

The Scientist: NewsBlog:

Story corps for scientists

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Nobel prize-winning geneticist [Joshua Lederberg](#), liposome pioneer and essayist [Gerald Weissmann](#), Lasker Prize-winning microbiologist [Carol Greider](#) -- these are only a smattering of the scientists whose thoughts, reflections, and tribulations have been recorded in oral histories as part of the Pew Oral History Project, a recently-forged collaboration between the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

Over 500 oral histories, some transcribed into pristine published volumes, others lingering on dusty cassettes, are now housed at CHF's headquarters in downtown Philadelphia. Almost half are recent additions from the Pew Trusts [Oral History and Archives Project](#). Begun in 1988, the program, previously run by UCLA, chronicles the experiences of Pew Scholars, promising early-career biomedical researchers who receive four years of funding and support from the Trusts to pursue innovative research. The Pew interviews will be added to some 300 interviews of chemists in CHF's [Oral History Collection](#).



While CHF has traditionally been devoted to the history of chemistry, the organization is interested in bridging disciplines and expanding their realms of research, says David Caruso, manager of CHF's Biomedical Sciences and Technologies Program. Caruso has the job of digitizing and compiling the hundreds of Pew interviews that fill his office. A wide filing cabinet in the corner of the room is jammed with cassettes, each meticulously labeled and bound in sets four or five. More climb in stacks from the top of the cabinet up to the ceiling, dwarfing a cassette player cabled to a digital recorder that runs almost continuously. Caruso, who now runs the joint Pew-CHF oral history project, is digitizing the interviews sent from UCLA, but the recorder only works in real-time and each interview lasts from four to twelve hours. It is a monumental task, but Caruso believes it's worthwhile. "Science is not just produced in papers," he says. "There's a rich history to the scientific process," including the beliefs, personal experiences, and even misconceptions of the scientists, he notes. Oral histories let us capture those otherwise lost aspects, says Caruso.

At the beginning of the interview process, says Caruso, "lots of scientists are initially a little worried. They don't know what to expect." But, he adds, those who believe they have little to say often end up speaking the most. Interviewees are asked about scientific as well as personal experiences, including their childhoods, inspirations, and the role of mentors in their lives. It is a record of how one becomes a scientist, says Caruso. The interviews were established to provide "rare and invaluable access to the knowledge, experiences and critical decisions of these scientists in their own words," wrote [Rebecca Rimel](#), President and CEO of Pew, in an Email to The Scientist.

In addition to the accumulation of oral histories from chemists, Caruso and his staff will now interview Pew Scholars, recording them three years after completion of the program at a time when they can relate their experiences at the Pew program as well as their current research. Later, the project plans to carry out longitudinal studies, re-interviewing some scholars 20 years after the award.

According to Caruso, the content of the oral histories, once digitized and transcribed, will be searchable via the internet but not accessible. Transcripts will be available to the public in the CHF library in printed and digital forms. "We hope these stories will serve to motivate and inspire others to follow similar paths," wrote Rimel.

Caruso, who only recently took over the project at CHF, says publicizing the collection is one of his main goals. For now, the completed transcripts rest in the CHF's quiet [library](#), blue numbered volumes lining a bookshelf that reserves space for more stories yet to be preserved.

Listen to selections from the oral history interview with Gerald Weissmann below:

Image of The Joseph J. and Violet J. Jacobs Reading Room at the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

