Sometimes history is about the grand sweep of events, but at other times it can be very personal. Last fall, senior history major Lindsay Little was worried that a piece of history was in danger of being lost—the history of her own family. "On my mother's side we have a huge family. My grandmother, Maria Cornelia Crisantos, was the eldest of twelve children. She came to the U.S. from Mexico, and for many years lived as a migrant farm worker in California. Now she was getting older, and we didn't know all the names and stories, let alone all the details. So my mom, and my aunt and uncle, asked me to start writing down the stories and to get back in touch with that history."

At the university, autumn quarter was underway, and Little was enrolled in a senior research seminar class as part of her degree requirements. Inspired by her grandmother's story, Little began to explore seminar paper topics that would connect her own family's experiences to larger historical questions of cultural identity and labor policy. The project gelled when she encountered a collection of California state records related to the Bracero guest-worker program of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. "My grandmother's father was part of the Bracero program," explained Little, "but it was also important to me how the Bracero project shaped later thinking on agricultural labor, immigration and Chicano identity. These are all things that have had a direct impact on my family."

While writing her seminar paper Little created a website that her family could use to access her research, professional and personal. Presented in English and Spanish, the site was designed both to preserve the family's memories, and to connect them to the larger historical narrative that she was researching. "The academic and personal sides of the project did not always take me in the same direction," Little acknowledged, "but they were definitely complementary. I learned how I could use my own experience as a springboard, to inspire and direct a project that has larger significance. I also learned not to assume too much based on my own experience, but to be able to step back and see the big picture—to recognize the many different ways that people experience the world."

A gratifying outcome of the project for Little was seeing how history could help her rethink her own experiences. "My family is a unique blend—not Mexican, not Irish, but a Chicano mix of the two. Working on this project has made me think a lot more about what that means. Now Chicano is not just a label for me, it is an entire conversation about how I relate to my family, to language, and to experiences that go back over generations." Still, the greatest reward came from Maria Crisantos's response to her granddaughter's efforts. "It touched her heart," Little recalled. "It was a blessing to be able to pursue a project like this."