

Where I'm from: poetry project preserves elders' memories

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The poems inspired by the elders of the Burleigh County Senior Center leap off the page and go straight to your senses. The heady scent of lilacs mingles with fresh bread from a summer kitchen. *Fibber McGee and Molly* plays on the radio, as grandmother's clock keeps time.

The quiet moments that make up a life can be just as evocative as the major milestones. The lives of 14 individuals are rendered in a series of sensory snapshots that put the reader right in the subjects' shoes. The truth of these poems is nestled in dozens of tiny details that history often overlooks. It's in the bark of the gnarled oak tree digging into the back of your knees as you hang upside down from its branches, the crinkle of a brown paper bag of Christmas treats, the tart taste of bull berry jelly on your tongue.

The elders served by Bismarck's Burleigh County Senior Center live in their own residences and come to the center for classes, activities and meals. Social distancing measures that curb the spread of the coronavirus have made community building a challenge. So Site Manager Lisa Bennett felt that the poetry project (which could be conducted remotely) was a responsible and timely way to use the facility's Art for Life Grant from North Dakota Council on the Arts – and to process the feelings stirred up by a global health crisis.

"I think every one of the people that did this will say that it gave them time to think about what's important in life," says Bennett, who also participated in the project herself. "Most of them grew up in the Depression, so they know what it's like to give up things. It was a very good reminder at a perfect time."

The subjects telephoned writers Matthew Musacchia and Maureen McDonald-Hins, who asked them a series of questions about their memories. After the discussion, the writers shaped their responses using the "Where I'm From" poetic template developed by George Ella Lyons. The finished poems were shared with the seniors (who were encouraged to send copies to friends and family) and published in the community newsletter. The poems will soon be compiled into a book for the elders as well. Some of the subjects admittedly needed a little convincing at first.

"I thought 'Oh dear, my life is not exciting,'" laughs Nanc Skaret, describing her initial reaction to the interview with McDonald-Hins. "But I found a lot of things to write about. I hadn't thought about some of this stuff for years."

"It was really fun for them," says McDonald-Hins. "Once they started sharing the poem with friends and family, I knew it was going to bring up even more memories and discussions."

That's the value of the program, Bennett says. After reading about air raid sirens and ration cards, living on WPA wages or a struggling farm's profits and tales of surviving icy ponds, exploding stoves and harsh winters (often without reliable heat or indoor plumbing), she gained a new appreciation for the people she serves.

"It taught me that they all lived really full lives," she says. "It just proves to me that the human race is very resilient."

Irene Walter, a poet herself, used the poem written about her to inspire her own work. She says anyone can – and should -- do a project like this with people they love.

"You just have to go back and think about how things were," she advises "I wish that we had asked our grandparents more, because there's so many things we wonder about now. Talk to the older ones while they're still here."