

# TELLING TALES

## OUT OF SCHOOL

If you're an alum with a story to tell, Lawrence University Archivist Julia Stringfellow wants to talk to you. In 2006 Stringfellow began an oral history project to collect first-person recollections about life at Lawrence. *Lawrence Today* recently sat down with Stringfellow to talk about the project.

**LT:** *What gave you the idea to start the alumni oral history project?*

**JS:** I thought it would be a great way to capture the stories that alumni have about their days at Lawrence. They always have such great stories and they're also so happy to share all of this information. I thought it would be good to get it into a recorded format so others can listen to it and learn about their student days.

**LT:** *Why is a project like this so important to the college?*

**JS:** I know that over the years there have been a few interviews here and there, but they weren't saved in the archives. It's a great way of documenting the history of Lawrence from the perspective of someone who was a student. It's a great way of keeping Lawrence alumni involved with the Lawrence community and encouraging them to share their stories. Students are very interested in hearing what alumni have to say about their student days at Lawrence. They're probably more interested in listening to these interviews than reading a book about the history of Lawrence.

**Below:** University Archivist Julia Stringfellow conducts an oral history interview with Lynn Hagee '58.



**LT:** *Can you describe a typical interview?*

**JS:** Usually an alum will volunteer to do an oral history interview and we'll sit down and they'll tell me stories about their student days, and it gets recorded, so it's captured forever. If they're here for Reunion Weekend, I usually ask the Goldens (alumni belonging to a class from more than 50 years ago) to sign up for a time to come in and do their oral history. I've also contacted alumni, retiring faculty, and retiring staff that live in the area and have encouraged them to come in and do an interview. I prefer not to do it over the phone. It's just best to do it in person and record it. An interview usually lasts at least a half hour — but some have talked to me for 90 minutes or more. I will let them talk as long as they want.

**LT:** *How many people have you interviewed so far?*

**JS:** I've interviewed about 30 — and that number includes both Lawrence alumni and alumnae of Milwaukee-Downer College. I'm especially focused on the classes from the 40s and 50s. So far I've interviewed individuals, couples that met at Lawrence, classmates — if people want to come in and do an interview as part of a group, that's fine. During the Milwaukee-Downer reunion in October, I went to Björklunden and the class of 1953 was there. There were 12 ladies and I interviewed them in groups of three, and it was so entertaining.

**LT:** *What happens with the information you collect?*

**JS:** I do a transcription of the interview, and usually the first 20 minutes of the interview is posted on the Lawrence Web site along with the transcript ([www.lawrence.edu/library/archives/oralhistory.shtml](http://www.lawrence.edu/library/archives/oralhistory.shtml)). Visitors are welcome to come to the archives and listen to the whole interview if they want to. My goal is to some day have a place on the Web site where people can search by year, and listen to those interviews. I've also done presentations where I've played excerpts from the oral history interviews and people get a big kick out of that. I played an interview with a married couple that met here right after WWII, and the people listening thought it was so cool that their fellow classmates were sharing their stories.

**LT:** *As an archivist, a project like this must really pique your interest. Have you learned anything new?*

**JS:** I interviewed **Chuck Merry '57** and **Dave Hathaway '57** about a year ago, and they told me all these stories about the union and how that was the social headquarters for the university. They talked about the segregation of genders in the residence halls. They also told a story about sneaking into a woman's residence hall claiming they had to fix a washing machine (when there was nothing wrong with the washing machine) and how one of the friends that was with them got the shock of his life by putting a screwdriver into the washing machine. Also Chuck talked about living in the basement of Main Hall. I had no idea that building had been used as a residence for students.

I also interviewed a married couple from the class of 1949. The woman was telling me that when she started as a freshman, the men were still away at the war, and there were no men on campus, and how sad that was. She and her roommate were living in Brokaw Hall and after the war ended and the men came back, they were walking across the bridge over Drew street and she was so excited to see them come back that she stuck her head out the window and yelled to them, "You're so handsome!" I'm learning all kinds of things.

**LT:** *What do you tell people who think they don't have anything interesting to say?*

**JS:** I have yet to do a boring interview — every person has a story to tell. People say, "Oh, I'm not going to remember anything." But once I turn on the recorder, usually the first question I ask is, "Why did you choose Lawrence?" For them it sets off a wave of memories and they start sharing stories — people are so eager to share their stories, and they have such pride in Lawrence. Everyone has a story to tell.

If you will be attending Reunion Weekend (June 19-21, 2009) or are going to be in Appleton in the future and would like to schedule an oral history interview, please contact Julia Stringfellow by phone: 920-832-6753 or send an e-mail to: [julia.stringfellow@lawrence.edu](mailto:julia.stringfellow@lawrence.edu) ■