

Whatever happened to ... Martha Norkunas?

Former UT professor collecting African-American stories in Tennessee

Posted: 9:18 p.m. Saturday, April 5, 2014

By [Patrick Beach](#)- American-Statesman Staff

For Martha Norkunas, whose students collected more than 100 oral histories of Central Texas African-Americans while she was at the University of Texas, the connections established are every bit as important as the academic work.

“It’s amazing the rapport that can be established between two human beings that transcends race,” said Norkunas, who these days is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University in Mufreesboro, where she teaches public history, oral history and more. “That has added an unexpected richness to the project.”



Martha Norkunas

Norkunas says her students have collected 40 to 50 narratives in Tennessee to add to the Austin stories which, transcribed, run to some 6,000 pages. We first brought you the story of her work in 2010.

“Texas and Tennessee have this ‘Gone to Texas’ connection, the whole Davy Crockett thing,” she said. “So I’ve taken that rich body of Texas-based narrative — because not everybody was born and bred in Austin — and we have this big Tennessee component to the project. It’s the same outlines of the project, interviewing people who identify as African-American and see how their lives differ and are similar in these two places. It puts it in an interesting comparative perspective.”

Norkunas has been particularly intrigued in the narratives of working women.

“There’s a whole section about African-American women’s work,” she said. “Some were teachers, of course. And some were domestics. There’s a moving and beautiful portrait of women doing laundry in their backyards. They couldn’t have been paid much and the heat must have been devastating. But women are entrepreneurs and they built up a network of clients.”

Norkunas hopes eventually to donate what has more or less become her life's work to a "major repository" where it will remain in the public domain.

"With these narratives, you can bring people together over a microphone and recorder and, over the sharing of stories, offer insights into another person's world that maybe increases understanding and peaceful co-existence."

For more about Norkunas' work at UT, go to utexas.edu/world/lifteveryvoice/histories/