Getting Word Celebrates 20 Years

A project that began two decades ago with little more than a tape recorder, several notebooks and a very committed staff today includes nearly 200 recorded interviews and has achieved national recognition.

by Christa Dierksheide, Monticello Historian

The Getting Word oral history project—an initiative that preserves the histories of the descendants of the Hern, Hemings, Granger, Gillette and other families of Monticello—has helped “humanize the story of slavery at Monticello and allowed us to see enslaved men, women and children as fully formed human beings who had skills, dreams and values,” said Lucia Stanton, project director of Getting Word and Shannon senior historian emeritus at Monticello.

Getting Word was first launched in 1993, during the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Jefferson’s birth. Awareness of the “gaps in the treatment of the African-American experience at Monticello” had begun to emerge, said Dianne Swann-Wright, Getting Word project historian. An initial grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities as well as support from Monticello’s then-president Daniel P. Jordan and the African-American Advisory Committee helped jump-start the initiative. Swann-Wright and Stanton then made several trips to southern Ohio, where a large contingent of Monticello descendants had settled. There they joined Getting Word consultant Beverly Gray, a historian who had been studying the descendants of Monticello slaves for decades. “She organized our initial interviews and became an invaluable colleague and mentor,” said Swann-Wright. In the decades since the team’s first meetings in Ohio, Stanton and Swann-Wright have traveled over 40,000 miles to 14 states in order to record interviews, explore archives and cemeteries, examine family photographs, and understand “how Jefferson and Monticello had shaped their [descendants’] lives” and “what they wanted the world to know about their families,” said Swann-Wright.

For many of the descendants interviewed by Swann-Wright and Stanton, Getting Word made a deep impression. Virginia Craft Rose-Niles, 2003, a descendant of the Fossett family at Monticello.
Getting Word Celebrates 20 Years

said that the interview of her mother, Virginia Craft Rose, in 2006 was a “pivotal” experience. Craft Rose and her family are descended from Joseph Fossett, a highly skilled blacksmith at Monticello who was one of five slaves freed in Jefferson’s will. The Getting Word interview gave Craft Rose the “opportunity to speak to the power and pride of our family,” and allowed her mother to make “sure that her children and grandchildren would understand their place in history and the valuable efforts that they could make to keep the family story alive,” said Rose-Niles. Her sister, Mary Ellen Butler, said that, including her mother, the Getting Word project “has had an impact on four generations of our family” and has given “our children and grandchildren an inkling of part of our heritage.”

Recently, the Getting Word project gained national attention as the heart of “Slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello: Paradox of Liberty,” an exhibition jointly sponsored by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. Since February 2013, the exhibition has traveled to Atlanta, Ga., and St. Louis, Mo. It opened April 11 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. In addition, Getting Word’s people and their stories will play an important role in Monticello’s new Mountaintop Project, a multiyear effort that will preserve and restore Jefferson’s mountaintop. A forthcoming Mulberry Row app will allow visitors to hear stories from the Getting Word project.

Visit monticello.org/getting-word to learn more.