

Documentary highlights Kansas history through women's stories

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Applause rang out in the Groesbeck Meeting Room of the Manhattan Public Library as the end credits of "She Told Me Stories," a documentary film mosaic of Kansas history, rolled Saturday.

The film, created by K-State faculty and students from the departments of women's studies and history, includes interviews with women from several towns in Kansas.

The idea for the film came from an interest in multicultural Kansas history and women's role in keeping history alive, according to Michele Janette, co-director of the film, head of the department of women's studies and associate professor of English.

The directors requested a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council in fall 2010 and received \$10,500 to make the film.

About 30 students and faculty worked on this film. The film was directed by Janette; Sue Zschoche, associate professor of history; Gabriela Diaz de Sabates, instructor of women's studies; and Marilyn Ortega, senior in women's studies and American ethnic studies.

Although Ortega was not present at the viewing, the other directors attested to her contributions to the film.

"Without her, I don't know if this film would be complete," Janette said.



Michele Janette

Interviews with women around the state began in spring 2011, beginning with the Kansas towns of Topeka, Westmoreland, Clay Center, Garden City and Alma, and expanding to include Beloit, Nicodemus, the Kickapoo Nation and Manhattan.

The film, which was completed just in time for Saturday's viewing, is an hour long but was compiled from more than 300 hours of interviews. The filmmakers said they hope the remaining footage can be used for other projects.

"We hope this is the beginning of future collectivist stories," Janette said.

The film used the metaphor of a quilt to signify the different aspects that make up a collective history. It was divided into sections including tales of working lives, tales of facing hardship and discrimination and tales of celebrations and solidarity, among others.

"I think we somewhat resisted the familiarity of the quilt metaphor," Janette said. "But I think eventually we went with it for that reason."

Geraldine Baker Walton and Rosa Hickman, Manhattan residents, were both featured in the film and saw it in its entirety for the first time on Saturday.

"This is the first time that I've seen it and it's excellent," Hickman said.

Walton is the author of the book "140 Years of Soul: A History of African-Americans in Manhattan, Kansas 1865-2005," which was released in 2008.

"You think you have a hard time with your life and your history," Walton said. "And then you see [the film] and know you're not the only one."

The interviewees came from varying cultural backgrounds and from families that had been in Kansas for time periods ranging from less than 10 years to more than 100.

"As a historian and as a Kansan, one of the things that has just blown me away about all this is finding all these different stories," Zschoche said.

Gerry Craig, head of the art department and associate professor of art, said she attended the viewing because she is a native Kansan and is very interested in women's stories, especially in Kansas, and particularly in relation to the women in her family.

"It was great," Craig said. "It's a lot of invisible history made visible."

Sunday featured a follow-up event, also held in the Manhattan Public Library. Community members were invited to bring meaningful objects from their family to be photographed and the stories of these objects were written down. According to Janette, these objects included jewelry, a bureau and handmade clay pots from Mexico. She said they hope to continue to gather enough pictures to make a book.

Those interested in seeing the film can look for updates about future screenings on the film's Facebook page at facebook.com/shetoldmestories.