oral history collections, UNCC and Kent State University are the only archives offering unlimited availability to anyone with internet access.[683] Collections held in Orlando, Las Vegas, and Blacksburg continue to be viewable by appointment, in-person, and only in archival reading rooms. As mass shootings continue to happen in America and crisis oral history projects

[683] While Charlotte's tragedy is recent, the mass shooting at Kent State by the National Guard occurred in 1970 and many interviews with faculty, community members, and former students were collected decades after the occurrence. See: 'Kent State Shootings: Oral Histories', Kent State University Special Collections and Archives (2025) <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/kent-state-shootings-oral-histories> [Accessed 10 July 2025]

become more feasible, we can assume that the number of mass shooting related oral history collections will also continue to grow, but to what extent are they usable?

Archivists continue to question issues of privacy, accessibility, and even user experience when making crisis oral history projects available to the broader public. Within the landscape of postmodernism, an archivist's role is to document moments in history by determining which materials to collect for the use of future researchers. Archivist Randall C. Jimerson famously argued that archivists use their power of determining what to collect 'for the benefit of all members of society' noting that 'advocacy and activism can address social issues without abandoning professional standards of fairness, honesty, detachment, and transparency'.[684] Punzalan and Caswell argued that 'archival records figure in the preservation, extension, and promotion of social memory' and that an active area of archival literature has engaged with the idea that official narratives lack the perspective of communities. An archive's utility lies in the 'recovery of silenced voices as well as in sustaining counternarratives' which is promising for archives with social justice missions.[685]

Our profession, then, survives by granting access to the public, to all members of society, to connect communities with their own perspectives. Although, how archivists grant that access and how they allow researchers to use crisis oral history narratives are grey areas for many archives as they are the stewards, and some would argue gatekeepers, of potentially sensitive and traumatic material. American archives are less restricted in what they decide to collect and make accessible because there is no equivalent legislation to Europe's General Data Protection Regulation,[686] and, since 2019, no federally mandated oversight from Institutional Review Boards.[687] This means decisions surrounding project creation, access, and usability are often made at the institutional level, in accordance with donation policy and institutional guidelines.

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[684] Randall C. Jimerson, 'Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice', *The American Archivist*, 70 (2007), pp. 252-281 (p. 252) doi:10.17723/aarc.70.2.5n20760751v643m7

[685] Punzalan and Caswell, 'Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice', p. 29.

[686] The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation is 'the toughest privacy and security law in the world' which any organization must follow when collecting data related to people within the European Union. The legislation affects oral history archives by limiting the personal data collected about narrators. The Oral History Society defines personal data as 'anything that allows a living individual to be identified directly, or in combination with other information' meaning personal data might also include descriptions provided within oral history interviews. See: 'What is GDPR, the EU's New Data Protection Law?', GDPR.EU (2025) <https://gdpr.eu/tag/gdpr/> [Accessed 18 May 2025]; Rob Perks, 'Dealing with GDPR', The Oral History Society (2019) <https://www.ohs.org.uk/gdpr-2/> [Accessed 18 May 2025]

[687] Until 2019, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services required oral history projects at federally funded universities and research organizations be vetted through Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure

Given the limited access to mass shooting oral history archives, and how few exist in America, it is not surprising that there are few examples of their use. The collected narratives which are available with restricted access were only collected in the last few decades, meaning they represent modern events which researchers have not begun to analyze in great detail for their community perspective and collective memory. However, examples from other types of social justice archives provide a glimpse of the potential use for these collections and they include museum exhibitions and digital exhibits, community projects, and local events. Using examples from social justice archives, this chapter hypothesizes the future of mass shooting oral history collections and their potential for advocacy.

5.3: The Future of Archival Activism

Archival activism is a natural next step for postmodernist archival theory, which saw archivists become stewards of resources, managing collections for 'everyone in society and not imped[ing] the path for those seeking truth(s) in archival holdings'.[688] Along with scholarship promoting the decolonization of the archive,[689] the concept of the activist archivist is relatively new in the field of archival theory.[690] In the 2015 *Archival Science* issue devoted to the topic, Flinn and Alexander described how archival practice and activism move beyond advocacy, empowering archivists to document social justice movements and support activism around

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projects did not put participants at risk. Oral historians welcomed the change, finding the process required 'burdensome conditions that violated accepted principles and best practices of oral history in the name of addressing nonexistent risk'. It also often required interviews to be destroyed after a number of years, negating the purpose of archiving and preserving personal narratives. Louis M. Kyriakoudes, 'Oral History, The Protection of Human Subjects in Research and Institutional Review Board Oversight', Oral History Association (2020) <https://oralhistory.org/information-about-irbs/> [Accessed 30 May 2025]

[688] Laura Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practices*, 2nd edn. (Facet, 2017), p. 43-44.

[689] Archivist Laura Millar summarizes this push as a redressing of wrongs by moving away from elite, government narratives to emphasize 'non-traditional sources of information such as oral histories; aboriginal stories and community rituals; or questioning the right of scholars or archivists to participate in archival or historical work if those people are not themselves part of the community represented in the archives'. Ibid., p. 44.

[690] While community archives are historically notable for local, social activism, the vocal call for activism in the archive is widely attributed to Howard Zinn, a prominent civil rights activist and author. Hi address at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in 1970 challenged archival professionals to abandon neutrality for engagement. He argued that the archivist, 'perpetuate[s] the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business', rationalizing that 'the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role' would mark the 'humanizing of an inevitably political craft' as research and scholarship are inescapably political. Howard Zinn, 'Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest', *The Midwestern Archivist,* 2 (1977), pp. 14-26 (p. 20).

political, human rights, and social movements.[691] Flinn and Alexander also commented on the contested nature of activism-based projects, noting that while they may be defined as 'flawed and exclusive', it is their very existence that proves the potentiality of archives to utilize the past to engage in the present while influencing the future.[692]

These ideas, coupled with theories brought forth by Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor surrounding radical empathy and feminist approaches, including ethics of care in the archive, mark notable changes in the role of archivists. They are influencing archival approaches to collections of advocacy, activism, and social justice.[693] In their article summarizing the relationship between archives and social justice movements, archivists Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace recognized, 'that social justice impacts of archives can yield different results for different groups' be those positive or negative. However, the group argued, 'one of the most potent aspects of the content held by archives is their utility or potentiality for impacting social justice'.[694]

Many scholars point to the lessons that may be learned from community archives. While Caswell acknowledged that community-based archives have historically been deemed 'amateurish', limited in their value, and lacking professional standardization,[695] she agreed with Terry Cook that archivists need to recognize 'that community-based archiving is often a long-standing and well-established praxis from which we can learn much'.[696] While Caswell writes about community archives in post-conflict areas, with a specific focus on community documentation of human rights abuse, the key principles she identified from these archives, 'participation; shared stewardship; multiplicity; archival activism; and reflexivity', have value for redefining formal archival repositories and the collections they steward.[697]

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[691] Flinn and Alexander, 'Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft', p. 329.
[692] Ibid., p. 331.
[693] Caswell and Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics', pp. 23-43.
[694] Duff and others, 'Social Justice Impact of Archives', p. 320.
[695] Caswell, 'Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Human Rights Archives: Lessons from Community-Based Archives', p. 5-6.
[696] Terry Cook, 'Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community; Four Shifting Archival Paradigms', *Archival Science,* 13 (2013), pp. 95-120 (p. 115), doi:10.1007/s10502-012-9180-7
[697] Caswell, 'Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Human Rights Archives', p. 2.

There are many examples of archives utilizing their collections for activism or merging with community organizations to lend archival materials to aid social justice initiatives.[698] In 2013, librarians Sonya Yaco and Beatriz Betancourt Hardy surveyed 195 historians and archivists to assess the effect of activism on their professional careers.[699] Their findings illustrated the benefits of these professions engaging in activism work for their employers, with results such as good publicity for employers, advancing the organization's mission, and forming new, positive connections.[700] In 2018, Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci interviewed seventeen community archive founders, volunteers, and staff to determine the role of community archives and archivists in social justice activism. They found that the community archive affiliation enables these archives 'to practice in politically engaged ways', finding many of the archives surveyed included social justice activism in their organizational missions.[701] The participants revealed, 'community-based archivists are putting history to work by using their archives and collections to "ignite action and practice" in a range of contemporary struggles for social change and justice'.[702] These included traveling poster exhibits on themes such as 'anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, anti-imperialism' at the Center for Political Graphics (CSPG), utilizing local archives, such as those held at the Little Tokyo Historical Society, as evidence to combat gentrification and build community, and simply deploying collected records 'through public programming to inform, prove points, and open perspectives'.[703]

While community archives admit their smaller statures and local connections enable their activism, how might archivists in university roles benefit from these examples of utilizing records for social justice causes? Archivist Alexandrina Buchanan and environmental humanities scholar Michelle Bastian engaged in a collaborative research project from 2012 to 2013 on both the history and future of Liverpool's local food systems. Working with academics, arts and

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[698] See: Joanne Evans, Sue McKemmish, Elizabeth Daniels and Gavan McCarthy, 'Self-determination and Archival Autonomy: Advocating Activism', *Archival Science*, 15 (2015), pp. 337-368, doi:10.1007/s10502-015-9244-6; Duff and others, 'Social Justice Impact of Archives', pp. 317-348.
[699] The historians, educators, and archivists participating self-identified as 'someone who takes part in activities that are intended to achieve social or political change, especially someone who is a member of an organization'. Sonya Yaco and Beatriz Betancourt Hardy, 'Historians, Archivists, and Social Activism: Benefits and Costs', *Archival Science*, 13 (2013), pp. 253-272 (p. 253), doi:10.1007/s10502-012-9187-0
[700] Ibid., p. 261.
[701] Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni and Noah Geraci 'What We Do Crosses over to Activism', *The Public Historian*, 40 (2018), pp. 69-95 (p. 85), doi:10.2307/26504393
[702] Ibid., p. 86.
[703] Ibid., p. 86-89.

heritage professionals, and community organizations, the project sought to 'bring together community-based heritage research with sustainability activism', with one observable outcome being that the traditional archives utilized for the project, i.e. archival documents, historical maps, and oral histories, 'can be effective resources for activist projects'.[704] While most of these examples focus on the use of physical archival records in advocacy work, what lessons might they hold for narratives? How might we incorporate oral history collections into endeavors of activism?

5.4: Activism and Oral History

Oral history literature is rife with illusions to the transformative power of oral narratives. While it was first lauded as a methodology that provided a voice to the traditionally overlooked or silenced, such as the working class and women, its role in activism has adapted. Lynn Abrams suggested that oral history has 'retained its role as a tool of advocacy for groups marginalised or excluded from formal channels of power,' placing it on the periphery of politics.[705] This movement away from the empowerment of oral history narrators, or giving voice, and toward advocacy, or using collected narratives to advocate for a specific group, is described by Abrams as the third wave of the power and empowerment of oral history.[706] Abrams clarifies this type of advocacy oral history has expanded to a variety of settings, such as health care and infrastructure development contexts, which often look to help specified communities and possibly empower participants to transform their lives.[707]

In 2018, oral historians Sarah K. Loose and Amy Starecheski recognized that while the oral history interview in itself is political, with 'complex power dynamics and rich with liberatory and oppressive potential,' there is a lack of academic literature surrounding 'the intentional use of oral history to make change in the world in the context of social movements,

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[704] Alexandrina Buchanan and Michelle Bastian, 'Activating the Archive: Rethinking the Role of Traditional Archives for Local Activist Projects', *Archival Science*, 15 (2015), pp. 429-451 (p. 431, 430) doi:10.1007/s10502-015-9247-3
[705] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 153-154.
[706] Ibid., p. 169.
[707] Ibid.

activism, and advocacy'.[708] A number of factors can impede its utilization for social change. The pair admit that while many organizing causes have time-sensitive natures, oral history has 'a more measured pace and long term vision'.[709] Deciding how to adapt a one-on-one private encounter for 'broader collective impact' can be daunting. The generative process of oral history produces powerful narratives, however, 'translating story into action requires more than oral history alone.'[710] Lastly, Loose and Starecheski remark on the uniqueness of each interview, stating that oral history is not quantifiable as 'data' and also not easily generalized.[711] These factors make it difficult to find ways to employ an oral history narrative in campaigns for social justice reform.

Loose was the founder and co-coordinator of Groundswell, a group formed to unite activist oral historians with a common goal of social transformation. Founded in 2011 and in operation until 2019, Groundswell was a network of oral historians, activists, cultural workers, community organizers, and documentary artists, seeking to utilize 'oral history and narrative in creative, effective and ethical ways to support movement building and transformative social change'.[712] Their work centered on activism, with Loose advancing the question, 'How is oral history different when led by people directly affected by oppression who are trying to use oral history to change their lives?'.[713]

Loose and Starecheski argued that oral history's narrative form lends itself to activism as stories are often used for their power of persuasion. Activists and social justice advocates recognize this advantage and its power to, 'shape opinions, impart lessons, and mobilize', however, they argue this utilization has not received much attention from academics.[714] Margaret Murphy attested to the power of narrative for the MFOL movement, noting the organization trained its members on forming their 'story of self'. Murphy recalled, 'the ability for people to relate to you is often the way that they'll decided if they're going to listen to you or not'.[715]

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[708] Sarah K. Loose and Amy Starecheski, 'Oral history for building social movements, then and now', in *Beyond Women's Words: Feminism and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta (Routledge, 2018), pp. 236-243 (p. 236) doi:10.4324/9781351123822
[709] Ibid., p. 236.
[710] Ibid., p. 237.
[711] Ibid., p. 236-237.
[712] 'Home', Groundswell: Oral History for Social Change (2014) <https://michael-falco-y5p8.squarespace.com/> [Accessed 19 May 2025].
[713] Loose and Starecheski, 'Oral History for Building Social Movements', p. 236.
[714] Ibid., p. 237.
[715] Murphy, oral history interview, 2022, 00:07:20.

Loose and Starecheski point to similar examples with the Texas After Violence project (TAVP),[716] NYC's Trans Oral History Project,[717] and Anti-Eviction Mapping Project's Narratives of Displacement and Resistance.[718] These contemporary projects contribute complex narratives to social justice initiatives, adding 'texture and nuance to related social movement-oriented research and organizing efforts'.[719]

In 1999, historian Daniel Kerr began the Clevland Homeless Oral History Project by recording interviews with the unhoused in a public square of Cleveland, videotaping each interview, which he began showing in shelters at the urging of unhoused spectators. He noted their disillusionment with government claims to aid the homeless crisis without including the involvement of those affected.[720] Ultimately, he reflected on issues of agency, citing sociologist Talmadge Wright's argument that, 'recognizing the agency of the homeless is absolutely necessary if we are ever going to see any substantive social change'.[721] Kerr's mode of advocacy included broadcasting his interviews over radio and hosting collaborative workshops in shelters,

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[716] The Texas After Violence General Collection is the first group of oral history interviews collected for the TAVP nonprofit. According to After Violence Project, 'The purpose of the collection is to capture and document the impact that the death penalty has had on individuals, families, and communities, and to facilitate dialogue surrounding capital punishment and its resulting trauma'. The University of Texas at Austin's Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI), partnered with the TAVP in 2009, describing its mission as one which sought to 'build a digital archive that serves as a resource for community dialogue and public policy to promote alternative, nonviolent ways to prevent and respond to violence'. See: 'Archive Collections: After Violence General Collection', After Violence Project (2025) <https://afterviolenceproject.org/documentation-archives/> [Accessed 12 June 2025]; 'Texas After Violence Project', The University of Texas at Austin <https://hrdi.lib.utexas.edu/hrdi/tavp/> [Accessed 5 May 2025]

[717] The NYC Trans Oral History Project collaborates with the New York Public Library to steward and preserve a collection of trans histories. All interviews are accessible online and the group accepts volunteer interviews and narrators, providing an online handbook for training purposes. The decade old volunteer organization describe their mission as working to 'confront the erasure of trans lives and recorded diverse histories of gender as intersecting with race and racism, poverty, dis/ability, aging, housing migration, sexism, and the AIDS crisis'. Their handbook deems the project to be 'Inspired by public history initiatives,' noting they 'believe oral history is a powerful tool for community organizing and anti-oppression work'. 'About', nyctransoralhistory.org (2025) <https://nyctransoralhistory.org/about/> [Accessed 12 June 2025]; NYC Trans Oral History Project, 'New York City Trans Oral History Project Oral History Handbook', nyctransoralhistory.org (2025), pp. 1-22 (p. 1) <https://nyctransoralhistory.org/content/uploads/2021/09/NYCTOH_Handbook.pdf/> [Accessed 12 June 2025]

[718] The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is a volunteer-led initiative across several US cities producing digital resources to combat housing inequality. The group deems their resources 'tools for resistance' and notes 'the project creates tools and disseminates data contributing to collective resistance and movement building'. 'About', Anti-Eviction Mapping Project <https://antievictionmap.com/about-the-aemp> [Accessed 12 June 2025]

[719] Loose and Starecheski, 'Oral History for Building Social Movements', p. 238.

[720] Daniel Kerr, '"We Know What the Problem Is": Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up', *Oral History Review*, 30, 1 (2003), pp. 27-45, p. 31-34, doi:10.1525/ohr.2003.30.1.27

[721] Talmadge Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes* (State University of New York, 1997), p. 6.

ultimately 'developing strategies to promote substantive social change',[722] which they did in the form of closing one unsanitary shelter and launching protests to reorganize shelters and issue an injunction against the mayor's policy of arresting rough sleepers, amongst other social changes.[723]

To Loose's point of allowing those oppressed to lead projects in an effort to motivate change, journalists Mark Schoofs and Rob Kuznia created a course at the University of Southern California at Annenberg in 2019 aimed at documenting mass shooting through student oral history interviews. In the course syllabus, the pair argued that the continuing epidemic of mass shooting resulted in a repetitive news coverage pattern, in which 'the true magnitude of these shootings often gets lost'.[724] The course consisted of students conducting in-depth oral history interviews with 'survivors, first responders, and family members of the slain […] not merely as a class exercise, but to help create a permanent digital archive of testimonies of mass shootings in America'.[725] Their intention was to open the collection to all users, including the general public, to stand as a 'permanent memorial for victims who are quickly forgotten in our frenetic news cycle', promising students a role in the literal creation of history.[726]

However, Schoofs' aims for the project went beyond one journalism class. He had hoped to spread the project idea to other universities, getting more student interviewers involved, his goal being, 'so that students […] will conduct thousands of oral histories, creating a vast and definitive account of mass shootings in America'.[727] While a admirable goal, there is no evidence that Schoofs repeated the course or disseminated it to other universities, or that the oral histories were deposited or processed in an archive available to the public. While this project is a good example of a university course engaging Gen Z students in an activist role against an epidemic defining their generation, it is unsurprising that the concept did not spread. Oral history projects require time, and training students while also providing the necessary resources to interview survivors of trauma necessitates careful planning.

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[722] Ibid., p. 37.
[723] Ibid., 41-42.
[724] Mark Schoofs and Rob Kuznia, 'JOUR 499 Documenting an American Tragedy: The Mass Shooting Oral History', USC Annenberg (2019) <https://web-app.usc.edu/soc/syllabus/20193/21447.pdf> [Accessed 12 July 2025]
[725] Ibid.
[726] Ibid.
[727] Ibid.

The difference between the utility and success of these projects and the NNROHP, again, stems from the project's connections to community organizations, impassioned volunteers, local social justice groups, and journalists. These are also examples of grassroots movements or projects designed to spread awareness of local issues, which admittedly cannot draw comparison to mass shootings in scope. Even Schoofs and Kuznia's goal with the oral history project was long-term, and probably positively affected the small number of students in the course more than it generated awareness of mass shooting survivor testimony.

While the University of Texas at Austin may host the TAVP interviews on its servers, and the New York Public Library partners with NYC's Trans Oral History Project, UNCC has yet to seek connections with local gun control or prevention advocacy groups to explore the collection's potential for activism work. A natural partnership for UNCC would be the Riley Howell Foundation. The Howell family established the organization in 2019 after their son's death, with the mission to support 'organizations that benefit victims of gun violence'.[728] Each year, the Riley Howell Foundation hosts the Mighty Four Miler, a half-marathon run through Howell's hometown of Waynesville, North Carolina, with all proceeds benefiting the fund and supporting various organizations associated with victims of gun violence.[729] Interestingly, in her 2020 interview for the NNROHP Officer Celeste Godwin suggested a yearly run in memory of both Howell and Parlier. She felt as though a yearly five kilometer run would symbolize the bond between the community, University, and campus police, but the idea, another potential endeavor for remembrance and healing, never came to fruition.[730]

However, it could be argued that university archives would be discouraged by administrators from seeking community partnership in social justice activism, as academic institutions want to detach themselves from controversial political topics. Chancellor Dubois made the decision not to discuss or take a stance on gun control during the 30 April shooting, telling his staff to focus on the victims and their families. He recalled advising staff, 'don't get distracted by other issues that people may want you to address', acknowledging, 'of course the

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[728] 'Who We Are', Riley Howell Foundation (2025) <https://rileyhowellfoundation.org/who-we-are> [Accessed 11 July 2025]
[729] 'Events', Riley Howell Foundation (2025) <https://rileyhowellfoundation.org/events> [Accessed 11 July 2025]
[730] Celeste Godwin, oral history interview, 2020 February 25, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections & University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 00:21:52 <https://goldmine.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A3086> [Accessed 10 September 2024]

number one sort of elephant in the room was the issue of gun violence'.[731] His handling of Matthew Shepard's death at Wyoming heavily influenced his decision to avoid a divisive, political topic.[732]

To Pamela Schwartz, this is the problematic nature of repositories held at Universities—not only their inaccessibility but their uselessness. Noting that her opinion was an unpopular one, Schwartz argued,

> Academia and museums are different. Academia focuses on research and data and information. We [museums] focus on accessibility and storytelling. […] You're all talking up here [at conferences] and writing papers, but what are you doing with the content? I think that there's a lot of missed opportunities for the hard work people in academia put in, because a lot of oral history collections exist within special collections and archives and libraries, not within museums. They're getting put into papers and things, which is great, but how many people are reading the thesis […] How do we work better with our museums? How do universities doing this important work, work better with museums to create a space for accessibility?[733]

To Schwartz point, there is no evidence that the NNROHP interviews, which are accessible online to anyone in the world, have been used outside of this thesis and internal displays within J. Murray Atkins Library. Even the Route One Harvest Festival narratives, which detail the worst mass shooting in American history, are not heavily used.[734]

However, is it an archivist's job to push a collection's utilization? In the case of the NRROHP, Howell's position as university archivist mandated she take proactive steps to collect the experiences of 30 April and memorial artifacts. The project was also proposed through community town hall events and had the support of the local community. Both Howell and Wright admitted that users were not considerations when designing the project. Wright acknowledged, 'there was an interest in documenting it for a number of reasons, and one of them is lest we forget', noting that the effort of collecting and archiving narratives of mass shooting

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[731] Dubois, oral history interview, 00:11:06
[732] Ibid.
[733] Schwartz, oral history interview, 00:21:41.
[734] The Healing Garden published a book using oral history quotes from the collection and the Oral History Research Center used narrator quotes to write their book chapters 'Las Vegas Healing Strategies: Mementos, Family, and Acts of Love and Kindness' and 'The Night the Music Stopped' for the book *Vegas Strong*. White, oral history interview, p. 6.; Roberta Sterman Sabbath (ed), *Vegas Strong: Bearing Witness 1 October 2017,* (University of Nevada Press, 2023)

was in itself an act of activism, that these events are not normal and cannot continue to happen.[735]

Perhaps the collection's utility does lie in the future, with future researchers and exhibits turning to oral history to engage the public on the mass shooting epidemic in America. Director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky, Douglas A. Boyd, wrote extensively on voice and access in oral history. He noted in his article on oral history archives and their usability, 'oral history has the distinct advantage of the human voice […] and the power to engage and move listeners in profound ways'.[736] Reflecting on her own work with an oral history exhibition surrounding Japanese internment during World War II, Selma Thomas, an oral historian and museum consultant, discussed the future of the methodology in the museum landscape. Thomas stated, 'Much oral history collected by museums will eventually become public history: even the most painful recollections potentially will be shared with thousands, even millions of strangers'.[737] If Thomas' example is emblematic of the time lapse between a historic event and its depiction as public history, it could be decades before the full utility of these collections come to fruition. However, to Boyd's point, they are powerful, engaging narratives of human experience. The fact that these narratives are collected and preserved by archivists who view these projects not only as documentary in nature but as a form of activism provides some hope for their potential in future social justice movements.

5.5: Discussion

Five years after their breakthrough article on radical empathy in the archive, Caswell and Cifor revisited their work in a featured commentary for a special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*. Writing amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and anti-Black violence in America, the pair argued care work, and specifically archival care work, has become more important than ever, noting,

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[735] White, oral history interview, 01:17:28.
[736] Douglas A. Boyd, 'I Just Want to Click on it and Listen': Oral History Archives, Orality and Usability', *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edn., ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 2016), pp. 193-215, (p.215), doi:10.4324/9781315671833
[737] Selma Thomas, 'Private Memory in a Public Space: Oral History and Museums' in *Oral history and Public Memories,* ed. by Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Temple University Press, 2008) pp. 85-100 (p. 98).

> Tremendous deficiencies in available care and the neglect of care obligations by our institutions means that in this time, archival care work, though sometimes less immediate, is also urgent and necessary. […] While archives cannot hope to alleviate physical suffering, end discrimination and stigma, or to stall death, alone, they can be a manifestation of the kind of care that we can actually provide right now.[738]

By concentrating on the care of records, and more importantly, the lives portrayed in those records, archivists work against oppressive, structural systems that leave individuals silenced and uncared for. This point would then argue that working in the midst of injustice like a mass shooting or gun violence tragedy, may 'offer important opportunities to work out together what can come in the aftermath of this personal, social, and political upheaval'.[739]

Each of the archivists interviewed for this thesis engaged this level of ethics of care in their own collections of mass shooting narratives. All three institutions employed approaches that centered their narrators. Schwartz made herself visible at all Pulse related events, allowing narrators to come to the OCRHC freely if they wished to be interviewed.[740] UNCC moved their permission forms to a creative common license, allowing narrators to have ownership over their interviews, while also adhering to the Concentric Circle Model in participant selection.[741] They worked with CAPS to develop handouts on mental health guidelines and resources, while also gently encouraging anyone ready to speak to do so.[742] White only sought out narrators who had given interviews or spoken publicly. She also received drop-in interviewees.[743]

The resulting collections help form the collective memory of these individual mass shooting events and provide evidence where there would likely be a gap had archivists not agreed on the importance of collecting oral histories in the months after. While collections in Orlando and Pulse have not been heavily utilized by researchers or the public, the NNROHP narratives shared in this thesis serve as potent examples of what Douglas A. Boyd would consider oral history's 'power to engage' in 'profound ways'.[744] These interviews describe not only the memories of a traumatic event but also those of community recovery and self-discovery.

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[738] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'Revisiting an Ethics of Care in Archives: An Introductory Note' in 'Radical Empathy in Archival Practice', ed by Elivia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 3, 2 (2021), pp. 1-6, (p. 2) doi:10.24242/jclis.v3i2.162
[739] Ibid., p. 5.
[740] Schwartz, oral history interview, p. 3-4.
[741] Wright, oral history interview, 00:55:05; Howell, oral history interview, p. 19.
[742] Howell, oral history interview, p. 15.
[743] White, oral history interview, p. 2.
[744] Boyd, 'I Just Want to Click on it and Listen', *The Oral History Reader,* p. 215.

Moving beyond media sound bites, the narratives capture the broader picture of communities experiencing mass shooting. Without massive changes to federal and state gun laws, these tragedies will only continue, and as archivists, so must our care obligations to our communities and activism in our collecting.

In *After Gun Violence*, rhetoric scholar Craig Rood made an important point surrounding the consequences of a mass shooting. Regardless of definitions used, which thereby affect data on the number of mass shootings in America and their rarity, 'mass shootings remain worthy of public and scholarly attention'.[745] Rood argued, as do the chapters in this thesis that, 'regardless of how frequently mass shootings happen, even a single mass shooting has devastating and enduring consequences. Those consequences matter. Those lives matter'.[746] Many archivists possess the skills and competency to design and steward oral history projects and with good practices and ethics of care, archivists are capable of overseeing crisis oral history projects. While demanding, these are the projects which will perpetually preserve voices of survivors and the affected lives in which Rood writes. Even if we are unaware of their future utility, as archivists, we have evidenced history and as Wright noted, we have archived these stories 'lest we forget' the tragedies affecting our communities.[747] To that point, Sloan concluded *Listening on the Edge* by reminding all practitioners that,

> Linked to the impulse to assist, crisis oral history is also a response to the silences inherent in rescue, recovery, and rebuilding. It provides a means for the people most affected by crisis or disaster to be recorded, archived, and shared, to put them, not the devastation, at the center of the story. It is an effort that has not traditionally been a priority.[748]

As trauma-informed practice and activism in the archive continue to be trending issues in the archival community, the priority of what we collect, how we collect it, and how we make it accessible and usable will also shift to better encapsulate our communities and the people at the center of those communities.

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[745] Craig Rood, *After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in an Age of Political Gridlock (*Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 4.
[746] Ibid.
[747] Wright, oral history interview, 01:17:43.
[748] Stephen M. Sloan, 'Conclusion: The Fabric of Crisis', in *Listening on the Edge*, ed. by Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 262-274 (p. 264).

5.6: Conclusion

This chapter introduced the concept of archival activism and considered how archivists might advocate for their collections' use in social justice initiatives. The question of accessibility and use is a natural conclusion to this thesis, which argues for the necessity of collections and their use. Chapter five outlines key takeaways from community and university archives that are using their archival holdings to engage in contemporary struggles for social justice. While Loose and Starecheski admit there is a lack of academic scholarship surrounding oral history and social movements, activism, and advocacy, Wright believed that the collection of the stories themselves was a form of activism. Using examples from archives that have engaged in social justice movements, this chapter argues that mass shooting oral history projects can also be utilized for these purposes, through partnerships with local community organizations and careful planning. This chapter brings together valuable examples for archivists who wish to promote the use of their oral history collections for social justice initiatives and invites the professional community to do more to connect and partner with local advocacy groups.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1: Concluding Thoughts

This study combined interviews with archivists stewarding mass shooting repositories with a thematic analysis of NNROHP narratives to support its central argument that oral histories of mass shootings are under-represented and underutilized in archives, but are also valuable collections. It explored the role of activist archivists in social justice movements, postulating the future importance mass shooting oral history collections could potentially hold in the movement against gun violence. My analysis of the NNROHP, particularly the interviews with Gen Z student narrators and faculty, demonstrates the significance oral history collections hold for communities and also for future research. These collections offer communities preserved narratives that capture the raw emotion of events while also documenting a collective, lived experience of community tragedy.

This research investigated five overarching research questions to determine why oral history interviews with survivors of mass shooting events are under-documented and underutilized in the archives sector. Chapter two used interviews with archivists and oral historians to learn how oral history is being used to document US mass shooting events, to determine how the politicization of gun violence impacted oral history projects, and to learn how feminist ethics and trauma-informed practices were used to ethically design projects. Chapters three and four contained my analysis of the NNROHP narratives, discussing what the narratives disclosed about living through a mass shooting event and how they depict community collective memory. Chapter five used examples from archival activism and social justice movements to postulate the future of these collections and how survivor narratives might inspire social change. The last three chapters specifically reveal the significance these collections bring to archival institutions, while chapter two provided many reasons why they are under-represented and underutilized in archives today.

6.2: Contributions and Future Research Avenues

The original contributions of this multi-disciplinary project in archival studies and archival theory, crisis oral history, and collective memory will be particularly valuable to

archivists, oral historians, and community practitioners looking to document community tragedies or continue researching their importance to archival collections. The relatively unexplored nature of research into oral history mass shooting collections provides opportunities for future research avenues in the above disciplines and beyond, particularly as collections open and opportunities to work with local communities arise.

This is the first study to interview a group of archivists and oral historians who have developed and currently steward mass shooting oral history collections. Viewed through a postmodernist lens, the archivists interviewed were actively collecting, exercising agency over the oral histories they added to their repositories, and employing ethical frameworks in their projects. The detailed project designs discussed in this thesis will be the first published case studies of the projects in Las Vegas, Orlando, and Charlotte, offering practical guidance on creating personalized 'good practices' for communities beginning crisis oral history projects. The methodology and analysis chapters also offer guidance on creating longitudinal studies within oral history projects and use the NNROHP themes as one way to analyze community recovery efforts after a school shooting.

This study joins Mears' work as one of the few examples of collecting oral history interviews in the aftermath of a school shooting, and it is one of the only studies to examine a large collection of mass shooting oral history interviews thematically.[749] Since the narratives spanned a five year period, it was possible to evaluate the oral histories through the lens of collective memory and argue that oral history interviews are instrumental in understanding a community tragedy and collective response. While my analysis of the UNCC interviews followed Carolyn Lunsford Mears' indicators of community recovery, the collective NRROHP contains narratives telling an array of stories awaiting future researchers wishing to learn about the lived experience of survivors during a university mass shooting.

Given the few academics working with and publishing on mass shooting crisis oral history collections, this topic offers potential avenues for further research. Currently, both Virginia Tech and Las Vegas are working to make their collections available to researchers. These collections represent the collective memory of two of the most notable shootings in United

[749] Kennelly and Fleming-Cook provide transcript excerpts and some thematic analysis of student interviews in their chapter *Listening on the Edge*. See: Kennelly and Fleming-Cook, 'Exhuming the Self' in *Listening on the Edge*, pp. 55-73.

States history, potentially offering insight into new interpretations of the events, chances for advocacy, and empowerment in the dissemination of narrator voices. Moreover, like the NRROHP, these twenty-first-century collections are digitally experienced, offering researchers the chance to work with emotive narratives collected in the recent aftermath of trauma. Researchers wishing to build on crisis oral history and mass shooting on a broader scale might consider a comparative analysis with an affected community outside of the United States. While the politicized nature of gun violence greatly impacted my project, investigating community tragedies of gun violence outside of America allows for varied cultural and social lenses, potentially finding similarities in community response and activism.

This thesis examines the role of the activist archivist and the inclusion of social justice activism in archival work. Chapter two assesses how the politics surrounding gun violence, particularly in the American South, affect archivists working with these collections and further supports the overarching argument by illustrating why mass shooting collections are under-documented. Using examples from social justice archives and activist movements, chapter five concludes by arguing that crisis oral history narratives can impact similar activism initiatives. I then offer suggestions for how archivists of mass shooting collections might form similar partnerships and connections in their own communities, broadening access to archives and creating impact.

While I argue for the utility of these collections in social justice movements, the case studies in chapter five reveal that, due to political sensitivities and other hesitancies, that work could take decades. Originally, my plan for this thesis research involved a digital exhibit centering the UNCC shooting within the University context and Charlotte politics. Had I received funding, I planned to engage with grassroots organizations and activists in Charlotte to involve the community in my work and connect social justice efforts to archives that fit their cause. One limitation for me was the inability to experience archival activism in practice, however, archival literature would benefit from future research on the intersectionality between modern archiving and activism. The case studies covered in chapter five reflect only the small percentage of the advocacy projects occurring today—projects with the potential to be employed as what Flinn and Alexander see as 'strategies of resistance and contestation […] and curations which serve as agents of political authority'.[750] Further exploration of activism in archival theory

[750] Flinn and Alexander, 'Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft', p.331.

and practice, and the political agency accompanying these practices and projects, would be a welcome addition to current academic literature.

The most substantial contribution to the field of crisis oral history was the analysis of the NNROHP interviews themselves, and the collective narrative surrounding UNCC's recovery efforts and the community's collective memory. Interviews with Gen Z students and faculty led to the argument that school shootings and active shooter drills are becoming embedded in the cultural life scripts of American children. The thematic analysis of interviews proved their evidentiary value as research collections. This is the first study to analyze a complete mass shooting oral history collection, and my findings demonstrate the integral value of these collections and the need to prioritize their use in the future. Moving beyond social justice activism, future researchers should explore the practical implications of these collections and how they might be applied. Meaningful change at the state and federal level is necessary for mass shootings to end in America. These narratives might be used to impact public policy and legislation or possibly to work with at-risk youth or survivors of gun violence.

The question activist archivists and postmodernists should be asking themselves is this: Is it our responsibility to document tragedy? Ultimately, is it our duty to document even these aspects of our communities? Mark Cave opened his definitive work on crisis oral history with a reminder, 'What remains when the cameras turn away, and reporters go home, are individuals and communities in the process of redefinition, forever changed by the event'.[751] Within this thesis I have explored a community's redefinition and narratives from mass shooting survivors who are forever changed. These oral history projects and narratives are invaluable to a community's history and the archival community must continue to strive for standards, toolkits, conversations, and scholarship to support those who decided to document mass shooting tragedies.

[751] Cave, 'Introduction: What Remains' in *Listening on the Edge*, p. 1.

Current and Future Impacts

Since 2019, my work on the topic of mass shootings and oral history has positively contributed to the fields of public history and oral history and has provided me with the opportunity to work with other archivists researching or stewarding mass shooting-related collections. To date, my research has been shared in both the United States and Scotland. I have contributed to working groups at the National Council for Public History and presented research on Gen Z students and mass shootings at the Oral History Society conference. I have co-led trauma-informed and oral history trainings for the University of Glasgow and helped UNCC develop exhibit content which engaged audiences with voices from the NNROHP interviews. These activities have allowed me to disseminate my work while engaging with peers in academia and public history. They have also enabled me to expand my reach by contributing to a toolkit designed for educators and by creating a good practices guide for trauma oral history projects, which is openly shared with archives and communities looking to collect in the wake of tragedy. Since 2024, I have been active on the SAA's Crisis, Disaster, and Tragedy Response working group list of experts willing to offer support in the event of crisis. In this role, I can provide my good practices guide and draw on my own research experiences to work with organizations planning oral history projects in the aftermath of trauma and disaster.

After completing my PhD, I plan to continue presenting on trauma-informed oral history projects and archival activism by attending conferences and potentially publishing articles if opportunities arise. Katie Causier Howell and I are currently writing an article about collecting in the aftermath of 30 April and the subsequent NNROHP, which we intend to publish in the National Council on Public History's journal, *The Public Historian*. However, my future career lies outside of academia. I plan to continue working as an archivist, advocating for the feminist ethics, trauma-informed approaches, and archival activism I have outlined in this thesis.

My current full-time position gives me an opportunity to shape the current Local Studies holdings of the council in which I'm employed both by adopting inclusive metadata language and seeking donations to fill gaps, better representing the local community. This position could potentially lead to future scholarship in the area of trauma-informed archival approaches in family history research, but that is yet to be determined.

Figure 6: Impacts to Date and Future Research Areas

Date	Project	Outputs and Contributions
2019-2020	Niner Nation Remembers first anniversary physical and digital exhibit, UNC Charlotte	I contributed twenty-five oral histories to the NNROHP and provided clips for the first anniversary exhibit. The physical exhibition materials included photographs of narrators with QR codes to engage audiences.
Spring 2022	National Council on Public History Working Group, 'Trauma Informed Practice in Teaching with Primary Sources in Public History Settings'	I contributed a trauma-informed good practices guide on oral history and trauma, which includes useful definitions, an annotated bibliography of resources, interview tips, answers to common questions, and advice on accessibility. This document was shared as an output with the working group and the SAA.
February 2023	Hooke Centre for American Studies talk, 'Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Shooting: Archival Approaches and Ethical Considerations"	I presented this short paper to the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative showcase to discuss the use of feminist ethics in oral history, archiving, and ethics. I showcased the NNROHP collection website and highlighted how feminist ethics impacted the project design.
April 2023	National Council on Public History Working Group, 'Facilitating difficult conversations in an age of increase political polarization'	I presented on teaching controversial topics through oral history, using my research and interviews with mass shooting survivors to advocate for incorporating history clips in the classroom. I created a take-away file for educators with links to sources and examples of how these 'difficult' narratives can be used to enhance lessons, arguing that students can benefit from hearing oral history clips firsthand.
May 2024	Introduction to Oral History for PGRs Workshop	I co-led this two-day workshop with my supervisor, Erin Jessee, and postgraduate researcher Katherine Mackinnon. I led sections on

		transcribing and archiving, where participants read transcripts and listened to clips from my own interviews with survivors. I used the NNROHP to exemplify the benefit of archiving collected interviews.
2022-2024	Donated seventeen interviews to UNC Charlotte for the NNROHP	I donated seventeen of my PhD interviews to UNCC for the NNROHP collection, after writing metadata and transcriptions to ensure full accessibility. They are currently awaiting upload to the Special Collections and University Archives website, where they will be accessible online.
July 2024	Trauma Informed Research Methods Workshop	I co-led this one-day workshop with my supervisor, Erin Jessee. I specifically spoke about my personal trauma-informed approaches and experiences conducting interviews with mass shooting survivors. I then formed a monthly supportive writing group so participants could have a safe space to write and discuss their projects as needed.
June 2025	Oral History Society Conference presentation, "Documenting School Shooting in America: Narratives from the 'Lockdown Generation'"	I presented this paper of findings from my fourth chapter on Gen Z survivors and mass shootings in America, using clips from my interviewees to discuss the impact of gun violence and the future of archived narratives of mass shootings. This presentation connected me with other oral historians based in the United Kingdom and I was asked to contribute an article for Oral History Australia's 2026 *Studies in Oral History* journal.
2027 Tentative	Collecting in the Aftermath of April 30th	This tentative article will outline UNCC's Special Collections and University Archives' efforts to collect both ephemera and oral history narratives in the aftermath of the

		shooting tragedy. Working with Katie Causier Howell, we hope to publish it in the NCPH journal, *The Public Historian*.

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