

Memoirs program has seniors reliving a forgotten Plainfield

By MARK SPIVEY • STAFF WRITER • January 3, 2011

PLAINFIELD — As the chief local history librarian at the Plainfield Public Library, Jessica Myers typically deals with still-life versions of the Queen City's past: photographs, blueprints, publications and other tangible mementos that constitute an impressive collection of archives.

But none of it can compare to experiencing the past through the eyes of people who lived it.

That's what Myers and others are able to do thanks to the library's Memoir Writing Club, which is offering a handful of local seniors the opportunity to create lasting reminders of a Plainfield that may be gone, but isn't forgotten.

"This group wants to tell their stories," Myers said. "And they're telling me things that I, even as a local history librarian, had never heard before."

The club currently has a modest number of participants, with about a dozen people convening at the library on Park Avenue and another dozen at the senior center on East Front Street (since September, monthly meetings have been held at both sites). But what's lacking in numbers is made up for in enthusiasm. Participants recall a local downtown that many decades ago was a hub of commerce, but also in some ways emblematic of the institutional racism that allowed for the existence of segregation prior to the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

"The neighborhood we lived in did not feel like anyone was segregated. It was a mixture of blacks, Italian and Jewish people . . . (and) at night you could go to bed with your house doors and cars unlocked, that's how safe it was," wrote Narissa Smith, who grew up as one of six children living in a home on West Fourth Street. "(But) there were incidents of prejudice that we had to experience: for example, where we were allowed to spend our money at a store, but had to take it (whatever was purchased) outside or wait outside."

Smith wrote that two of the city's four movie theaters

at the time were segregated, and young black students were not allowed to sit at indoor tables in a popular ice-cream shop or participate in programs at the "white" YMCA on Watchung Avenue — instead they had to go to a different one in the West End.

Other participants fondly recalled kindly owners of neighborhood grocery stores and delis who allowed families to keep tabs they would pay at the end of the week, like the long-defunct Pete's on Plainfield Avenue. Five cents, one club member wrote, used to go a long way.

"I think the thing I've been getting the most was the sense of community people shared," Myers said of her experiences coordinating the club's activities. "Not only did your neighbors know who you were . . . but so did the store owners, and they knew your brothers and sisters and parents, too."

Not all members of the club are local natives — Silvia Miller, 74, for example, grew up on a farm in rural South Carolina before moving here in 1965. But transplants' recollections of their own childhoods offer a refreshing change of pace.

"We had fun chasing the chickens and ducks, trying to catch them," Miller said, reading from a passage she recently wrote. "And getting hit in the face with cow tails while milking."

Arguably the club's biggest fan is senior center director Sharron Brown, who is engaged in constant efforts to get members to remain engaged and active as they grow older.

"I am in love with it," Brown said. "These seniors all have some stories to tell."

Mark Spivey: 908-243-6607;
mspivey@MyCentralJersey.com



Plainfield Senior Center - Tues., Dec. 14, 2010
Talking about their memories, From Lft- Michelle Bishop (fr. North Plainfield), Silvia Miller from Plainfield and Rt.- Jessica Myers, local history librarian share their memories of growing up. (Joe McLaughlin / MyCentralJersey)

IF YOU GO

WHAT: The Plainfield Public Library's Memoir Writing Club.

WHEN: The club's two groups each hold monthly meetings, convening 10:30-11:30 a.m. on the second Friday of each month and 10:45 a.m.-noon on the fourth Wednesday of each month.

WHERE: The group that meets Fridays convenes in Room 5 on the lower level of the Plainfield Public Library, 800 Park Ave., Plainfield. The group that meets Wednesdays convenes in the conference room of the Plainfield Senior Citizens Center, 400 E. Front St., Plainfield.

MORE INFO: To find out more about the club, contact Jane or Jessica in the library's Local History Department at 908-757-1111, Ext. 136, or write to localhistory@plfdpl.info.