

Dear Global Folklorists,

After I studied to become a folklorist and took my first job, I found that many people did not understand exactly what a folklorist does. They asked, “Do you play the banjo? Do you tell folk tales? Do you sew quilts?” No, I explained, I study people who do these things and share their stories with the world. How do I do that? By asking them questions and observing what they do. Then, I edit the information I gather to present to the world through a video, a podcast, a blog, an exhibition or a program for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

That sounds simple, but it takes preparation, practice and a lot of thinking and planning. In your work as a Global Folklorist, you will go through the same steps as does a professional folklorist. These steps are explained in detail in the Global Folklorist Challenge. Here are a few pointers that have helped me in my work. Use them as you start thinking about and planning your Challenge entry.

Do your homework. Read some background material about the tradition that interests you. Learn special terms, more about how a craft is made, where and when a celebration takes place and other details that will help you form good questions. If possible, visit the person you wish to interview informally, or chat with them on the phone, so that you become comfortable with one another before the interview.

Ask good questions. Go beyond the obvious, “What is this made from, and how long does it take to make it?” to get at the deeper meanings and importance of whatever you are researching. Ask detailed questions and keep “digging” to get at the real heart of the tradition and the person behind it.

Know your equipment. Folklorists capture the story of the tradition bearers they interview in audio, still photographs and video. Make sure you have good equipment and practice using it until you are comfortable with its operation.



Tegai Roberts (left), Betty Belanus (right)

Identify the context. Carefully note the setting in which the tradition bearer lives and works. Observe the tradition bearer at work, on stage or in his or her home, and take notes to describe this space afterward. Relate the skill of the tradition bearer to his/her family and community: Does he/she have a younger family member or apprentice to whom he/she is passing on this skill? Does he or she perform traditional music for a community audience? Go beyond the interview to find these details.

Present your best work. Make sure your final product is your best effort. Ask the tradition bearer, your parents and/or your teacher to take a look at a draft and give you feedback. Think about how you could make your work even better next time!

Give back to the tradition bearer and his/her community. Thank the tradition bearer. Send a written thank you note or an e-mail, but also plan to share your final product with him or her, his or her family and friends and the larger community of which they are a part. If possible, make a booklet or a slide show for the tradition bearer using your work, or share the audio sound file, photos or video you have taken. Tradition bearers give much of themselves to folklorists; they deserve something in return.

I hope you enjoy becoming a Global Folklorist. Have fun and do your best!

Sincerely,
Betty J. Belanus, Folklorist/Education Specialist
Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage