

Their gift is their life

By: **MARION CALLAHAN** (Sun, Dec/02/2007)

Their Christmas gifts are their words.

Their treasures are their memories, a lifetime of lessons learned, tragedies endured and soul mates found and then lost.

John Donohue, 85, writes of his best memories that include his first encounter with his wife; and his worst memory, the day his 17-year-old son jumped into the Neshaminy Creek to rescue someone and died. ([See Video](#))

Orphia Wirth, 89, writes of an early childhood bond with an imaginary fairy that helped her cope with not being allowed to go outside and play with other children.

Elaine Van Aken, 79, writes about the Depression's grip on everyday life — how food was rationed and how even a dropped egg was scraped up for saving.

"We've all been through the same things one way or another, yet each of us is different," said Emma Preiss. "We were born after the war to end wars, we went through the Depression, World War II, then it was Korea and Vietnam. Four wars have influenced our lives and now we are in the midst of the worst one. It's amazing what we have lived through."

During the last nine weeks, the group of seniors from Heritage Towers in Doylestown have been working with Doylestown life biographer Oana Nechita to unearth memories buried in their past and revive them on paper. While their histories are different, their intentions are the same: to share what matters most with their families so it won't be lost or forgotten.

Nechita, who has written and published her Romanian family's biography, began the meetings in October, with the goal of helping the seniors finish a story they could share as a Christmas gift. Nechita said she guides the group by asking questions that spark memories.

"I would say 'tell me more about the color of this, what foods your mother cooked or the weather the day so and so was born,' " said Nechita, who asked that they record their life lessons, their greatest influences and fears they have conquered. "It worked very well. You start with an outline and a few memories and it takes a life of its own."

For Preiss, 87, the class answered a question that she had been asking for years: "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?"

"Every New Year's Eve, I would ask the same question ... for years, I never got an answer," she told the group during their last session this week.

"But as a result of this class, I am going to be able answer that question: I'm going to write a book: 'My Life's Journey' and I'm going to make it a best seller," said Preiss, who began digging through photos she had tucked behind a chair that she hasn't touched for years.

She said many people today are more disconnected from their pasts and their histories, as families live farther apart.

"My family was fortunate to have that kind of family that lived close," said Preiss, who is recruiting her two nieces and nephew to help. "You don't have families like that today and as a result of that you miss an awful lot."

Elly Kupferschmid said the sessions helped dredge up experiences that may not otherwise have been recalled.

"It made us remember things we had long forgotten," said Kupferschmid, who has been sharing the memories over the phone with her three children, all of whom live out of state. "They are anxious to see the finished product."

For Kupferschmid, she said her book — which she will put in the mail this week — chronicles her life, but it also passes on her values, lessons and family traditions, like the three layer cake she would bake every Christmas.

"It was frosted with whipped cream, and a long candle would be in the center of it with a sprig of holly," she said. "The kids would look forward to it so much. And they would sing happy birthday to Jesus."

Inside her handwritten book is this experience from when she was 6 years old:

"During the Depression when no one had any money, my mother gave me \$1 to buy four presents for the rest of the family, for 25 cents a piece. In Fishman's store sat a jolly fat Santa who would take kids on their lap and listen to their Christmas wishes. I had my precious dollar bill in my hand as I climbed into Santa's lap. After a lovely chat with him, I climbed down to start my shopping. Except that all of a sudden I didn't have my dollar bill. I suddenly remember how Santa held my hand so ardently and I'm pretty sure he palmed the dollar bill. After quite a bit of crying at home, my mother gave me another dollar bill. She went with me and this time went to Woolworths and then came a very sad explanation to me of how Santa could be at two places at the same time."

John Donohue began writing his favorite story, two years ago after his wife died. The class, he said, gave him motivation to write more about his family.

"My favorite story is meeting my wife, Helen, in France in 1945. I wrote this just after her death, unfortunately, two years ago," she said. "So it was a very lonely time, and some of the writing might have been a little morose. It was so good to write about her, because we were so much in love. She's the love of my life."

Donohue met Helen at a Red Cross dance, where he recalls dancing to "Sentimental Journey."

"On a blind date I met this woman I lived with for 60 years. Some blind dates work out very well. I remember; we danced all night."

In his book, he wrote:

"We were on foreign soil, immersed in the greatest war ever fought and were serving our country to the best of our abilities. The reward for us was great after this chance encounter — a lifetime relationship of love and friendship. But it wasn't easy — we worked at it."

During the next 20 years, John and Helen Donahue had 10 children, one of whom died at the age of 17.

"We lost him, the only one who isn't alive today," said Donohue, who wrote another book about his son. "He was a Red Cross lifesaver. He was on vacation. He tried to save someone from drowning in Neshaminy Creek and he never came up. So I wrote that up, which was tough...The title: 'A promise unfulfilled.' He was a hero. He never let us down. This book is in honor of him. "

Elaine Van Aken said her book gave her an opportunity to remember warm family memories that came in "good times and in tough times." She recorded this memory from her childhood:

"Certainly I was too young to be fully aware of the heartache of the depression. However, there are several things that do stand out in my memory. I recall my dad leaving regularly to stand in the bread line. He would return with a bag of noodles and a loaf of bread. Every now and then, he would get real butter, which my mom carefully doled out. The lack of protein was of great concern to my mother. Then one winter day dad came home with a precious bag of six eggs. The sidewalk was icy and as dad came up the walk, he stepped on a spot of ice and fell, breaking three of the eggs. His heart was broken like the eggs: He knew how much the family needed them. But mom carefully picked out the pieces of shell and scrambled what remained. And what a feast with noodles and home canned vegetables."

Van Aken's recollection of the Depression and World War II unearthed memories for Orphia Wirth.

During the Depression, Wirth was confined to her home and restricted from playing with the children in the neighborhood. Wirth wrote about how she made it through that isolating time in her life.

"I had a fairy; it was a lovely beautiful thing that played with children," said Wirth, describing the memories she put in her book. "I had my own fairy. I didn't name here. She was my good fairy. She whispered back to me so my father wouldn't hear. She did wonderful things. She made sure I had chocolate candy. My mother would never let me have chocolate candy. Really, I think it's the only thing that got me through my childhood."

Touched by Wirth's story, Preiss added that the adversity they all faced in life gave them strength and stories.

"It made me a stronger person," she said. "And I want to pass that on in writing my life story. I hope my family may find something in my story that might touch them."

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