We can learn a lot about a quilt by looking at it, but that doesn’t tell us the whole story. Listening to the quiltmaker does.

Ten years ago, the Alliance for American Quilts, a nonprofit organization in Asheville, North Carolina, launched a one-of-a-kind oral history project designed to collect recorded interviews with quiltmakers and to make transcripts of those interviews available online. They named the project Quilters’ S.O.S.–Save Our Stories (Q. S.O.S) and resolved to keep it simple, inexpensive, and inclusive. They succeeded. Today, approximately 200 volunteers have conducted more than 1,000 interviews, capturing and preserving quiltmakers’ stories in their own words.

The project was introduced in October 1999. In the photo at left, I am preparing to conduct the very first Q.S.O.S. interview with Georgia Bonesteel. Additional interviews occurred that same year at the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas. Now, a decade later, Q.S.O.S. has uncovered the complexity and diversity of quiltmakers and their quilts. Interviewees include the young and the old, women and men, hobbyists and professionals, artists and traditional quilters, American quilters and quilters who live outside the U.S. In fact, last year, volunteer Alessandra Bravo interviewed Silvia Huaman Loa of Peru—the first Q.S.O.S.
“My quilt is...based on my dad's journey from Mexico to the United States...I started recording my dad's stories because I want my [five-year-old son]...to grow up hearing my dad's stories...the stories I grew up hearing...I know that when my dad sees this quilt and a little bit of his life on this quilt...he is going to start crying...My dad's journey is being told through this quilt.” — MARIA HERRERA

“I started piecing together our old clothing and old blue jeans, everything, everything...old handkerchiefs, old pillowcases, everything...This is [a piece from] my wedding dress...It was my son...who one day took the sleeves off, and my husband said, 'Oh, no!' I told him, 'See, it is not about the dress. It is about being married to you and growing old with you.'...It is a great quilt because it is our lives all wrapped up into one big package.” — LOIS BEARDSLEE

“When I quilt, I...think about the people who have come before me, who have quilted in the 1800s...This quilt...I pieced it and then I hand quilted the entire thing by candlelight. I wanted to see how they felt working at night after all their chores were done—all the baking and washing and taking care of the kids. I hand quilted it by candlelight at night.” — CHARLENE HUGHES
Get Involved

The Q.S.O.S. archive is the world’s most extensive oral history project devoted to collecting quilters’ stories. Visit allianceforamericanquilts.org/qsos to search the archive and download the complete Q.S.O.S. manual.

WEBxtra

Go to quiltersnewsletter.com to print Karen’s 12 tips for conducting a successful interview.

Karen Musgrave has been involved with the Q.S.O.S. project since its launch in 1999, and she has personally conducted more than 250 interviews. She lives in Naperville, Illinois.

Interview conducted entirely in Spanish, and then translated into English!

More and more guilds and organizations are interested in having their members’ stories collected by Q.S.O.S. Among them are the American Quilt Study Group (12 interviews), the Daughters of Dorcas (21 interviews), and the Daughters of the American Revolution (more than 145 interviews). Members of some organizations are even learning to conduct interviews as well so that they can contribute to the growth and success of the project.

The transcripts of the interviews are being used in ways that were not imagined in the beginning. They are being used as primary sources for master’s theses and doctoral dissertations. Writers are using the interviews in researching their books. Guilds use the interviews to find speakers and teachers. Buyers use the interviews to educate themselves about making smart purchases. From all over the world, visitors to the online archive are being inspired.

While the Q.S.O.S. interviewers probably don’t set out to touch another’s feelings and longings, words and images emerge in interviews that are just as universal as they are personal. Q.S.O.S. has provided a place where quilters’ stories are accessible, where others can draw on them for strength and to make a connection. This is the gift that Q.S.O.S. volunteers will continue to give for many years to come.

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