

# Seniors share memories through Creative Aging Writer's Workshop in Millersville



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Flossie Bensinger recalls bringing a baby pig into the house when she was a girl, and hearing her mother say, “Get that darn pig out of here!”

Janet Barch remembers Fels Naphtha soap, marimba lessons, scary radio programs and playing with a Lone Ranger wind-up toy.

Arlene Lease’s memories include swimming in a creek with cows and wearing long, cotton stockings.

And Ed Guion remembers the sound of a model A Ford engine starting up.

These are a tiny fraction of the memories — of city life and farm life, of beloved spouses enriching life and then passing from it, of faraway travels and domestic hobbies — shared Wednesday morning by a group of writers at the Millersville Senior Center.

The seniors were celebrating the end of a five-week Creative Aging Writer’s Workshop, led by Jenny Hill, a Lancaster-area teacher, writer and circus performer.

Their essays, poems and other reflections on their lives are gathered in a paperback anthology called “We Remember,” of which the seniors got their copies for the first time Wednesday.

## **‘Recycled teenagers’**

As the seniors gathered in a circle of folding chairs, cooled by a tall fan in the senior center’s community room at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Millersville, they took turns reading some of the writing they have produced over the past five weeks.

Hill has been giving them creative prompts — having them make anagrams of their names to see what those words suggest, for instance, or making lists of their likes and their pet peeves — that have conjured up pleasant, sad and funny memories some of the seniors have buried for years.

“How do you write a whole life, while you are inside of it?” Hill reads from her introduction to the anthology. “You write one story at a time.”

Each senior takes a turn reading a bit of their writing captured in the book, and the rest applaud as they finish.

“I am a daisy, happy and smiling,” reads Karen Minnig, 69, of Lancaster. “I like to do puzzles in the morning paper — it keeps my mind occupied. ... I don’t like it when I am alone, or when I can’t hear what people are talking about. ... I like having a glass of wine with a meal.”

“I remember I had an imaginary friend who lived behind the davenport,” reads Jeannette Mateer, 91, of Millersville. “His name was Jerry Safe Deposit!” She also recalls her family’s push mower, and roller skates fastened to her shoes with a key.

As Audie Martin, 94, reads a list of her childhood memories — riding a brown bike in the alley near her house, making rice pudding, “the cranky nun at St. Gabriel’s” — she pauses for an impromptu addition.

“I was studying to be a nun,” Martin, of Millersville, tells the group. “But then I met Bernie (who became her husband). ... They told me I couldn’t have children, which made me feel bad. But after eight years, I had a baby, and then three years later I had another. A boy and a girl.”

Nancy Wakeley, 80, of Millersville, reads about how she likes to spend time listening to favorite composers like Mozart and Chopin, and “reading a book that excites my imagination.”

“Life,” Wakeley writes, “is love, duty and honor to family and country. It’s gratitude, empathy, good manners, civil discourse.”

“I remember the intense pain and shock upon the ears upon first being exposed to the concussion of the bazooka rocket launcher being fired in the Army,” reads Guion, 84, of Manheim.

“We’re not old. We’re just recycled teenagers,” says Bensinger, 87, of Manor Township. She reads her memories of yelling “tidal wave!” when jumping into a swimming hole as a kid, and hiding dirty dishes under the sink so she didn’t have to wash them.

Marion Pfortsch, who is “past 80” and lives in Millersville, reads from a list of her likes and dislikes: She dislikes clutter, filling out lots of forms or personal questions. But this Long Island native favors traveling, the full moon, the sounds of the city and planning parties.

“This was such an enlightening experience,” Pfortsch tells the group. “You push your memories back with everything going on day to day.” Hill’s prompts, she says, brought them to the surface.

## **‘Greatest gift’**

For the past 18 years, Hill has been registered as a teaching artist through the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. She has taught writing, poetry, movement and more.

After her father died 11 years ago, Hill recalls, she started helping people in hospice care write their life stories.

“It ended up being the greatest gift I was given by all the people I met with,” Hill says, “who were open to sharing their stories at a time in their life when their life was ending.”

Her voice breaks as she remembers.

“This was a group of people I wanted to continue to work with because there was great wisdom and honesty, and beauty and realness,” she says.

It led her to training with the National Center for Creative Aging in Washington, D.C., and with Elders Share the Arts, in Brooklyn, New York.

“And that training ... continued a path of working with people who are older, in the creative aging field,” Hill says, “which is something I feel really strongly about. I think that one of the worst things in the world is loneliness. ... And as we age, we tend to become more isolated.

“And it’s things like this (writers group) that bring people together, give them a sense of belonging, forge new friendships — sharing stories this way.

“Hearing one person’s story makes you think of one of your own stories,” Hill says, “It’s those connections that matter the most.”

Hill’s writing residency at the senior center was suggested by center director Valerie Dunn, and funded by the nonprofit South Central PaARTners group at Millersville University’s Ware Center in Lancaster.

## **Fascinating and fun**

The seniors participating in the group say the stories they heard from each other helped them remember additional vignettes from their own lives.

They all seem to have enjoyed the experience.

“I thought it was fascinating. It’s fun,” Bensinger says. “I enjoyed every minute of it.”

Because she and her late husband didn’t travel much, she says, she enjoyed hearing about the lifetime of journeys by other group members.

“My creative instincts sort of reignited,” Wakeley says. “I hadn’t done much writing in a long while. It’s been a renewal with (reading) poetry, too.”

The questions Hill posed to the group, Wakeley says, led to “deep thinking (that) brought memories long buried and long forgotten back to the surface.”

“I’m just amazed at the talents, and the things that these people have contributed through the years,” Mateer says. “It’s been a revelation, really.”

“I’ve been retired for years,” Guion says, “and I kind of stay to myself. Coming with a group like this, and seeing how other people can be drawn out from memories — I call them trigger mechanisms — it reminds me of something that happened in my past.

“Someone like Jenny can just draw anybody out ... I was so impressed with her leadership” of the group, he adds.

“I really liked being here because it helps me be around other people, and gets me out of my house,” Minnig adds.

As the writing class draws to a close, Hill passes out peacock feathers and has the seniors try to balance the pointed end on their hands — a sensory activity she uses as a way to inspire creativity.

The blue-and-green feathers tremble above the writing circle as the seniors raise them on open palms.

Guion plays his ukulele and sings lyrics he wrote to a Gilbert & Sullivan tune about the writing-group experience.

The seniors then share the six-word life mottoes Hill asked them to write for the anthology.

“Life is fragile; handle with prayer,” says Bartch.

“Trust everyone, but cut the cards,” Guion reads.

“This was a very good program,”

Martin says, as the writing group ends and chair yoga begins at the center. “It was what I needed.

“In everything,” she adds, “we told the truth.”

*If your senior center or group is interested in having a creative writing class like this one, contact the Lancaster County Office of Aging at 717-299-7979.*