Increasing Access to and Appreciation of Local History Through Database Overhaul and Redesign

Contact Information:

Browning Genealogy

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Program Description:

Browning Genealogy seeks funding to update our local history database, improving community members' access to historical and cultural education and engagement.

Amount requested: $10,000
Total cost of project: $11,025

Program area:
Arts and Culture

History, vision, and mission:

Browning Genealogy is a nonprofit historical database and obituary archive, with current and forthcoming projects organized in partnership with the Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library, the libraries in surrounding counties, and USI. Our files contain over 828,000 local history entries and nearly 466,000 obituaries from Southern Indiana, Northwestern Kentucky, and Southeastern Illinois.

Since 1954, Browning Genealogy has worked to fill Vanderburgh County's deep community need for historical preservation and genealogical records. In 1981, our organization distributed our files to ten local libraries, as well as the Allen County Genealogical Library and the Library of the Latter Day Saints. At the time, local librarians commented that these files were among the libraries' most used resources, and in 1999, the Browning records—containing information from

the 1850s to present day—were digitized and donated to the Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library.

Our staff updates the digital archives daily, adding obituaries, cemetery information, yearbooks, veterans' records, letters, and genealogical data from Vanderburgh, Knox, Pike, Posey, Perry, Spencer, and Warrick Counties. Our mission includes preservation, education, community engagement, and outreach. Aided by funds to modernize our databases and build capacity, we plan to expand our records, launch interactive tours, create internships for students and underserved community members, and preserve local history in perpetuity.

Employees: Full-time (1), Part-time (6), Volunteers (2)

Objectives and methodologies

Goal One: To increase web traffic from new and existing users by updating and linking Browning's two databases, redesigning the website to include global search optimization, expanding our local history archives, and integrating social media, video, and donation options.

Objective: The database will demonstrate a 30% increase in web traffic from new users and a 30% increase in traffic from existing users post update via google analytics.

Goal Two: To increase our community donations and build a contact list of potential volunteers and donors.

Objective: With the implementation of a donation button and optional surveys collecting user data and contact information, Browning Genealogy will increase small, individual donations by 95% and increase volunteers by 80%, helping us to achieve our goals of long-term sustainability.

Methodology: Browning Genealogy will provide Google and website analytics and host pre- and post-update focus groups featuring users of different ages, backgrounds, and goals to measure database goers' experiences regarding website usability, ease of access, increased local history and obituary catalogs, updated global search optimization, and social media integration. Additionally, we will provide information on donations collected from our website patrons.

Our activities will include regular meetings with our web designer; strategy sessions and beta tests; publicizing our growth and redesign through social media; organizing and executing focus group meetings; gathering and compiling website analytic reports; adding new local history data to the improved website; marketing our free services through digital and print avenues.

We use best practices when archiving and preserving timeless, delicate materials and offer free, unlimited access to all of our files. Our board is comprised of dedicated community members who have devoted their lives to honoring and preserving the memories of the Vanderburgh community.

Statement of Need

Since its inception in 2007, our local history database has garnered millions of unique views, with nearly half of the website's hits coming from new visitors. Browninggenealogy.org is a vital resource for the Vanderburgh community, providing newspaper obituary archives, veterans' records, a business-entity database, immigration logs featuring naturalization records for Vanderburgh and Warrick counties from 1850-1920, as well as photos of headstones, plot locations, and death/birth dates. We are the only genealogy database of this kind to offer all of our information free of charge. With the help of generous gifts, we hope to integrate our Youtube channel into the website's new design, which features over 250 videos and boasts over 52,000 views.

Our database receives up to 15 million visits per year. In the past month, the website attracted over 400 users and received nearly 10,000 page views with an average session of 10 minutes. Most users visited between 14-19 pages per session, with roughly 50% of hits coming from new website users. With database updates, we hope to attract even more visitors and continue to act as a vital educational and cultural resource for Southern Indiana, Northwestern Kentucky, and Southeastern Illinois.

Outcomes

Improvement to our infrastructure in the form of technological updates will increase our organization's capacity to preserve the past for future generations. We hope that the new, user-friendly nature of the linked databases, along with social media and cross-platform integration, will result in revitalized historical interest from the Vanderburgh community, especially from our young people and students in elementary and high school. It is our goal to modernize our resources so that our databases are intuitive and accessible for teachers to implement in their lessons, as well

as attractive to underserved populations who are unfamiliar with our free resources. Optional data collection from our website's visitors will allow us to increase our communication with users and build email marketing, volunteer recruitment, and fundraising campaigns to work toward sustainability.

Partnership and collaboration

Browning Genealogy is partnered with the Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library, which hosts our original obituary database, as well as the University of Southern Indiana. In collaboration with USI, we are creating and planning paid local-history internships for students with interests in history, genealogy, art, design, technology, communication, business, and writing. Our partnership with USI allows us to give back to our community, broaden the scope of our work, and avoid duplication.

Updates to the website will empower our interns to research, document, and digitize larger volumes of information, enabling them to organize and share their work in a comprehensive, modern system.

Implementation

To ensure that no data is lost in the transition, the database overhaul and redesign will be engineered and implemented by a designer familiar with the website's current structure. The staff at Browning Genealogy will be in constant contact, collaborating and testing the website to ensure that it meets the needs of community members in Vanderburgh county and those across the U.S. and abroad seeking information about their family members who live or lived in Southern Indiana, Northwestern Kentucky, and Southeastern Illinois.

Timeline

(Step One) - Grant funding announced; collaborate with website designer on database overhaul; consult USI's history department and EVPL staff about ways to improve access and user experience; write pre- and post-redesign surveys for focus group participants; create email marketing and fundraising strategy for collected emails and home addresses.

(Step Two) - Announce website updates in press releases, social media, and on the website; create social media donation campaigns; host a half-day training at Browning Genealogy to teach our staff and local librarians about database updates; train interns on new database entries and best practices.

(Step Three) - Monthly check-ins with Browning Genealogy staff to make sure the website is delivering on the community's needs; organize focus group; gather and analyze focus group results into a report; make any necessary changes to the website; compile report assessing successes of outcomes from survey information and google analytics data. Distribute press release on Vanderburgh Community Foundation and Browning Genealogy's partnership in successfully serving community needs in history and culture.

Budget:

Website Overhaul and Redesign: $11,025

Itemized website redesign elements:
$2,550 for database and search capability improvements.
$5,250 for design updates; mobile-friendly and donation integration.
$1,725 for security updates.
$1,500 for website customization.

Proposal Funding Sources:

$10,000 from Vanderburgh Community Foundation (unsecured).
$1,025 from Browning Genealogy Nonprofit (secured).

Sustainability:

Browning Genealogy has over 50 years of service in providing the Evansville community with vital cultural and local history resources. Mr. Browning believed that every person's story is worth telling, and he dedicated his life to honoring the lives of the everyday, unsung heroes of Evansville, Vanderburgh County, and the surrounding areas.

As our nonprofit expands, we aim to echo that sentiment in our commitment to community outreach, engagement, and individual empowerment. Not only do we want to preserve the past for future generations, but we want to give back to the community in a measurable way today. Funding from the Vanderburgh Community Foundation will allow more stories to be shared and new potential to be uncovered in the lives of Vanderburgh citizens.

Browning employs part-time archivists and student interns to collect and enter local-history data. Fundraising and collaboration facilitate our goals toward sustainability.