

*Autistic Lived Experience: Community Curation and Memory Workers Fellowship  
IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grants - Preliminary Proposal - 9/20/23*

**Introduction:** The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), on behalf of the Autistic Voices Oral History Project (tAVOHP), and in collaboration with the Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE), requests \$169,100 in support of the “Autistic Lived Experience: Community Curation and Memory Workers Fellowship” project. This Implementation project led by Project Director Casey Davis seeks to 1) train archivists and oral history practitioners (“memory workers”) on Autistic communication, culture, and ways of being to advance their capacity to meet the needs of their communities (Strategic Objective 1.2), and 2) train Autistic community members on oral history practice to promote inclusive engagement of the Autistic community in co-curation of Autistic lived experience (Strategic Objective 2.1). Our project addresses neuro-normative assumptions and lack of accessibility for Autistic people within the field of oral history, and seeks also to remedy the underrepresentation of lived Autistic experiences within the historic record.

**Project Justification:** The significance of this project lies in its goals of training non-Autistic (allistic<sup>1</sup>) memory workers on Autistic ways of being, enhancing their cross-neurotype<sup>2</sup> communication and oral history practice. Throughout their careers, memory workers will undoubtedly work with, collaborate with, acquire collections from, interview, or otherwise offer services to people from the Autistic community. The understanding and knowledge gained through this project will enable participating memory workers to better serve their communities well beyond the duration of this project. As a community archive, the project will also engage and train people from the Autistic community in the practice of oral history and support them in becoming part of this collective effort. Launched in 2023, [tAVOHP](#) records, preserves, and makes accessible the stories of Autistic people, documenting our perspectives, our culture, our struggles, and our joy. The project records interviews (video, audio or written testimonies) for preservation with a repository partner and makes interviews available online to the extent permitted by interviewees. While tAVOHP aims to capture stories across the widest possible spectrum of the Autistic experience, the project gives special attention to ensuring that the stories of people historically marginalized from dominant representations and understanding of autism are preserved. Our goal is to facilitate the use of these video, audio, and written artifacts as agents of change, tools for advocacy, and as means to contribute to a more representative historic record. tAVOHP challenges the conventional approaches to oral history, which have historically been designed from a neuro-normative perspective and exclusive of neurodivergent ways of thinking, processing, feeling, remembering, and communicating. tAVOHP oral history interviews are Autistically designed to ensure mental and emotional comfort and to reduce stressors. Details on our methodology, ethics and privacy practices are publicly available on the [tAVOHP website](#).

**Project Work Plan:** The project will run for 15 months. In Phase 1 (Month 1), tAVOHP staff (Davis, Fleishman and Rooney) will hold a kick-off meeting among staff, AMIA, AANE, oral history consultants and our [Advisory Committee](#). The meeting will include a review of project goals, timeline, and establish a plan for regular communication. During Phase 2 (Months 2-5), tAVOHP staff, AMIA, and oral history consultants will design the “Oral History with Autistics for Allistic Memory Workers Workshop” content. tAVOHP and AANE will also collaboratively design the “Autistic Community Oral History Workshop” content. Feedback on workshop content will be sought from AMIA’s Oral History and Accessibility Committees. During Phase 3 (Months 4-5), tAVOHP, AMIA and AANE will issue two separate calls for fellow applications, one for Allistic Memory Workers Fellows and one for Autistic Community Fellows. Twelve allistic memory workers and 12 Autistic community members will be selected. From the memory workers applicants, we will seek fellows who have a vested interest in neurodiversity either personally or professionally, and we will give priority to applicants who are part of other marginalized communities. From the Autistic community applicants, we will seek fellows who have a vested interest in history, storytelling, or Autistic advocacy, and we will again prioritize applicants who are part of other marginalized communities. After becoming aware of our Autistic identity, many people in the Autistic community develop a passion and Special Interest<sup>3</sup> in autism specifically, so we anticipate many members of the community will be greatly interested in this opportunity. In Phase 4 (Month 6), the team will hold the workshops. The “Oral History with

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<sup>1</sup> A non-Autistic person.

<sup>2</sup> A neurotype is a type of brain, in terms of how a person perceives and interacts with the world. Autism is a neurotype.

<sup>3</sup> An intense and passionate interest in which an Autistic person often becomes an expert, and in which engaging brings them great joy.

Autistics for Allistic Memory Workers Workshop” will be free and open to any archivist or oral historian to attend. This workshop will cover neurodiversity awareness and inclusion, focusing specifically on the Autistic experience and ways of being, and it will offer recommended practices for conducting oral history interviews with people with an Autistic neurotype. The “Autistic Community Oral History Workshop” will be open only to Autistic Community Fellows. During Phase 5 (Months 7-10), fellows will conduct their oral history interviews. After the workshops, the project team and AANE will offer support and guidance to all 24 fellows via scheduled group meetings and regular office hours. A Slack channel will be created to share questions and experiences. The fellows from each cohort will each conduct two oral history interviews with other Autistic community members to be added to the collection. During this time (and/or in advance of this phase), AANE will help recruit interviewees from the AANE community. Project staff will also support fellows with recruitment of interviewees via direct outreach to individuals such as Autistic activists, writers, scientists, and others, as well as via outreach to Autistic-led organizations. The team will introduce interviewers and interviewees to each other as appropriate, helping create a safe, accessible and welcoming space for both in their participation. In other cases, fellows will interview colleagues, friends or family members with whom they already have a connection. A total of 48 interviews will be conducted by the 24 fellows. Phase 6 (Months 8 - 14) will involve post-production. Interview recordings, completed release forms, and biographical forms will be delivered by fellows to the project team. Project staff will create metadata for each interview, perform any necessary editing and create closed captions. Final interview recordings will be connected to their metadata records and made available on the project website. Copies will also be deposited with an archival repository. (The Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center has enthusiastically accepted a first batch of interviews already conducted, and we intend to continue depositing future batches with them.) Phase 7 (Months 1-15) will be dedicated to project outreach and will take place over the duration of the grant. The project team will utilize social media to share news and updates on the project. To share the project with the archival community, the project team will propose sessions for the AMIA, SAA, and OHA conferences in 2024. At the end of the project, a culminating online event bringing together the 24 fellows will support continued community, engagement, and sharing of experiences. The project team will also organize an online get-together among all of the interviewees who participated in the project as a way to support connection, sharing of experiences and gathering feedback on ways we can make this project more impactful for all involved.

**Project Results:** The results include: 1) knowledge and understanding gained via workshops and fellowships by 12 memory workers; 2) engagement of 12 Autistic community members passionate about Autistic advocacy to help build a collection of Autistic voices that represents the diversity of our community; 3) addition of 48 Autistic voices to the historic record; and 4) broad dissemination of the project throughout the archival community. This project seeks to help create a world in which Autistic people can feel we belong in it, where we can be our natural selves in all environments without having to use all of our brain energy to try to communicate and behave in ways unnatural to us in order to make the neuromajority<sup>4</sup> feel comfortable around us. We envision these fellowships as a way to center Autistic ways of being in oral history practice, creating space for us to unmask and share our authentic perspectives. Through this project, we will engage the Autistic population and educate allistic memory workers on intentional documentation of neurodivergent people in accessible and inclusive ways (Strategic Objective 1.1)

**Budget Summary:** AMIA seeks \$169,100 to support this project: (1) Salaries and Wages: \$53,550 for Davis, Fleishman, and Rooney; (2) Fringe Benefits: N/A; (3) Travel: \$13,950 for two staff to 3 conferences; (4) Supplies, Materials, and Equipment: N/A; (5) Subawards and Contracts: \$20,000 for AANE; (6) Student Support: N/A; (7) Other Costs: \$60,000 for Fellow stipends (24 fellows at \$2,500 each), \$9,600 for interviewee stipends (48 interviewees at \$200 each); \$5,000 for two oral history consultants; and \$7,000 for Advisor honoraria (7 advisors at \$1,000 each) and (8) Indirect Costs: N/A.

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<sup>4</sup>Those whose behaviors and ways of being are deemed socially acceptable; comprises those who are neurotypical.