

LIA at Work

Literacy InterActives, Inc.

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Sponsor of the Parker Sydnor Historic Preservation Site

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Silver Linings: Books, Newspapers and Zoom in the Age of COVID-19

In 2020 Literacy InterActives, Inc. (LIA) received a generous grant from Virginia Humanities. We were set to conduct a series of in-person workshops that would focus on multiple interpretations of historic preservation in Southern Virginia. With the impact of the pandemic, LIA had to quickly shift its planning and target a virtual audience for the series. Despite the persistent onslaught of COVID-19 and its related challenges in our communities, LIA had a year of exceptional accomplishments because of the commitment and ongoing support of our board members, advisory council members, and stakeholders near and far.

How could we invite our targeted prospective participants in rural areas to Zoom workshops when there are digital divides in many of these communities?

Using Zoom as the platform for the series enabled us to have a measurable impact with the use of technology in the way that our tagline— “literacy is more than reading a newspaper or a book”—connects technology to the meaning of new definitions for literacy in today’s world. With a Team Project in command, LIA took a deep dive in the spring of 2021 with its virtual series entitled, “This is Us: Preserving Our Church Histories.”

The virtual platform expanded the series to a wider geographical range that yielded 122 attendees during two consecutive weekends. Participants who did not have access to computers used their cell phones and learned “to zoom” with individualized assistance from LIA. Acquiring new internet skills was an unexpected bonus. In addition to using regular social media and email, LIA publicized the series in local print newspapers and through the old-fashioned way—using the telephone to get the word out.

“The workshop series connects to the legacy of the Parker Sydnor historic preservation site,” explains Dr. Angelita Reyes, president of LIA. “The site is named after Patrick Robert “Parker” Sydnor (1854-1950), a tombstone maker who promoted literacy and the preservation of sacred spaces in African American church cemeteries. Our series is relevant to his mission and to the new dimensions and perspectives about historic preservation.”

Members of the LIA Team Project who brought the work-shops to success were Pastor Michael Jackson (St. Matthew Baptist Church), Honorable Glanzy Spain (Mecklenburg County Board of

Supervisors), and the following LIA Board Members: Inez Arnett-Ferrer, Alexandria Reyes Schroeder, and Dorothy M. David. Chelsea Cleghon was the Team's indispensable technical communications specialist.

According to David Beringer, Senior Director of Grants & Global Virginia Programs at VA Humanities, who attended the series, "This was an absolutely fantastic program. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be part of this very important work."

The workshops featured keynote speakers and a panel of diverse and inclusive participants sharing remarks during the Open Mic segment that was followed by Q&A when everyone had the opportunity to interact with each other on Zoom. Marc Wagner, Senior Architectural Historian at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, exclaims "I loved the workshop. It was run perfectly!"

There is undisputed popular enthusiasm for interactive history-telling, sharing stories, and "doing" history in work-shop settings. Our keynote speakers reflected that enthusiasm. Dr. Michelle J. Pinkard, associate professor at Tennessee State University, talked about African American women's culture of collecting funeral service programs. Dr. Pinkard is an expert on the provenance of church funeral service programs as historical artifacts and a source for genealogical research.

Benjamin Ross, the renowned historian for Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, led participants through preservation strategies for church documents. A church historian for more than 35 years, he introduced an engaging set of practical skills, techniques, and ideas that could entice anyone to work with historical documents. "Just about every aspect of church history can be preserved and become a part of your church's historic preservation," says Benjamin Ross as he encourages us to think outside of the box about preserving documents related to sacred spaces. The workshop series was free and open to the public.

Thank you to AARP Virginia Chapter 741, St. Matthew Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. Elisha Burke of the Baptist General Convention of Virginia, and a host of volunteers who helped to make our first virtual workshop series a resounding success.

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Visit the Workshop Series Recording Links

April 17, 2021: "Conversations with the Ancestors: Women Collecting Funeral Service Programs"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dqk9iA6Y6_Y

April 24, 2021: "Preserving Our Church Histories for the Generations"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_FENBh-dvs