Hello, welcome to VT Untapped, a podcast from the Vermont Folklife Center that explores the state through the voices of its own residents. I’m Mary Wesley.

Our summer has been consumed with continuing to adjust to life and work during a pandemic. The VFC bases almost all of our activities in ethnographic fieldwork. The hallmark of this approach to learning about culture and community is to spend a lot of time with people, on site, in the “field.” Whether the field is a dance hall, a blacksmith shop, someone’s home or a literal field full of vegetables, when we’re there we like to observe closely, maybe even try a dance or pull up some weeds while chatting with the Vermonters who occupy these spaces every day. Whenever possible, we record interviews on site, sitting down across from someone to listen to them and learn from their experiences.

So, like everyone, we have needed to completely reimagine the ways in which we do what we do. We’re asking ourselves, ‘can we be ‘in the field’ on Zoom?’ Can we connect with and interview someone over the phone? How can we get a high quality recording when we can’t be in person with whoever we’re talking to? And of course we’re wondering, how are other Vermonters experiencing and reimaging their work, their home life, their schools and communities?

I’ll tell you right now, this is an ongoing process. We’re still finding answers to these questions, and, like you, I’m sure, still adjusting and readjusting to our current reality. But we have started to find ways to continue our work and as we go into the fall I’m excited to share some of what we’ve been up to. In the upcoming episodes we’ll take you into six different Vermont communities where we’ve spent some time listening to what people are going through and what they’re thinking about.

This work is part of our Listening in Place initiative, a project designed in response to COVID-19, and now an ongoing effort to maintain and cultivate community, listen to others, and document our extraordinary daily lives together during the pandemic and beyond.
Mary Wesley: We’re starting this series close to home, in Middlebury, VT where the VFC offices and gallery stand quiet and empty since March. Just across town, a beautiful yellow building that houses Project Independence, an adult day care facility serving Addison County, has also been quiet. Pre-COVID this center offered a daytime “home away from home” for elderly adults whose independence has lessened due to chronic illness, disability, or very advanced age. On March 12th, they had to close their doors to participants, but it wasn’t long before the Project Independence community was able to reconnect. They just had to do it virtually. Activities Director Ken Schoen speaks about the transition:

Ken Schoen: And then we had a couple staff meetings with staff to just kind of talk about what are we going to do now? And it was like everybody was kind of deer in headlights. It's like, oh, my God, we're shut down, we don't know for how long. At that point, we're thinking eh it's going to be a month or two and then we'll be back in business. But it became pretty clear within a week or two that it was gonna go longer. And then it was like yikes, now we have just about 90 employees that we have to figure out how to pay them while we also have to figure out how do we serve our elderly population now, because this is pretty challenging. And then it was like yikes. I'm like, you know what I think? I think we can do stuff online. We can maybe use, do Face, FaceTime live or other things. And at that point, I hadn't really even heard of the Zoom. But, you know, I'm talking to a few staff and going, OK, there's probably ways we can engage on screen. The challenge is elderly folks, usually that's not in their skill set, to use computers. So how do we do, how do we navigate that?

Mary Wesley: One of the people helping to navigate this challenge is Project Independence staff member Geetha Wunnava:

Geetha Wunnava: So Project is, historically has been very focused on, you know, connection and people and not devices and technology. And we very much are an analog agency, right, in a lot of ways. And we've had this whole process of, I mean, it started in March where we were trying to figure out what device, you know, would work for someone that's 90 and has, you know, neuropathy in their hands and can't see properly and has really hard of hearing and maybe doesn't have someone at home with them to help them navigate, you know, their email and finding that link. And it's suddenly like my role was like part social worker, part occupational therapist, and part engineer. And so what we've come to is we finally wound up going with a touchscreen Chromebook with, and then managed to put sort of a shortcut on it where it's essentially a one click deal for them. Yeah, it's just, it's for me one of the biggest takeaways is just that technology can be used for so much good. I think, you know, my generation you know gets a really bad rap for, you know, how, you know, we're just always on our phones and we're always, you know, our connection skills. We're not known for our, you know, people skills or whatever. So it's been really neat to see technology be used to foster connection.

Cello theme.
Mary Wesley: I talked to Geetha and Ken in early August. I wanted to hear their behind-the-scenes perspective on running virtual programming for their distanced community of senior citizens. As part of our Listening in Place work, the VFC has been conducting interviews, over Zoom, with many of those tech-savvy seniors. Between May 12th and August 5th we signed in and said ‘hello’ to 20 people. 

*Upbeat Cello, continues throughout the next few clips.*

Mary Wesley on Zoom: Alright, well good morning. I have to look at my calendar, it’s hard to keep track of the days. It’s May 12th. Wednesday, June 13th.

Maeve McCurdy on Zoom: It is Tuesday, June 9th, 2020. So my name is Maeve McCurdy and I’m doing this for the Vermont Folklife Center.

Mary Wesley on Zoom: So it is Tuesday, July 14th, 2020 and this is Mary Wesley for the Vermont Folklife Center and our Listening in Place project.

Maeve McCurdy on Zoom: So if you just want to start off and introduce yourself.

Mary Wesley: Our main questions were, “How has it been going?” “What’s been different for you?” “What’s been surprising?” The goal of Listening in Place is to make a record of what Vermonters are experiencing through the pandemic, but even more so, the goal is to maintain our connections to one another. We hope that by offering a chance to listen and be listened to, relationships can be strengthened and the distance that we’re all experiencing right now can maybe be lessened, just a bit.

It was an honor to speak with these 20 individuals and to work side-by-side with Project Independence staff who helped schedule and coordinate the interviews. I also want to give a giant thank you to Maeve McCurdy, our summer intern now starting her senior year at Smith College. Maeve supported this project as an interviewer, transcriber, audio producer and all around fantastic human and I miss working with her! You’ll hear her voice in some of the interviews.

For the rest of this episode I invite you to listen to some excerpts from our conversations with the Project Independence community. We couldn’t include everyone in this short episode, so please take the time to head over to our show notes at [www.vtfolklife.org/untapped](http://www.vtfolklife.org/untapped) where you’ll find a longer playlist of excerpts as well as some artwork and poetry from a few of the people we spoke with.

*Cello music.*

Arlyn Foote: Well, I just, you know, I used to go into Project. Well. Monday through Friday. And now can't do that, so it's a lot different now. I never thought when when we got, when we quit in the first part of March, you know, I never figured it would last this long.
Mary Wesley: And how long have you been in Cornwall?

Arlyn Foote: Ninety one years. All my life.

Mary Wesley: Has it, has it changed at all?

Arlyn Foote: Yes it has, a lot. You know changed a lot in the last 10, 10 years you know. This used to be a farming community. There was at one time there was about 38 farms in Cornwall and now there's two. So. It's a lot different now. It's gonna be different when it when this opens up too.

I just can't imagine what it is going to be like when this is over, you know. Is it going to be over you know? But, uh. I don’t know. I just can't imagine what it's gonna be like.

My wife is in a nursing home out in Middlebury. I go out there once a week, you know, and see her. They have to bring her out in the in the garden there, you know? And we have to stay, you know, six foot apart, and stay there about a half hour and then they. Yep. So that shut down too, you know, nobody can go into a nursing home or anything now. Yup. So it's a lot of different.

Slow cello music swells in and out.

Nancy White: It really got serious when I couldn't go to Project and I really love going there. And then I couldn't go to church. It's just like things being taken away almost, you know. Then the grocery store. I didn't go the grocery store for a long time. Now I do.

I've never been so alone in all my life. You know, I live alone. And they wouldn't let me see Joey. The only one I saw was my daughter, Mary. She'd come down once a week for a couple hours. But, boy, the days can be long. So I've been organizing my house and I had a complete knee replacement, so. And staying home has been good for that.

And and I believe in following the rules. Wear a mask, you know, no gatherings. To follow those rules. And be safe, number one is to be safe. And still enjoy this life as best you can. That's for sure. And once I got out, it was nicer. But I stayed right home for a long time.

Slow cello music swells in and out.

Penny Battison: It changed it changed a whole lot in my life. It changed every every like social activity that I have, it changed how I do things. My social life, you know, I can't just go over to people's houses right now and restaurants were shut down, of course, for quite a while, except for takeout. I've never seen Middlebury College shut down the way they did in the spring. Couldn't go walk on the indoor track at the field house, which is what I used to love to do and couldn't do that.
And I never even heard the word 'Zoom' until probably March maybe. I never even touched a computer till I was 35 years old. And I'm 70 now, so.

Fortunately Project has done so much in helping all of us learn about Zoom and learn how to access it. And they have a team of people that are excellent at sort of coaching us over the phone how to do it. So I think Zoom has just been terrific, you know, for all of us.

I've never lived through anything like this. I remember the tail end of the polio epidemic as a kid. And I remember the vaccine for polio became available. So, of course, kids were all taken to the pediatrician to get a so-called shot. And we never none of us liked shots, so we weren't happy about it. But, of course, in retrospect, we were so fortunate, you know, kids my age and younger, we were so fortunate to have that vaccine. We didn't know that at that age, but we were.

Cello music.

**Sylvia Coffin:** It wasn't so much a transition because I was already alone in the house most of the time. I mean, I had company and I had a routine going to coffee with the ladies and stuff like that. Right now I'm really happy to be here because I have a home and I can do things for myself more or less. Nancy is around and my daughter-in-law lives next door to me, too. So that's a big help for me to know that those two women are around to help me when I need it.

**Mary Wesley:** What's been the biggest change or what feels the most different to you in this?

**Sylvia Coffin:** Not getting my hair done every week and going shopping in the grocery store. Every Friday, a routine. My daughter would take me to the hairdressers at nine thirty. Then I would go grocery shopping. And that was the best thing because I saw a lot of people in the store of course, that I knew.

So I am thinking that this is sort of a lesson for us to slow down and be more loving to others in your home, especially because you have to live together without going. Well, yes, you can go out for rides or to get a creemee or something. They took me out on Mother's Day for a creemee and that was a big, that was really my favorite present because I love to have a creemee on Sunday. And so, you know, little things like that. Loving gestures towards, towards your fellow man, whether it's your family or someone that is your acquaintance.

I sort of have a faith that God is taking care of me, that's been my life, my lifetime thought. That is my goal, is to know that, that I'm take care of. That when I go to sleep at night, I know everything is going to be all right when I wake up.

**Diane Whitney:** I told Ken yesterday when he called with the idea and I said it really hasn't affected me other than not being able to go to Project. But while I was on the phone Ken the wheels were still turning. And I said, you idiot, of course this affected me, you know, and my family. We're a very huggy family and it just, you know, we don't get together, we don't do road
trips, you know, we just. There's no hugging, no kissing, you know, course this affected me. And to have a doctor's appointment out in the parking lot, I mean, that was different for me.

**Mary Wesley:** What do you think stands out for you right now? What are we learning?

**Diane Whitney:** Not taking my friends for granted. I am really really anxious to meet, see them all again. We just get used to it every day, and then when they're not there, I can't help but miss them. So yeah. I go up in the lobby and in the mornings wait for the mail. And usually we have a little gab fest six feet apart. So that's my big, exciting mornings.

One of the good things about this is that the restaurants are starting to open up again. And we usually do sibling night. And I have two brothers and two sisters. And so at least once a month or every three months, we'll get together. So we just did this oh a couple weeks ago, and it was so nice seeing everybody because I hadn't seen them for at least three months. And we went to Mr. Ups and we were down on the porch and they had quite the business that night, even though we were all six feet apart and at the tables. It was very, very nice.

*Cello interlude.*

**Jean Bateson:** I will do what needs to be done with that with the Coronavirus. I mean, I will wear a mask. I will do all the things that they ask us to do because. I respect other people, but I don't believe that there's anything to be, so upset about, worried about. I've seen too many things that have happened in my lifetime that people have survived and. Be aware. Yeah, be aware and use good judgment, but don't get into fear. It doesn't do any good, doesn't help anything.

Anything else? Well, let's see.

**Maeve McCurdy:** Yeah, well, how has your life, has your life changed in a lot of other ways since, you know, really having to stay home?

**Jean Bateson:** Oh, no, not at all, not at all. This may sound conceited, but it isn't. It's, I've worked on myself over the years, and I like myself. I like my own company. Yeah. So, yeah. So it's like what's the difference? No, no different than it was before. You know, I do what I want to do.

Not everybody is going to understand what this next thing that I'm doing is, but nevertheless, I'm planning my own funeral, and I was going to do it before I died. I have it all. I haven't completed it yet, but I have pretty much what I want. The music that I want, the people that I would like to have do my eulogies, eulogies. I have a granddaughter who is a minister, so I want her to perform the services. And as I said, I was, I really was thinking of making a party of it, doing it while I was alive. So that I could see what people thought of me, you know? Doesn't that make sense to you?
Maeve McCurdy: Yeah.

Jean Bateson: Yeah.

Maeve McCurdy: Hear good things about yourself.

Jean Bateson: Yeah. And anyway, I'm working on that.

Cello theme.

Roger Rice: When I start seeing signs all over our building, you know, warning about masks and the gloves and I go, uh oh something's going on. And so I was heading out the door to go to the store and I went over to Shaw's and we had to wait in line. And I says oh what's for what's going on? And cause I heard that China and Japan were infected with this. And I didn't know it came so quick to the United States and Vermont. And I says, hmm, Okay, well, I guess you gotta be careful.

We have three floors so I can walk indoors. Keep moving. And listen to the tape that my aunt made with, my niece did a presentation like we're doing today about how life was in the Depression and what they had to do. So I said, well, you know, that's similar to what's happening here. But this is a virus. And life goes on. And we've got to keep going. That's what my aunt always said. Life goes on, keep going. And think positive things. Don't let the news get you down. And when you're feeling down, put on some happy music. It'll make you feel better. Move around a little bit or something. But life is good. You know, it's different. In reality, it's a whole different world out there. So hopefully we can all be together soon.

Upbeat cello music.

Mary Wesley: You've been listening to the voices of Arlyn Foote, Penny Battison, Nancy White, Sylvia Coffin, Diane Whitney, Jean Bateson and Roger Rice. Again, a huge thank you to these people and everyone that we interviewed. I'm especially grateful to Ken and Geetha who you heard earlier in the show, and the many Project Independence staff members and volunteers who worked in partnership with me and Maeve to make this Listening in Place project a reality.

I know a lot of us probably have Zoom fatigue. The struggle is real! Whether it's for work or play, so much of our social interaction has been moved into a virtual, distanced, seemingly disconnected space. But I have to tell you, signing in to do these interviews a couple of times a week over the summer was hugely rewarding and restorative for me. Making time to sit down, ask someone about what they're experiencing at this time, and then listen, really listen to them, even through a computer screen, is different. Different than a meeting! Different than a webinar.

This is what Listening in Place is all about. The belief that a pathway through anxiety, fear and uncertainty lies in the act of listening as much as it does in the act of telling one’s story. Both are important and both are accessible to YOU. If you’d like to learn more about doing your own interviews in your family, household or community or if you’re part of a group or organization like
Project Independence and would like to partner with VFC to engage in this kind of work head to our website at www.vtfolklife.org/listening to learn more.

Cello theme fades in and continues under narration.

From all of us here at the VFC we hope you and your families are keeping as well as can be. We’ll be sharing more stories from our Listening in Place project through this podcast and also on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. You can follow us @vermontfolklife.

If you liked listening to this show please tell others to look us up and subscribe. You can find VT Untapped on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, Spotify and TuneIn Radio.

VT Untapped is produced by me, Mary Wesley. Maeve McCurdy and Abra Clawson were assistant producers on this episode. Our executive producer, who also happens to be the VFC archivist, is Andy Kolovos. Music in this show was recorded by Dave Haughey. Thanks for listening.

Cello music swells and ends.

And you’re gone again. Anya?

Are you there? Oh now I can hear you.

I can hear me again.

You know, as disruptive as it is, I think it’s really, it shows what we’re working with here.

Laughter.

You know, that we’re all kind of, this is sort of a day in the life of.

Yeah it’s the new normal. Laughs.

Exactly. Alright.

Okay.

Final cello notes sound and fade out.