

Conversations in Public History: An Interview with Bob Eager

CALIFORNIA HISTORY RECENTLY met with Bob Eager, a historian-turned-lawyer-turned-history-educator whose non-profit work with *Own Your History* offers an innovative approach toward public history and historical engagement.

What is the mission of Own Your History (OYH), and what inspired you to create this organization?

Our mission is to develop greater awareness in young people of the U.S. history we all need to know and, equally important, of their choices in life. But Americans are divided because of denial of our historical skeletons—core parts of our history that are contrary to our national ideals. This includes our history of inequality, xenophobia, poverty, discrimination and injustice based on color, “race”, gender, ethnicity, and LGBTQ status. I began work on *OYH* to address this denial. We have inherited a country with deep divisions rooted in our history. We do not share a common, complete American history. We are divided over a past we cannot change and find it hard to work together for a better future.

OYH helps students understand that we all live in history and make decisions that will affect the future. *OYH* helps us realize our power to make a difference for ourselves and for good in our communities. “Owning your history” is transforming, because facing our historical skeletons lets us move beyond them. When we look objectively at all our history, end denial, and together embrace both the glories and injustices of our common past, we can move forward with honesty to seek justice as a more unified country.

What specific programs does OYH offer?

We have two programs, the “Own Your History” Leadership Course (*OYHL*) for school classrooms, and *Own It!*, for after-school programs such as the Boys & Girls Clubs. Both develop a personal connection between young people and history and stress the

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relationship of past and future. They both include beginning activities to connect their communities to history. They are curious about their own neighborhood—their street, school, Boys & Girls Club, playground, park, sports and arts facilities and how they became as they are—and if such features are lacking, why that is so and who made the decisions shaping their neighborhood.

Has OYH challenged or shaped your perspectives of public history and civic engagement?

We started with two questions: 1) Why should young people care about the study of US history? 2) Why would it matter to them personally? As a result, *OYH* gives priority to connecting each of us to our unique, individual histories. Our inheritances from the past—both from family history and our shared American history—necessarily provide the starting points for our personal journeys into the future. We are all products of history, even if we do not appear in any written book. Each of our stories is a singular piece of Americana, and young people who feel connected to history will naturally have a great interest in developing a deeper knowledge of the American past. Whatever one's age, heritage, background, or education, history matters.

Though your office is based in Washington, D.C., you've partnered with educational organizations in California. Why do you think Californians have been so receptive to OYH?

I think there is a special awareness in California. As a whole, Californians tend to be more conscious of the unconventional, more accepting of diversity, and more open to change and to fresh, atypical ideas. The changing population in California in recent decades has increased consciousness about the connection between past and future - this benefits the work of *OYH*. Additionally, California educators, whether in middle school, high school, or university, have appreciated *Own Your History* and introduced it to colleagues and interested persons. This networking exceeds what I have experienced elsewhere in the country.

You've had great success in recruiting history graduate students to help develop OYH's educational modules. What are your thoughts about History PhDs' participation in public outreach programs like OYH?

OYH offers additional ways for history PhDs to do important work in primary and secondary history education, with a focus on why history should matter to K-12 students and its connection to them personally. So much of the PhD training focuses on churning out college professors, and some of the graduate students I work with have mentioned that *OYH* helps them think about teaching and historical engagement in a new way.

Where do you see *Own Your History* in five years?

While it is more difficult to change the overall structure of established school educational programs, we believe that *OYHL* is sufficiently compelling that it will be offered in many schools in five years. *Own It!* is already having a significant impact. In particular, Boys & Girls Clubs in California and several other states are recognizing the enrichment provided by the program's combination of substantive historical knowledge with skills and personal

leadership development. In five years we expect to be nationwide in Boys & Girls Clubs and other non-school youth education programs.

Bob Eager received his PhD in U.S. History from Stanford (1978) before earning a law degree from Georgetown. After retiring as a partner from the major national law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP, Eager returned to his roots as a historian and educator and established The Reconciliation Education Project, Inc. (REP) as a section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt education nonprofit to develop OYH. Please visit www.ownyourhistory.us to learn more about OYH.