Family History for Everyone

Help everyone experience the benefits of family history while building a more complete history of the human story.

Nicole Martinez-LeGrand and Lauren Peightel

Across the country, genealogical and historical societies are asking, "How can our programming remain vibrant and relevant as things change?"[1] Many who plan programs feel caught between honoring the expectations of long-time members—who may value traditional lectures, workshops, and research methods—and reaching new audiences who connect with family and community history in different ways.

Making genealogy programs equally attractive to everyone seems critical given the evidence of the numerous benefits of knowing one's family history such as increased sense of identity and emotional resilience,[2] connection with others,[3] health insights,[4] and cultural understanding.

This is not an either/or decision. Rather, it is an opportunity to renew or reimagine the mission of genealogical organizations. While continuing to nurture research excellence, societies can also claim roles as community memory keepers and social connectors.

*Figure 1. Diane Hunter, retired Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and a past Indiana Historical Society (IHS) trustee explains Miami (*myaamia*) family units and shares stories her grandmother, Swan, heard from her grandparents about their forced removal from what is now Indiana. Guests lunch on* myaami *flavors: greens with berries; roasted turkey breast with a summer casserole of corn, beans, and squash; and a delicious dessert with maple syrup. Midwestern Roots Family History Conference, Indianapolis, 2022. (Photo by Lauren Peightel)*

Expanding genealogy and its audience

Genealogy and family history, once defined primarily by lineage tracing, today sits at the intersection of history, anthropology, and lived experience. Family history encompasses identity, belonging, migration,

Websites in this article were viewed on 11 December 2025.

1. Brenda Leyndyke, "Are Genealogy Seminars Falling by the Wayside?" blog post, *Journey to the Past* (https://www.journeytothepastblog.com/2023/10/are-genealogy-seminars-falling-by.html : posted 24 October 2023).
2. Martha Driessnack, "Who Are You From?" *Journal of Family Nursing* 23:4 (November 2017): 434–449.
3. Rachel Coleman, "Why We Need Family History Now More Than Ever," blog post, *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/en/blog/why-we-need-family-history-now-more-than-ever : posted 26 September 2017).
4. "6 Benefits of Knowing Your Family History," blog post, *StoryTerrace* (https://www.storyterrace.com/blog/6-benefits-of-knowing-your-family-history : undated).

NICOLE MARTINEZ-LEGRAND, a fourth-generation Mexican American and third-generation Hoosier, is a historian, curator, documentarian, and award-winning author with over twenty years' experience in museums and nonprofits. She focuses on strengthening relationships between museums and communities. Currently the Multicultural Collections Curator at the Indiana Historical Society, she is a 2025 History Leadership Institute Fellow and an elected leader with the National Council on Public History. She holds a BA and MA from Marian University and Indiana University–Indianapolis.

LAUREN PEIGHTEL brings nearly twenty years' experience in arts, history, and genealogy programming centered on diversity, inclusion, and storytelling. She has chaired regional genealogy conferences, presented widely, consulted on *The Art of Access* (2021), taught for AASLH's History Leadership Institute, and served as a diversity and inclusion expert for a Johns Hopkins–Smithsonian summit. She holds BA and MA degrees from Seton Hill University and Johns Hopkins University plus certification in leadership for history organizations.

and memory. Some researchers reconstruct the lives of ancestors erased by enslavement or displacement. Others uncover meanings behind family recipes and heirlooms. Some use DNA to reconstitute unknown biological connections. Each expands the definition of what it means to belong to a place and to one another.[5]

Genealogical practices in the United States have often focused on written documentation and property-based lineage. This methodology unintentionally marginalizes traditions that transmit heritage through non-textual means.[6] This imbalance has left out individuals and communities whose histories were not written or were obscured by colonization, enslavement, displacement, or systemic erasure. For many communities—particularly Indigenous, African American, Latino, Asian American, and some recent immigrant populations—family history is not primarily found in written records but carried through stories, songs, foodways, and collective memory (see figure 1).

Inclusive genealogy programming invites people from underrepresented backgrounds to see themselves as the inquirers, not just as subjects of research. It builds trust in institutions that have not always served all communities and promotes ethical storytelling. Inclusive programs also help repair and augment the overall historical record by uncovering overlooked archives and lost oral histories, naming traditions, languages, community memory, and contributions of historically marginalized people.

Strengthening the field

When genealogical programs intentionally include historically underreported histories, they expand the field's overall accuracy, creativity, and empathy.[7] Programs that highlight African American research examples, for instance, teach societies how to work with Freedmen's Bureau contracts, emancipation-era testimonies, and plantation records. These skills sharpen everyone's ability to interpret complex, trauma-laden archives with greater precision. Workshops centered on Latino genealogy can introduce midwife records, *compadrazgo* (sacred kinship) networks, and border-crossing files, all sources that model creative strategies for reconstructing fragmented lineages. Incorporating Polynesian, Indigenous, or Asian American genealogical traditions exposes researchers to place-based knowledge, clan systems, or village genealogies, fostering innovative ways to validate evidence outside traditional Western documentation.

Diverse programming also cultivates empathy throughout the genealogical community. Holocaust-era research sessions, for example, encourage attendees to approach restitution files and survivor testimonies with greater sensitivity and ethical awareness. LGBTQIA+ family history programs help societies recognize chosen family, name changes, and erased relationships, shaping more inclusive and compassionate research and documentation practices.[8] To learn that in many Indigenous languages, the same word for "grandparent" also identifies a many-times great-grandparent adds understanding that these languages do not dilute the relationship identity from one generation to the next, which can profoundly impact a family's perspective on the past.

By bringing these varied experiences into shared learning spaces, genealogical societies strengthen the field as a whole. The result is a more powerful historical storytelling community that is more accurate in its methods, more creative in problem-solving, and more empathetic in understanding. When a field values every lineage and every cultural approach to ancestry, it shifts from being a search for pedigree to being a movement for truth, belonging, and connection. An example of the latter is featured in figure 2.

Listening for inclusion

True inclusion means ensuring communities have influence over programming, representation, and storytelling.[9] Equity requires both humility and active listening. It means asking not only "who is here?" but also "whose stories are missing, and why?"

Before diversifying programming, societies must understand the perspectives and needs of their

5. Scott Phillips, "Family Historians Can Promote Acceptance and Fight Prejudice," *NGS Magazine* 39:4 (October–December 2013): 50–54.
6. Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, A Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021).
7. Darcie M. Hind Posz, "The Skill Set Option for Multicultural American Genealogy," *NGS Magazine* 39:3 (July–September 2013): 34–37.
8. See Carly Lane Morgan, "Families of Every Kind: Best Practices for Recording Complex Parent Relationships," *NGS Magazine* 51:3 (July–September 2025): 32–35.
9. National Genealogical Society, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/dei).

Figure 2. Sara (Hindi) Ayoubi, Ezzeldeen Elsayed, Lauren Peightel, Arwa Ghalawan, and Maria Nimri following the film screening of Arab Indianapolis: A Hidden History, *and a moderated panel on the complexities of identity, traditions, and faith for immigrants and citizens with Arab ancestry (Indiana Historical Society Photo)*

current members and broader communities. Surveys, when designed thoughtfully, can reveal interests, barriers, and motivations that shape participation.

Member surveys assess what keeps current members engaged and what might be missing. Ask about more than their satisfaction with current programs. Probe more deeply: What makes an event memorable? What learning formats are most engaging? What stories or local histories would members like to learn more about? Framing questions around curiosity and connection ("What first drew you to genealogy?" or "What program made you feel most part of a community?") yields more authentic insight.

Community surveys through libraries, cultural centers, faith communities, local events, and digital channels (including online and social media groups) can illuminate what potential participants seek from heritage programming. Questions might include, "What kinds of programs make you feel connected to your community's history?" or "How would you prefer to share your family's story?" This approach reframes genealogy as an act of community belonging, not a specialized pursuit for experts.

Surveys also help societies identify silence, especially when responses are compared with local demographic data. Who is not responding? Which neighborhoods or groups are absent from the data? That absence is an opportunity to explore unseen barriers of communication, access, cost, representation, or trust.

Redefining success

For decades, success in genealogical societies has been measured primarily in attendance, membership, or numbers of lectures and publications. While engagement-related measures remain important (and tapping into new communities may help societies grow), a more holistic understanding of a society's success may come from asking, "Whose stories are we telling? What relationships are we building? Are we helping our communities see themselves reflected in history?"

Equity-centered success measures might include

- new partnerships with underrepresented communities
- multilingual or intercultural programming
- new documentation of local histories previously unrecorded in archives
- public engagement through storytelling, festivals, or oral history projects

For some organizations, the most meaningful progress may not appear in increased membership but in renewed trust and visibility within their communities. While building new relationships, individual program attendance might shift or even decline. But the impact of that progress is found in the conversation, insight, and takeaways of new and existing guests and partners.

Learning the community's full history

Place-based genealogical societies operate within geographical spaces that have been shaped by migration, displacement, and cultural blending. Understanding the layered history of those places is crucial to building inclusive programs.

Research begins by asking

- who has lived here over time, including today
- what laws, industries, or events shaped who could settle, vote, or own property
- what religious or linguistic groups have contributed to the local story
- whose histories remain invisible in local archives

By way of analogy, traditional building preservation practices have often excluded entire communities when making decisions about what is

preserved and how local history is interpreted. From the planning phase to storytelling, the communities involved in the history should be at the table.[10] Preservation is ultimately about determining which histories matter enough to safeguard. Genealogists face the same fundamental questions. By inviting residents of historically marginalized neighborhoods to be co-researchers and co-interpreters of their own histories, genealogical societies offer research as an instrument of civic discovery and even repair. They serve more people, broaden their programming, fulfill their missions more deeply, and demonstrate their ongoing relevance in their communities.

Building authentic relationships

Societies should approach partnerships with humility and a spirit of collaboration and reciprocity. Rather than inviting a group to "participate" in pre-defined programming, societies can ask, "What goals are most important to your organization? How can we support you using our skills or resources?"

A meaningful partnership might involve offering volunteers to digitize records for a community archive; providing training in preservation techniques; or co-developing an exhibition that reflects the changing population of a community. The goal is not to "bring diversity in," but to share stewardship of heritage. Note the many community partners involved in the project illustrated in figure 3.

Creative and culturally responsive programming

Diversifying programming also means diversifying learning formats. Lectures and research workshops remain essential, but societies can broaden their impact through experiential, intergenerational, and culturally grounded approaches.

Examples include

- heritage food events: invite community members to share recipes, food memories, and the migration stories tied to them (see figure 4)
- storytelling nights: create opportunities for sharing oral traditions, poetry, or music that reflect family or neighborhood histories

*Figure 3. IHS intern RaeVen Ridgell was inspired to write a short play (*To Canaan with Love, Bethel*) after finding her ancestor's name on a Bethel A.M.E. Church program; she is shown here, center, with (from left) Roselyn "Doc" Cole, Aniqua ShaCole Chatman, Josiah McCruiston, and Kaylin Greer. An overflowing audience responded with a two-hour community conversation. This program was created in partnership with Bethel A.M.E. and I.U.P.U.I. Africana and Religious Studies Departments and supported by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.–Alpha Mu Omega Chapter and the Robin and Charlitta Winston Family Fund for African American History. (Photo by Lauren Peightel)*

Figure 4. Annah Wangari Gathirua, a Kenyan visiting from Nairobi, and IHS actor and professional storyteller Ellen Lane make Kenyan mandazi (similar to a sugarless beignet, served with chai (boiled milk with tea added to steep); "Flavors of the Heartland" is a monthly program series at IHS in which guests enter a mobile chef's kitchen for food and casual conversation (Photo by Lauren Peightel)

10. National Trust for Historic Preservation African American Cultural Heritage Fund, "Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation's Potential as a Path for Equity" (https://cdn.savingplaces.org/2023/08/10/13/57/18/226/AACHAF_EquityStudyReport_lo-res.pdf : October 2020).

- living history demonstrations: partner with artisans or craftspeople to connect traditional trades to family stories, or to perform characters or scripts grounded in historical events and research
- intergenerational projects: pair youth with elders to document family narratives through video or scrapbooks

Such programs invite participation beyond the traditional researcher audience. They also reposition family history as a living, sensory experience everyone can access.

However, equity must remain central. Programs inspired by a specific culture should be co-led by individuals from that community, ensuring representation is authentic. "Nothing about us without us" is a common phrase for working with Indigenous communities and should be thought about and applied in all cultural programming. It is also important to not pigeonhole speakers to only certain topics pertaining to their ethnicity, race, or religion; that expert on Mexican American research could likely instruct the group on other topics, too.

Reaching new audiences through equitable outreach

To attract broader audiences, societies must rethink where and how they communicate. Traditional communication via newsletters, websites, or mailing lists only reaches existing networks. To reach new participants, organizations need to reach out via new channels with new invitations.[11]

Strategies include

- partnering with libraries, schools, and cultural centers for shared events
- advertising through community bulletins, faith organizations, and local media in multiple languages
- using inclusive visuals that reflect families of diverse racial, cultural, and intergenerational backgrounds
- framing programs as celebrations of shared heritage (such as the performance featured in figure 5)
- digital and social media engagement and storytelling

Language matters. An invitation that says "Join us to explore how your community's stories shape our shared history" is more welcoming than asking for attendance to a lecture. The former invites belonging; the latter is just about showing up. If this seems daunting, remember that genealogy can be a great connector: see "My Story" on page 23.

Figure 5. Young adult members of the Okinawa Yu-Yu-Kai (or 遊友会, "Fun and Friendship Association"), an Indianapolis dance and drumming group, perform the traditional Eisa folk dance at IHS to honor the ancestors' spirits. (Photo by Lauren Peightel)

Conclusion

At its core, genealogy is about stories: people and place, migration and memory, connection and identity. Grounded in the search for roots, genealogical organizations have a unique power to reveal not only connections of lineage but also of experience, place, and memory. When societies commit to equity in programming and outreach, they are supporting not just genealogy education for everyone but the creation of a fuller, more truthful record of the past—a record that honors the complexities of identity and the resilience of communities historically excluded from written history.

This is not a call to change what genealogists are, but to invite more people into the circle of genealogy

11. "Expanding the Reach of Genealogy Societies and Conferences," *Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter* (https://eogn.com/page-18080/13055217 : posted 12 January 2023).

MY STORY: NICOLE MARTINEZ-LEGRAND

I am a historian and a fourth-generation Mexican American and third-generation Hoosier. Nonetheless, I grew up without learning my own history outside of my family home. When I was hired in 2016 to support a grant-funded project to enrich Indiana Historical Society (IHS) collections relevant to Hoosiers of Latino and Asian heritage, I began a journey of self-discovery and a path toward a deeper understanding of the culture and contributions of the Latino community statewide. It is a path that mirrored the experiences of many who participated in the project.

In the early weeks of my day-to-day work in the archives, I had scheduled time at our reference desk. This opportunity exposed me to the wonderment of patrons from all backgrounds who were discovering intimate connections to their past in the archive or via our genealogy databases. I wanted to offer that same feeling to the communities for whom I set out to reconstruct a historical narrative, but I wasn't yet sure how.

Nicole in 2018 with her grandparents, Edward and Aurora Medina, at the opening of Be Heard: Latino Experiences in Indiana at IHS; the exhibit featured oral history interviewees she worked with, including her late grandfather, Edward (IHS photo)

I began connecting with potential contributors of Asian and Latino backgrounds to source historical materials. Due to my previous experience with grant-funded museum projects related to community building, I had strong feelings about investing in the participants. But many of them had no previous formal relationship with a collecting institution, nor had they even visited Indianapolis, where IHS is located. In a grant-funded project, timing is critical. Strong relationships needed to be built quickly.

Using genealogical research of the participants proved crucial to success. I conducted light genealogical work-ups on participants before the formal sit-down interviews. This dramatically shifted our relationship from extractive to participatory. Genealogy helped build and maintain a level of community trust and dialogue that has lasted almost a decade. A simple investment in the individuals and the families I worked with have continued to pay dividends long past the life span of the grant.

Subsequent genealogical research further expanded understanding of the place of these Latino and Asian families and communities in Hoosier history. The seemingly small gesture of mapping out family experiences through genealogy has resulted in the gathering of over a century's worth of history in less than a decade. This history is documented in several exhibits, two publications, several online digital image collections, and most recently, a 22-minute documentary, *Beyond El Barrio: Early Cultural Contributions to the City of Indianapolis, Seen and Unseen* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4imcFbUhqWY).

Thanks to the foresight of the IHS's leadership and funders–and to the power of genealogy to build real connections–this work has helped uncover a depth of history that had been long absent from Indiana's historical narrative. This renewed and more inclusive history enriches and benefits everyone.

and to expand what genealogy can become. The work of family history today is as much about the stories yet untold as the records already preserved. By embracing inclusive and creative programming—rooted in equity, outreach, and respect for all communities—societies can ensure that the legacies they preserve reflect the fullness of the human story, not only the parts most often recorded.

The ultimate measure of success may be this: that a descendant, generations from now, finds their community reflected in the archives because a society chose to listen, to learn, and to widen the circle of belonging. What is built now will become the inheritance of belonging for future descendants.