

Residents tell stories of hardship, inspiration

If you want to see the face of the Inland Valley, take a look at "Here I Am: Extraordinary Lives in the Inland Empire."

You'll meet Pat Yeates, who grew up in poverty in Pittsburgh with dreams of learning to dance. Dancing would lead to a stint with the Ice Capades and a more prosperous life.

Or Gordon Ayers, who got married and drafted into World War II within a heartbeat of each event and spent the next two years fighting across the Pacific. Or Fred Roccatini of Alta Loma, who grew up in war-torn Italy and owes his life to a German tank commander who saved his life.

Not all the stories are wrenching. You'll also meet Mary Martha Barkley, who was driving a truck at age 9 simply because she was "tall" for her age and could.

What you will find if you visit <http://is.gd/BFwsIK> is a remarkable collection of stories, family stories, that provide an insight to this community.

It all started last fall, when Chaffey College's Wignall Museum hosted an exhibition called "When I'm 64." What began as an artistic look at seniors and aging has taken on a life of its own, one that residents should embrace.

"As part of the public programming in support of the exhibition we held an event called Your Story Here. We solicited applications from our local seniors to apply to participate in a one-day oral history project," said Rebecca Trawick, the Wignall Museum's director and curator.

Twelve participants were selected, and they sat down with Jane and Peter Shafron of Your Story Here Inc. When the sessions were completed, the Shafrons edited the film and then gave free copies to each. But the Shafrons were intrigued and took it a step further, making the 20-minute documentary of the process but also the people involved.

Participants were given topics to review and then talk about. The entire process resulted in six hours of filming. The Shafrons said editing was a must, but they didn't want to leave so many memories on the cutting room floor. They came up with the idea for the documentary. Some historical material, music and graphics were added.

"The exhibition grew in ways we couldn't foresee at the beginning, which was incredible. It's like it had a life of its own," Trawick said.



Courtesy Photo

Gordon Ayers is interviewed for the "When I'm 64" oral history program at Chaffey College.



Trawick sent a copy of the documentary to local PBS channel KVCR and is hoping to hear back.

Chaffey College now has a copy of the documentary for its archives and so does professor Catherin Baccus, who uses it as a teaching tool in her gerontology classes.

"As a curator, this is exactly what I'd hope for an exhibition like this that tied into our local community. It was far beyond what I could have hoped, but the exhibition and all the related programming helped us to reach out to artists, performers, seniors and their families and many others who haven't ever visited us before," she said.

"It was an amazing way to connect to segments of the local community that we haven't had a chance to in the past."

For Mary Martha Barkley, her daughter Floy Biggs and the rest of their family, it was sheer fun.

"I enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on my past," Barkley said.

"Telling stories is something that is so familiar to me — I grew up in a time where all we did was tell stories. Gathering around and listening to my own parents and grandparents tell stories is such a wonderful memory for me. The seniors involved in the project were such an inspiring group. It was a very easy process, and I am grateful to have been a part."

"I was so excited when my mother was chosen to participate

in the Story Boarding. It was an opportunity for her to reflect on her life and share words of wisdom. My whole family loved watching all the videos. I think an opportunity to see such extraordinary stories from such an eclectic group of seniors was quite inspiring. We all must capture the stories of our parents and grandparents or we will lose them with their passing," said Biggs, chief executive officer of Community Senior Services in Claremont.

Jane Shafron couldn't agree more.

"Everyone has a story that is important to their families and deserves to be preserved for future generations," she said.

"You don't have to be famous or have had a dramatic life to have an important story for your family. And certainly, people who were born and grew up in the 20th century have lived through dramatic times. Knowing about those experiences can make history come alive for their descendants. And, if we know the stories of our ancestors we know something about ourselves."

In today's tech-savvy age, Shafron said there is no excuse.

"We have the technology to capture not just the stories but the personalities, the laughter and tears, in video. And telling your story is worthwhile whether you do it on video or as a memoir," she said.

"There are people who can help. The Association of Personal Historians, I am a director, has members, professional personal historians who can help record stories on video, audio or in writing."

Shafron has a website at www.yourstoryherehome.com.