

"Age In America" oral history project bridges a gap

BY JIM MERRITT

"When I was a kid ..."

Those five words spoken by an adult can signify nostalgia, but they probably spell boredom for most Long Island kids who would rather be text messaging than listening to dust-covered recollections of times gone by.

However, not all youngsters tune out when oldsters take a trip down memory lane. Justin Dobrow, 13, of Selden, and Casey Obratis, 12, of Manorville, for example, were fascinated recently to hear their grandparents tell stories about growing up on Long Island during the Great Depression and World War II.

Justin and Casey are among five Long Island kids who recently recorded interviews at the start of a two-year oral history project jointly sponsored by the Long Island Museum of American Art, History of Carriages in Stony Brook and the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach.

Bringing them together

Part of the Libraries for the Future "Age in America" project, the Stony Brook-Middle Country collaboration is one of three such pilot programs nationwide - the others are in Norfolk, Va., and Hartford. The object is to bring libraries and museums together to "keep older adults active and civically engaged," said Lori Abbatepaolo, an adult-services librarian at the Middle Country Public Library. The Institute of Museum and Library Services, a government agency in Washington, D.C., provided a \$20,000 grant for staff time and other expenses.

The interviews are being recorded on a DVD-quality Sony Hard Drive DV camera, with an extra-sensitive wireless Bluetooth microphone. (Justin, a self-described fan of technology,

volunteered to operate the digital camera for future interviews.) They will be edited into mini-documentaries and shown in a Long Island Museum exhibit, "Long Island Grows Up," which will open Feb. 14 and run through Oct. 25, 2009. They were also captured on a digital recorder in MP3 format and will be uploaded to a Web site devoted to the project, www.growinguponlongisland.org, which should be online in February, Abbatepaolo said.

Digging for anecdotes

Joshua Ruff, history curator at the Long Island Museum, said that rather than hire professional historians to conduct the oral history interviews, it was decided that kids would do the digging for anecdotes and half-forgotten memories.

He explained, "We felt there would be a level of intimacy between the grandparents and grandkids that would be genuine and very appealing."

In September, Justin, an eighth-grader at Selden Middle School, sat down at a library meeting room table with his grandfather Jack Dobrow, 77, of East Northport. Justin started out reading from a set of prepared questions, asking, "What was your best childhood moment?" and "What is your worst memory from childhood?"

But he soon launched into his own questions, indulging his curiosity about his grandfather's boyhood in Depression-era Flushing, Queens, and Brooklyn.

Did his grandfather have a girlfriend at his age? Justin wanted to know. (The answer was no, Granddad didn't date until he was 15.) Justin also found a generation gap when he asked where his grandfather used to "hang out."

"I don't even remember the term 'hanging out,'"

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Dobrow told Justin, "but I'd come home, listen to the radio, do homework, go out and play."

But there were generational bridges, too, such as a shared enjoyment of "The Wizard of Oz," the classic Judy Garland movie that Justin saw on DVD and his granddad enjoyed during its original 1939 release.

For Casey, a seventh-grader at Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School in Manorville, her own interview was an opportunity to learn more about a woman she admires, her grandmother Kathleen Colletti, 73, of Selden. Casey was already familiar with some of her grandmother's biography, such as her career as a children's services and front-desk librarian at the Middle Country Library. Colletti and her husband, Thomas, a retired letter carrier, have five children, 11 grandchildren, including Casey, and four great grandchildren.

A book of memories

In the sixth grade, Casey had received a grade of 99 for writing a memory book about her grandmother, whom she affectionately calls Nani. "I wrote how I want to follow in her footsteps because I know how successful she was," Casey said.

During their oral history session, Colletti told of growing up "in the neighborhood" - the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn - in a two-family house on 52nd Street between Second and Third avenues.

Colletti said her childhood joys revolved around not television programs and malls, but sitting on the front stoop or playing games such as Ringalevio under a streetlight.

During her years attending a Bay Ridge parochial school and later Bay Ridge High School, Nani recalled, "sometimes I didn't have the money for the bus and had to walk home for lunch. She [Casey] was kind of surprised about that."

After school, "we would gather on the floor and listen to the radio," Colletti told Casey.

Colletti summed up her memories of growing up with a few well chosen words: "It was a simple life."

Inquiring minds want to know

Some suggested topics for "Age in America project"

When and where did you grow up?

What was your best childhood moment?

What is your worst memory from childhood?

Did you feel any peer pressure to behave or dress in any certain ways?

Do you remember the day you felt like you'd become an adult?

Who lived in your household?

Describe a typical day in your family's life.

Would you change anything about how you were raised?

Where did you go to school?

How did you get to school?

What did you study at school?

How much homework did you have?

What was your favorite toy?

Who were your best friends?

What did you do together?

What was your favorite movie? Your favorite music?

How did your relationship with your family change once you became a teenager?

Did you hang out with friends much as a teenager?

Do you remember your first date?

What didn't you do as a child and a teenager that you always wanted to do?

Did life turn out the way you thought it would?

Interview Grandpa?

Hey kids! Have a grandparent who grew up on Long Island (Nassau, Suffolk, Brooklyn or Queens) and is willing to sit down for a 20-30 minute interview? Through December, you can set up your own oral history recording session by calling Lori Abbatepaolo at the Middle Country Public Library, 631-585- 9393, ext. 295; or Joshua Ruff at the Long Island Museum, 631-751-0066, ext. 224.

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