

Around the County

By Chris Rooney
Sausalito Marin Scope

While the wisdom of senior citizens is revered in other cultures, it is too often overlooked or dismissed in the U.S. At best, it's a wasted resource; at worst, it's a shameful lack of honor directed to those most deserving.

The shabby treatment of senior citizens resonates in Marin County, as the region has one of the oldest median ages in the state, perhaps the entire nation. However, a recently launched program (and website) is tapping into the minds and memories of the county's elderly and providing them with an outlet to tell their stories and impart their wisdom.

TellOurLifeStories.com is a website devoted to uniting people in the telling of their stories. It provides a secure environment in which people can invite family and friends to view and comment on their stories. They can also add stories to a collection.

The TellOurLifeStories project is working in collaboration with Senior Access, which provides programs and services for older adults with chronic health-care needs.

"I was able to connect with Senior Access through a friend of mine who is on their board," explained Margaret Randall, founder of TellOurLifeStories.com. "I was very happy that they wanted to participate in our promotion. We put their logo on our home page and for each subscription, priced at \$24.95 for the holidays, we donate \$5 to Senior Access."

Randall said the partnership with Senior Access is beneficial for both partners, as it allows the website to gather stories and provides an outlet for Senior Access clients to tell their stories.

"Our stories define us; they tell who we are," Randall said.

For Randall, a 25-year San Anselmo resident and former journalist, the value of hearing stories from previous generations hits home.

"I once asked my grandma what her life was like growing up. She told me about Milwaukee as it was at the turn of the century - horses instead of cars, great fields and farms instead of suburban acres. Years later, my mother elaborated. My great-grandmother left her husband because he was a drinker. That was unheard in the Polish Catholic neighborhoods of South Milwaukee. They moved far away, which in those days was only about five blocks from where they had been, but it was a different parish, different priest, different neighbors," Randall explained. "I was glad to know these things. If my mom hadn't told me that story, how would I have known my great-grandmother had such character, and raised a family of five children all by herself in those days. From what my mother told me, my great-grandmother drew people together and her home was home to some of her children and their children at times even after they were grown. My grandmother was the same way and I remember happy family parties during many holidays in her home."

Randall tapped into those stories and they helped her forge relationships - and her own stories.

"Having moved to California from the Midwest, with my family not being nearby, I discovered a sense of community in my church group. At potluck suppers at my house, which have been many over the years, I enjoy suggesting a story topic for our discussion time. Those potluck suppers have enabled me to create the family meals that I so enjoyed as a child with my extended family of friends," Randall said. "We've told stories about food and meals we've prepared and enjoyed,

and stories about how we've faced challenges, where we drew strength. We talked about what it is that we feel called to do. All the stories have helped define us to one another; we all have these stories that we have enjoyed hearing and telling. The stories we've shared in community have deepened our relationships with each other and they have also provided much cause for laughter along the way."

So TellOurLifeStories.com is a way for Randall to contribute to the idea of creating community through the telling and sharing of stories. The people at Senior Access have embraced the notion.

"We encourage people to support this new partnership and tell their rich and compelling stories," Andrea Goldfien, Senior Access development manager, said in a prepared statement. "We are using the website ourselves, to capture and preserve the stories of friendship that develop and are shared between our volunteers and Senior Access participants."

"It is our sincere hope that this fundraiser helps to heighten awareness of the good work of Senior Access in Marin County," said Randall. "We are excited about this partnership to raise funds for their continuing work. We recognize that partnerships such as this strengthen both organizations."

Senior Access has been serving Marin County seniors and adults since 1973. The organization provides programs and services to enhance the quality of life and independence of older adults. The Senior Access Adult Day Health Center and the Marin Alzheimer's Center are located in Novato and Kentfield and offer low-cost, structured day programs for older adults with physical and mental disabilities. Designed to be an alternative to in-home care services, nursing homes or assisted-living care, Senior Access supports family caregivers and offers programs that enable aging adults to remain in their homes and in their communities.

Visit TellOurLifeStories.com or senioraccess.org for additional information.

Contact Chris Rooney at crooney@marinscope.com