The National Science Foundation (NSF) has awarded Columbia a $90,000 grant to conduct an oral history project on the World Trade Center attacks of September 11.

Over a two-year period, researchers will collect and analyze life-stories of individuals both in New York City and around the country who were affected directly and indirectly by the attack. Called "Narrative Networks: The World Trade Center Tragedy," the project was initiated by Mary Marshall Clark, director of Columbia's Oral History Research Office and one of two principal investigators on the project, which researchers hope will create a valuable historical resource for future researchers and the public.

"As oral historians, we know that people make sense of their lives and their experiences through stories," said Clark. "We want to give people affected by this tragedy the opportunity to offer their own interpretations of this historical event. Through doing so, we will provide the public and generations of future scholars and researchers, a record that represents, to the fullest extent possible, the uniqueness and diversity of responses to this tragedy."

"We hope to understand the ways in which stories of the tragedy were told, transformed, circulated, and shaped the understandings of people, both closely and only distantly involved," said Bearman. "Hundreds of volunteers have stepped forward to conduct interviews, transcribe data, organize field materials, and help in launching a giant field project in a matter of days. Because narrative quality decays quickly, the support of the volunteers has meant that we can get into the field quickly, an essential element for project success."

"This project represents a wonderful opportunity for Columbia University to participate in a productive and educationally appropriate way to help us understand the reactions of individuals to an unprecedented tragedy," said Provost Jonathan Cole, provost and dean of faculties at Columbia. "The project will extend beyond the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and then conduct follow-up interviews with the same individuals after six months and again after two years. Since the scope of the project will extend beyond New York, Columbia will recruit oral historians across the nation."

Living, an essential element for participatory and productive research, the project will be an important study of oral history research on the World Trade Center tragedy. Of special interest is how the event emerged as an important turning point. In addition, they hope to understand how narratives of the tragedy are shaped, and shape understandings of immigration status, race, social class, and ethnicity.

Also involved in the project as the other principal investigator is Peter Bearman, director of the Institute for Social and Economic Research Policy (ISERP) and chair of Columbia's department of sociology. Robert Smith, assistant professor of sociology at Barnard College, an ISERP research fellow, and an affiliate of the Oral History Research Office, is a co-investigator.

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