Librarian says, ‘let there be sound’

Oral history project wants to hear from you

by Paula Neudorf
Chronicle Contributor

As if it wasn’t enough for the Queens Library to manage over a million books, the library also seeks to preserve and catalog the history of Queens. To that end, it’s home to over 150,000 photographs, 6,000 maps and hundreds of thousands of manuscripts depicting “the history, the geology, the geography” of Long Island, including Queens and Brooklyn, said John Hyslop, the digital assets manager for the library.

But until an enterprising library studies grad student got involved, the library’s collection had one notable gap: audio recordings.

That librarian, Natalie Milbrodt, came up with an ingenious idea to help fulfill the library’s mission and make its substantial collection more accessible to the public. She would collect the oral histories of residents in Queens, from all walks of life and of all ages, contextualize them with material from the library and make all of this available online.

She called it the Queens Memory Project, and has teamed up with Queens College and Queens Library in her effort to interview borough residents and preserve the results.

Part of what inspired Milbrodt to start the project two years ago was her awareness of “how quickly New York neighborhoods in general change.”

“I just kind of got the sense that you needed to quickly take a snapshot,” she said.

Since beginning the project nearly two years ago, Milbrodt and her team have conducted and cataloged 30 interviews with people including Aaron Gorman, who in an audio clip on the site describes playing baseball at Forest Park’s Victory Field in the 1930s, and Annalou Christensen, who recalls what Flushing was like in the 1920s.

These interviews appear on queensmemory.org with related materials, including photographs and other ephemera, obtained from the interviewees or culled archives at Queens Library and Queens College.

And the Queens Memory Project has established a partnership with not only the library but a national oral history project called Storycorps.

Since 2003, Storycorps has been inviting people to tell and record their stories at special booths set up in New York, Atlanta and San Francisco, though it recently closed its booth here.

Typically, an individual interviews a friend, family member or loved one with a Storycorps employee present to facilitate the process and monitor the audio. A CD of the interview is provided to the participants at the end of the project, and all interviews are eventually stored at the Library of Congress.

Last fall, Storycorps came to Queens for a special Queens Week, and conducted 34 interviews at the Flushing Library and Queens College’s Rosenthal Library. These interviews have been made available to Milbrodt, who will take clips from them and put them on the Queens Memory Project’s website.

In addition, the 34 interviews, and eventually the thousands of interviews continued on page 35
Storycorps has conducted with Queens residents to date, will be digitized and made publicly available by Queens Library. "We feel like everybody has a story to tell, and this presents an opportunity for people to do that," said John White, a Storycorps facilitator, of the national project. Since he began working for Storycorps in 2007, White said he has helped facilitate over 800 interviews.

What struck him most about the experience, he said, was the "similarities between people."

"As a New Yorker, you can become very cynical," White noted. "You only glean parts of peoples' lives." But as a facilitator, White has been privy to peoples' thoughts and private lives, ranging from everyday details to accounts of momentous events like the 9/11 attacks.

"It's been a life-affirming, life-changing experience," White said.

While her interview methodology is more academic and hones in specifically on Queens, Milbrodt echoed White's experience when she noted the striking similarities between stories told to her by a woman in her 90s, a woman in her 40s and a teenager, all of whom had grown up near Kissena Park in Flushing, but in different eras.

"They described a very similar sense of their upbringing," Milbrodt said, adding that all three spent their time "hanging out in the same places."

Of the interview process, Milbrodt noted she often returns to the same person more than once, because "there are things you don't remember until you start thinking about them."

Anyone can contribute to the Queens Memory Project or Storycorps. To find out how, visit queensmemory.org or storycorps.org. A sample clip from an interview Milbrodt conducted with Aaron Gorman accompanies this story on the Chronicle's website, qchron.com.