Jay Ruby’s ‘Oak Park Stories’ explore an evolving village

By KEN TRAINOR

f you had four stories to tell to capture what Oak Park has become, which would you choose? That was the challenge Temple University anthropologist Jay Ruby set for himself when he came back to his hometown in 1999 to spend a summer here. Ruby, 69, now semi-retired, grew up in Oak Park in the 1940s and 50s and for much of that time, all he could think of was getting the hell out. Too parochial, too conservative, too broad-lawned and narrow-minded. But when he returned—to house-sit for an old friend, Bobbie Raymond Larson—he found a village transformed. Fascinated, he decided to make his hometown the subject of his last major academic study—an “video ethnography” using film, photography, text, and computer technology to tell, in considerable depth and detail, four stories that capture critical facets of how Oak Park turned into the town we know today.

Two of Ruby’s “Oak Park Stories” were released on CDROM last spring by Documentary Educational Resources (DER), with two more to come. Ruby says the stories are “designed to counter cliched assumptions about suburbs.” The publisher describes the project as “a series of reflexive ethnographic explorations of a Chicago suburb—one of the most successfully integrated places in the U.S. Employing interactive and digital technologies, four portraits present an anthropological perspective of this ‘social experiment’ through written and video portraits of African-American, European-American and Asian-American villagers.”

See JAY RUBY on page 12

ETHNOGRAPHER’S MARKET: Anthropologist Jay Ruby (left) with two of his Oak Park “stories,” Bob Trezvant and the Taylor family, Craig, Yolanda, son Jahn and daughter Jitaun at the Farmers’ Market.
Four stories that tell the story of a changing village

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Lesbian and WASP families and an institutional portrait of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center; the core of the community’s integration maintenance policies.

This is cutting-edge stuff in the world of academic research, according to Ruby, who describes himself as “a visual anthropologist.” What differentiates him from your typical objective scientific researcher is that he gets involved in his own study. Very involved. He lived in Oak Park for a year (2000-01), worked as a volunteer at the Housing Center, and befriended his subjects, practically becoming part of their families. And he’s spent every summer back here since.

Each CD, he said, contains approximately two hours of video and 300 pages of text, with topics linked to encourage interactivity. He chose CD ROMs as his format so they could be run on older computers. You can select the short version or the long, depending on how in-depth you want to go. The “layered” quality of the presentation makes the experience “non-linear” as opposed to a traditional book form.

Though his audience will probably be largely academic, he says the presentation is “plain-spoken” because he wants to make this as accessible as possible, especially for Oak Parkers. The Historical Society of Oak Park-River Forest has a copy of the first two CDROMS, as does the Oak Park Public Library, though cataloging it has posed a problem since it’s a format unto itself at this point.

In the video portion, his subjects talk about their lives. On the Taylor Family CD, he includes slides of Oak Park’s open housing era in the 1960s and family photos. “They had some amazing shots of the 1919 Chicago race riots,” Ruby recalled.

The entire project has taken a long time (it germinated in 1986) and represents the culmination of “ideas I’ve played with for years.”

“I’m becoming more atheoretical as I get older. Describing how people live is more interesting to me than theory.”

Close to his subjects

The most complicated story is the one he’s finishing now—Bob and Katherine Trezevant and Katherine’s mother, Helena (née Saxby) Gervais McCullough, a living connection to Oak Park’s Victorian WASP past. “I became extremely good friends with them,” Ruby said, “which really pushes the reflexivity. It’s a much more intimate way to conduct research. The whole family is fascinating. I just went through their attic and found out Helena’s uncle was the governor of Vera Cruz in Mexico for three days, setting up the civilian government. It’s a historical gold mine.”

While the black and lesbian families represent “new” Oak Park, the Trezevant family combines old and new. At 89, Helena, though wheelchair-bound is still sharp, so she can still recall the Oak Park that produced Ernest Hemingway. Her son, Paul, married an African American, and her son-in-law, Bob, was one of the co-founders of OPALGIA (Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association). Though very much a member of the old guard establishment herself, Ruby said, Helena was able to adjust to a changing society. To Ruby, she is a symbol of Oak Park’s resilience.

“The ability to accept new worlds is why Oak Park hasn’t fallen apart,” he said.

In fact, Helena once belonged to a group called “The Ageless Radicals,” which met at Grace Episcopal in the 1970s and 80s. She was also the best friend of Ruby’s aunt, one of the reasons he chose the family to study.

The story became even more complicated this past December when Katherine, Helena’s daughter and Bob’s wife, died suddenly. Getting involved in your stories has a down side.

“Katherine’s death was a personal loss,” Ruby said. “We had an active social life and did a lot together.” It’s especially strange—and painful—editing film footage of a friend who has died, he said.

The Trezevants moved into Helena’s two flat on Linden Avenue across the street from the high school in 1977. It was the home Katherine grew up in and the town she, too, had wanted to leave. “She described it as ‘a gilded ghetto filled with rock-rubbed Republicans and WASPs.’” Bob recalled. But, like Ruby, she, too, was impressed with how the village had changed by the late 1970s.

Helena, meanwhile, always had one foot inside the establishment and one foot outside. She was a member of the exclusive River Forest Tennis Club but grew up a Unitarian and a Democrat. “That was considered fringe,” said Trezevant, who describes his mother-in-law as “19th century in her dedication to family and tradition, but in terms of social and religious issues, she’s 21st century.”

And a treasure trove of history for Ruby. “She knew everybody, and has a story about every house,” Trezevant said. “She was connected, but not exclusive.”

Trezevant said it was a privilege to be part of Ruby’s study. He enjoyed watching the ethnographer’s amazement as they reintroduced him to the community he grew up in. It was also wonderful to have their family history recorded in such detail, during hours of interviews.

“It’s invaluable,” said Trezevant, a longtime community activist and retired District 97 elementary school teacher.

Talking very personally on film and having someone on hand “filming grandma’s birthday party” felt odd at times, he admitted, “but the risk is offset by the good the study is going to do. It’s not about me.”

He will also treasure the printed transcript of Katherine’s interviews as a keepsake.

One of the benefits Trezevant sees in this study is acquainting newer residents with “what this community has stood for over the decades. People who move here today for the diversity have no idea what it took to make that happen. They can use this to appreciate the really deep and important traditions we have here.”

Becoming one community

Trezevant, who considers himself “a connector,” led Ruby to the Taylor family. Bob met Yolanda Taylor, a professional fitness trainer, at the YMCA where she was teaching an exercise class. Ruby, noting that a large percentage of black Oak Parkers rent, said he was looking for middle class black homeowners who had “a stake in the community.” The Taylors, he said, were articulate and thoughtful, “and they have dynamite kids.” Both Yolanda, who grew up in Austin, and her husband, Craig, creative director for an advertising firm, came from middle class families in the city and talked easily about their experiences growing up and living in a predominantly white suburb like Oak Park.

But Ruby wasn’t looking for boosters, and Yolanda isn’t afraid to be both critical and complimentary of her hometown.

“Jay and I both agreed early on that Oak Park is a good example of ‘controlled racism,’” she said.

The Taylors have lived in south Oak Park for the past six years. “I don’t know why he chose us,” said Yolanda, 37, who was initially resistant to moving here. She had grown up on Race Avenue, near Austin Boulevard, and, like Ruby and Katherine Trezevant, wasn’t sure she wanted to come back to the area. “It wasn’t the most exciting place for a teenager,” she recalled, “and her first impression confirmed that perception. “They roll up the sidewalks at 9 p.m. It was definitely not a ‘sexy suburb.”’

Now she loves it, as do her kids, Jahl, 11, and Jittuan, 7 (who originally thought the white-whiskered, portly, affable Ruby was Santa Claus). “It’s a great place for raising kids—the school system, the park district. Any activity you can think of, there’s an opportunity to try it.”

She, too, was impressed by Ruby’s thoroughness. He went to school with the kids, came for family dinner, visited her husband’s family on the South Side. His re-
search turned up fascinating tidbits. Yolanda’s grandmother came to Chicago from Kentucky at the age of 17 and made enough money playing cards to buy the home on Race. “Her attitude was, you do what you need to do to survive,” said Taylor. “She taught us to be resourceful.”

And learning how to survive in Oak Park involves learning how the system works, Yolanda said, “and working the system,” something the longer established white families have a big head start on. Networking is part of it, she said, which is one of the reasons she joined a support group for African-American mothers called “Jack and Jill,” which meets at Euclid Avenue Methodist Church.

Yolanda had just viewed the finished CD a few days before we spoke with her, and her first reaction was “I can’t believe I did this.” But she’s glad she did. “It’s hard to see yourself, but it’s important for the goal of becoming one community racially.” She admits being disillusioned about Oak Park early on, which she thinks is a typical stage of adjustment for black parents. Overcoming first impressions is important for both blacks and whites. “If you think it’s going to be utopia,” she said, “it’s never going to be. I came to that realization quickly. But there are much worse places to live and I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. Oak Park has come very far, much further than any other community. It’s not perfect. It needs work, and everyone needs to work toward that.”

Making connections

Family and roots were also high on Ruby’s list for his profile of a lesbian couple. Rebeckah Levin and Sophie Kauliakzi have two kids, own a home on the south side of town and are very involved in their community. Levin grew up in Oak Park, and her parents still live here, which made her even more interesting to Ruby. He also liked the fact that she was a social scientist and researcher, is articulate and comfortable talking about their life. As are their children. One of the first things daughter Ariel told Ruby is, “I’ve been in a gay family all my life.”

Son Ben was too young when Ruby conducted his initial interviews, but he asked to be interviewed when Ruby returned with the completed version.

Levin said she found the process “fascinating. I never saw myself on film before.” Like the others, Ruby’s thoroughness impressed her: “He wanted whole stories, from childhood to the present,” she recalled. “It was like free therapy. I examined my whole life as a sexual being, an activist, my identity as an Oak Parker, things I hadn’t thought about in a long time.”

Ruby asked excellent questions that were interesting to talk about, she said. “It pushed me to think about connections.”

Levin heads the Center for Impact Research, which does “applied research on issues of social and economic justice.” Kauliakzi is a financial planner.

Levin said she found Ruby’s take on Oak Park and diversity helpful “because his viewpoint is different from those of us who live here. Any kind of insight from Jay’s work is going to help us.”

She said viewing these stories will “give Oak Parkers a depth of understanding on maintaining and supporting diversity,” and help them understand more about racial and sexual orientation issues. “There’s a wealth of information,” she said.

**Keystone institution**

The fourth profile, which should be completed by the end of 2006, is the Housing Center, a choice Ruby describes as “a no-brainer. It’s the keystone.”

The center was created during “tough and scary times. Oak Park was in a major transitional period.” Today, he noted, “those pioneers are dying off, and the trustees are too young to know the battle isn’t over.”

In fact, he said, “This is the most interesting social experiment in the United States in terms of racial integration.” He said he couldn’t help getting caught up in the Oak Park story when he returned. “If I were richer, I’d move back,” he said. “It’s beyond my means.”

What differentiates anthropology from sociology, is that he isn’t working with “a statistically significant sample.”

“These are not typical families, but they typify something.” Ruby said. He also stretched traditional boundaries in other ways. Each family, for instance, was allowed to view their profile, then Ruby filmed them talking about their reaction to it. “They didn’t have editing rights, but they could give feedback in great detail.”

Ruby’s “Oak Park Stories” tell how the old Oak Park transformed itself into the new Oak Park. “That’s a remarkable story,” Ruby said, “how a group of people who should have fallen apart found ways to change. If you have enough people who can change, you have a healthy community. The unbending conservatives all got out.”

The reason he limited himself to four stories is that “I wanted to finish before I die.” What he is producing, he said, “is the equivalent of four books and four movies. That’s enough, and there is still a lot to do.”

There are other stories still untold, he said. The high school for one. “It’s an astonishing place,” said the OPRF alum. The police department is also remarkable. “They have a designated liaison to the gay community who has nothing to do.”

But Oak Park still faces dangers, he cautioned. Most blacks rent, and rental units are converting to condo at a rapid pace, causing instability. African Americans also don’t have the same support network in Oak Park that whites do.


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**Organizations**

- West Cook YMCA in Oak Park
  - 255 South Marion, Oak Park, IL 60302
  - (708) 383-5200
  - www.opymca.org
  - We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities.

**November Events**

- **Oak Park’s Invest in Youth program**
  - **Christmas Tree Lot**
    - **Hours:**
      - Weekdays: 4:00-9:00 p.m.
      - Saturday & Sunday: 9:00 a.m.-9:00 p.m.

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