Folk 321/UrbSt 327
Exploring Memory and Tradition in Philadelphia Communities

Professor Mary Hufford  M.W. 10-12*, F 2-5
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Garrison Togba, with members of the Agape Center Liberian community during a visit to Penn’s Archive of Folklore and Ethnography, relates the tale of Leopard and Sparrow, a dilemma story that tests the wisdom required for choosing a mate.
Photo by Moliner Torking, April 27, 2007.

Course Description

In this ethnography-based service learning course we explore the integral role of traditional verbal and material arts in the lives of elderly men and women in Philadelphia communities and neighborhoods. We begin with theories of culture, community, and identity found in the literature of folklore, anthropology, and gerontology, and move from there into historic and ethnographic overviews of relevance to the community we will be working with. We then explore approaches to fieldwork and ethnography, with special attention to techniques of participant observation, interviewing, interpretation, and the ethical dimensions of fieldwork. Applying these methods, students develop a research and writing project that serves the needs of a collaborating Philadelphia community. Students gain critical thinking skills from the readings, discussion, and weekly writing assignments, while learning the complexities of cross-cultural communication.

The fieldwork component for the Spring of 2006 focusses on the verbal arts and storytelling traditions of a community of Liberian elders who meet at a senior center in West Philadelphia. Working with elderly Liberian refugees to create a collection of their traditional tales and life histories, students will learn to apply ethnographic and oral historical skills and perspectives. Students will work with the elders to prepare for an evening of traditional storytelling on campus at the Kelly Writer’s House in early April. During the month of March, students will visit the Agape Senior Center one morning per week (Mondays or Wednesdays), in addition to meeting on Friday afternoons. This one and a half credit ABCS course fulfills the general distribution requirement in Society.

An ABCS Course of the Center for Folklore and Ethnography, the Agape African Senior Center and the Center for Community Partnerships.