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The Mass. Memories Road Show: Some Notes on Bridging and Bonding

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The Mass. Memories Road Show: Some Notes on Bridging and Bonding

Posted By Joanne Riley on Apr 4, 2008 | 0 comments

Four years ago, the [Mass. Studies Project](#) at UMass Boston launched a cultural heritage project that we dubbed the "Mass. Memories Road Show," a real-world mashup of PBS's *Antiques Road Show* (people bring their personal stuff to a local event for professional perusal) and the [Library of Congress' American Memory Project](#) (digitize historic stuff and share it with the world). Our ambitious goal was – and still is! – to visit each of the 351 communities in Massachusetts, inviting residents to bring in photographs that reflect themselves and their families in that community. At the public "Road Show" events, we digitize the photos, capture information, videotape the story behind the photo, and then enter all of that information into a [searchable, online database](#). From the beginning, we were operating from the simple idea that sharing personal photographs in a public event would both document and strengthen a community, and would also be a lot of fun. Our goal is to build a realistic, composite portrait of Massachusetts from thousands of contributions of photos and stories.

Since the first Mass. Memories Road Show in [Norwood](#) in late 2004, we have organized community Road Shows in [Dorchester](#), [Roxbury](#), [Deerfield](#) and [Quincy](#), and special themed events for [WGBH](#), [Hebrew Senior Life](#), and the [Grub Street Memoir Project](#). Each of the Road Shows to date has led us to fine-tune the process in ways mundane and sublime, most often inspired by unexpected interactions with individuals. For instance, at an early Road Show in Dorchester, high school student Christine Caples snapped candid shots of two contributors holding their family photos: [Valerie Stephens](#) holding a [photo of her mother](#) addressing a rally on Beacon Street in Boston in the 1970s, and [Kris Boelitz](#) holding a 1930's [picture of her grandfather](#) with his grandparents in Ireland. These two engaging images jolted us into realizing that each contributor's presence on this particular day and in this particular place was a vital part of what we were documenting. So, ever since, we have taken and printed out a [portrait photo for each contributor](#) to take away as a keepsake, and we add the digital version to the online database along with the other artifacts that reflect that community's participation in the Mass. Memories Road Show.

In retrospect, the adjustments we made in the Road Show over time are in tune with the two components of social capital that Robert Putnam describes in [Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#) (2000). According to Putnam, *bonding social capital* holds together people who see themselves as being similar in social identity, and can either be beneficial to society as a whole (e.g. ethnic festivals, bowling leagues) or threatening to society (Ku Klux Klan, street gangs). *Bridging social capital*, on the other hand, brings together people who consider themselves to be "unlike" in some aspect of social identity and is overall good for society as a whole. At its best, the Mass. Memories Road Show seems to generate both of these at once, a two-fer-one in the civic engagement arena.

Because they reside in the same town or city, people arriving at their local Road Show with photos in hand already have in common the simple fact that all are Norwood-ites or Quincy-ites or Dorchester-ites or Deerfieldians. But because of ethnic and cultural and class differences, they may not feel that warm, fulfilling bond with each other because they see themselves as more unlike than alike. The Road Show serves as a kind of bridge, bringing people together and highlighting the fact that all "belong" by virtue of their residence (present or past) in this city or town. This is why we tend to resist taking the Road Show out to internally bonded ethnic and cultural groups, where people would deposit their stories with us in the expectation that we would share them

with the larger civic community. Focused, thematic Road Shows can serve a wonderful purpose – witness the [WWII memories](#) Road Show we did with WGBH. But there is something to be said for generating both kinds of social capital, and that means inviting everyone to an open, community-wide event where people show up to tell their stories directly to one another.

This is a useful way for us to think about the role of the



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Road Shows in fostering civic engagement. There's so much more to learn, but for the moment, here are some notes on two related bridges-and-bonds lessons, to be more fully explored in the next 347+ Road Shows:



- *The joy of kindred spirits.* We've found that the official, "influential" leaders in a given community aren't nearly as effective for Road Show coalition-building as "kindred spirits" whose eyes light up at the very idea of sepia photographs and family and local histories. It takes time to find – across cultural, ethnic and class differences – those members of a community who share a common passion. (This is different from a passion for community organizing in and of itself.) But the effort can make the difference between a lively work group for whom the means is as invigorating as the end, and a low-key committee trying to get the job done with minimal effort.
- *Whose story is this, anyway?* A subtle shift in our collective thinking has led us to understand that we are not "adding voices" to a "mainstream story." We are documenting the offerings of the people who belong to a given community because they live (or lived) there and thus are the mainstream story. This understanding shows up in using the Contributor's own words for photo captions and descriptions, rather than dry, objective labels. It's evident in the setup of the physical space, which aims to encourage all to listen in on and view everything that their fellow participants have brought to share. Comfortable chairs are placed at the edge of the video interview area for anyone who would like to serve as audience, and every photo that is scanned is also projected on the wall for all to see. The overall effect is of an intertwined story being told by community members to each other.

The hundreds of photographs gathered at Road Shows so far, along with some of the videos, may be explored on the project's website at <http://www.MassMemories.net>. Please stop by, take a look and [let us know what you think](#). Note: the Mass. Memories Road Show is accepting applications for local Road Shows to be held between June and November 2008, sponsored by [MassHumanities](#) and the [Healey Library, UMass Boston](#). For more information, please contact Heather Cole, MMRS Project Director, at heather.cole@umb.edu.

-Joanne Riley is Associate University Librarian for Digital Library Services at the Healey Library, UMass Boston

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