

In the first person, past tense

Residents of Doylestown's Heritage Towers are writing autobiographies as a history project.

By Erica S. Brath

For The Inquirer

Residents of Wesley Enhanced Living at Heritage Towers in Doylestown spent this fall writing down the stories of their lives. Led by Bucks County biographer Oana Nechita, about a dozen residents met on Wednesday evenings in October and November to record their lives for current and future generations.

"Every New Year's Eve, I would say to myself, 'OK, Emma, what do you want to do with the rest of your life?' But I never got an answer," said Emma Preiss, 87, originally from Newark, N.J., who spent the bulk of her life in New York's Greenwich Village.

"As a result of this class, this New Year's Eve, I'm going to be able to answer the question. I'm going to write a book, my life's journey."

Old-fashioned notions of retirement living disappear the moment you enter Heritage Towers, home to more than 300 seniors residing in 221 independent and assisted-living apartments.

There's a wellness center, beauty salon and restaurant-style dining in addition to a wealth of activities. The stereotypical image of aged men and women whiling away the hours in solitary, sedentary existence has been replaced by arts and crafts, card games and even tai chi.

In fact, one resident likened living at the towers to a college dormitory, without the age-related shenanigans, of course. And it is the residents' combined experience of a time so different from, yet in many ways similar to, the modern age that made the autobiography group such a success.

"We were born during a war. We lived through a very bad depression, and I think that's something you really have to experience to know what it is. And then another war, and you learn there's more to war, bad as it is, there's more than shooting guns and setting off bombs. It's making do with things, the needs of people, and the breaking up of families," said Orphia Wirth, 89, from Philadelphia, who worked as a nurse in the Philadelphia School District for "at least 20 years."

"We've made tremendous progress since World War II - it was a hard job, but we did it - and we wouldn't want to do it again. But it did make you appreciate one another, and what a loaf of bread really meant."

The idea for the group came from Nechita, who approached Cathy DeChellis, activities

coordinator at the towers, with the idea of holding a memory-writing workshop. Originally from Romania, Nechita makes her living as the Bucks Biographer, helping Bucks County residents record their histories and memoirs.

"I'm a kid compared to everybody here, and it was just amazing to see everyone writing and getting into it, putting the time in and continuing throughout the week, finishing up their stories," Nechita said.

"All I did was just to mediate and bring out the stories and the details."

Sitting around a table in a cramped room, the residents met for the last time on Nov. 28 to share some final tales and recap what the autobiography sessions had meant for them.

Each of the participants' stories will be transcribed by a group of local high school students and made into a booklet in time for the holidays.

"This biography class, it was the sessions that gave me the incentive," Preiss said. "There's a lifetime of photos I have hiding behind a chair. I'm living here three years, and those photos I haven't touched, and now I'm connecting them with the writing of my book. So it will be the pictures that will give me the memories back."

Participants recorded those memories in a variety of ways, from spiral-bound notebooks filled with long, graceful cursive to folders bursting with typewritten pages. Timeworn photos lay strewn around the table or preserved in ornate frames as each autobiographer took his or her turn recounting tales from the past.

John Donohue, 85, from Philadelphia, described dancing with his future wife at a Red Cross dance during World War II. "It was the greatest war ever fought. That's what we thought," he said.

Donohue created slide shows of his memories on CDs for his nine living children, and their children, including photos and stories from throughout his life. And while his choice of media might seem unusual for someone born well before the Internet or iPod, saving his memories in digital form made sense for Donohue.

"I'm a chemical engineer. I've got a brain. I want to use it," he said.

Part of Donohue's multimedia memories include Doris Day's 1945 hit song "Sentimental Journey," which was playing, he explained, as he and his wife of 60 years, Helen, first danced.

Almost on cue, the rest of the group broke into song, "Gonna take a sentimental journey. Gonna set my heart at ease. Gonna make a sentimental journey, to renew old memories."