

Trending: T-Mobile CEO John Legere slams Verizon's new 5G offering: 'Will never scale ... but it is first, r

A nonprofit battles the 'magnetic media crisis' by digitizing aging movies before they vanish

BY LISA STIFFLER on October 1, 2018 at 4:00 pm

1 Comment

f Share 165

🐦 Tweet

📌 Share

👍 Reddit

✉ Email

Sponsored by



This **special series** focuses on important community issues, innovative solutions to societal challenges, and people and non-profit groups making an impact through technology.



In a narrow, windowless, closet of an office in Seattle's City Hall, two young women are battling against the "magnetic media crisis."

That's because the Hi8 home movies, VHS recordings and Betacam cassettes from decades ago are approaching the end of their lifetime — if they're not already past it — and **starting to fall apart**. One of the biggest threats is an ailment called "sticky shed syndrome" where the glue that holds the components of the magnetic tape together breakdown, and the recorded images and sound are lost forever.



Libby Hopfauf, left, and Ari Lavigne are audiovisual archivists with Moving Image Preservation of Puget Sound, or MIPoPS. (GeekWire Photo / Lisa Stiffler)

If it's a movie of Susie's third birthday in 1977 that vanishes, her family may mourn the loss. But also captured on these failing media are historically and culturally significant and rare recordings. And it's these motion pictures that are being saved by **Moving Image Preservation of Puget Sound, or MIPoPS** (pronounced "me-pops").

The tiny nonprofit and its two audiovisual archivists, Libby Hopfauf and Ari Lavigne, are currently hustling to preserve a set of 800 videotapes from the **Vi Hilbert Collection**.

Hilbert was a renowned elder with the **Upper Skagit Indian Tribe**, whose people live north of Seattle. She died in 2008 at the age of 90, and for decades worked to document and revitalize her



songs and stories and cultural materials," said Laurel Sercombe, a retired University of Washington ethnomusicologist who until recently oversaw the collection, which also includes audiotapes and manuscripts.



Vi Hilbert, an elder of the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe who promoted and taught the Lushootseed language and documented the culture of local tribes. (Jill Sabella Photo)

"It's the most important collection that we have access to and the indigenous people have access to," she said.

But key pieces of it are in danger of being lost forever.

Hilbert made videos of herself speaking Lushootseed — which was her first language — with other tribal elders, capturing exchanges essential to understanding a language that few speak and that Upper Skagit members are eager to teach. As she grew older, Hilbert hosted birthday parties that lasted days, inviting members of area tribes to share stories and songs, which were filmed.

Hilbert made the UW the custodian of the collection, but the university didn't have the resources to digitize the hundreds of hours of decades-old videos in order to preserve and share the materials.



Libby Hopfauf, audiovisual archivist with MIPoPS, transfers information from decaying magnetic tapes into stable digital formats. (GeekWire Photo / Lisa Stiffler)

Enter MIPoPS.

The 3-year-old nonprofit is focused on preserving videos and films from government agencies, university departments, museums and arts organizations, and religious groups. MIPoPS is led by Rachel Price. For the Hilbert project, which started this year and will finish in 2020, the team has secured grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

Some of the oldest tapes in the collection are from the mid-70s, featuring multiple Lushootseed speakers.

"It was almost impossible for us to get a good capture [of the sound and images] from them," said Lavigne. "Seeing the quality of the capture that we were able to get, it struck me how important the work we do is."

To transfer the information, the tapes can first be "baked" or put into a dehydrator. That improves their condition, but isn't a permanent fix.

With baking, "we can temporarily pause degradation," Lavigne said. "But we can't take the information that has fallen off the tape and put it back on."

Part of what makes the Hilbert videos so important is the fact that Hilbert herself gathered a lot of the information. Historically, it was usually white, male anthropologists or ethnomusicologists making these documents.



making sure that sacred, private songs and rituals are kept private.

"It's a balancing act," Vallier said. "We don't want to put anything out there that is personal or should only be heard by certain members of a community."

MIPoPS and the UW Ethnomusicology Archive recently hosted a screening of some of the videos. The event included a discussion with Sercombe and Jill LaPointe, Hilbert's granddaughter, who is helping to manage the material.

Other MIPoPS projects include scenes from the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, construction of the Ross and Diablo Dams, and from the UW collection, African dance and folktales. There are quirky items, including an unlikely public service announcement promoting energy conservation. The 1987 video called "Reduce Your Bills and Cut Your Chills" features a rap written by local artist Sir Mix-A-Lot.



Inside the tiny office of MIPoPS is a tower of aging machines capable of playing outdated videos. (GeekWire Photo / Lisa Stiffler)

The organization also teaches people how to do the digital transfer themselves. One of the challenges is maintaining aging machines that can play the increasingly antiquated tapes.

And there's the question of which format to transfer the videos into. Today's technology will become obsolete someday as well. It can be expensive to store the large files in the cloud.

"Digital is not the end of the story," Vallier said. "It's the beginning of a new chapter of nightmares in preservation."

Upcoming events with MIPoPS:

- Learn from experts how to preserve your home movies. The pay-what-you-can event is Oct. 21 from 2:30-4:30 p.m. at the Northwest Film Forum. [More information here.](#)
- Watch the highlights from recently digitized materials at a screening called "Moving History: Sticky Shed Syndrome." Nov. 11 from 5-6:30 p.m. at the Northwest Film Forum. [More information here.](#)

Sponsor Post



This is part of a [special series of stories](#) by GeekWire — underwritten by the Singh Family Foundation and Seattle-area business leader Steve Singh — focusing on important community issues, innovative solutions to societal

challenges, and people and non-profit groups making an impact through technology. Do you have ideas for future installments? Contact Lisa Stiffler at lisa@geekwire.com.

More Impact Series

[Opening the door to inclusion through our 2018 GeekWire Summit non-profit Impact Partners](#)

[The multibillion-dollar question: What in the world \(or universe\) will Jeff Bezos do with his riches?](#)

[How kids quacking at a cartoon duck fuels bigger ideas about voice technology and access](#)



GeekWire contributor Lisa Stiffler is a reporter, editor and Northwest native who nearly two decades ago swapped a lab coat for a reporter's notebook. Covers local efforts to use technology to solve environmental, health, societal and other do-gooder challenges. Follow [@lisa_stiffler](#) and email lisa@geekwire.com.

1 Comment

f Share 165

t Tweet

in Share

Reddit

✉ Email

Previous Story

Meet Karat: This startup has quietly conducted 20K technical interviews for MuleSoft, Intuit, Pinterest

Next Story

TLDR: Digitizing movies before they vanish

Filed Under: [Impact Series](#) Tagged With: [audio](#) • [digitization](#) • [magnetic media crisis](#) • [MIPoPS](#) • [Video](#)