

Remembering the Home Front

by Lynne Martin Erickson, Intergenerational Project Coordinator



“Sunday, December 7, 1941. If you’re old enough to remember that day, you probably do. You know where you were and what you were doing when you heard the news.”

So begins “Stars on the Home Front,” a slide/tape presentation that is part of Bi-Folkal Productions’ program kit, *Remembering the Home Front*. And so began a training session for volunteers to the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of Dane County for an intergenerational project focusing on the World War II years.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941 these particular volunteers were:

enjoying an afternoon of wedding planning

studying at the college library

in training at an Army base in Louisiana

on the farm doing chores

enjoying a day off from work at the shipyard

helping Dad make a rabbit trap in the basement, and

at Pearl Harbor making breakfast for a husband stationed there

Two volunteers were at the movies when they stopped the movie and the theater manager made the announcement that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. Two volunteers were working in movie theaters at the time and made that announcement.

One volunteer was a high school student, sleeping in her bed in Berlin. She noted that there is a 7-hour time difference between here and there.

Just a bit more than 55 years later, they were preparing to share their experiences with talented and gifted students in Phillip Paulson’s ninth-grade American history class at East High School in Madison. As part of a service learning project funded by the Corporation for National Service, the students and volunteers identified specific topics of interest from the years 1940–45. Pairs and teams were formed.

During six Wednesday afternoon class periods, the older adults were interviewed. The Bi-Folkal kit provided a nucleus of documentary information, sights, and sounds to prompt memories and discussion. The accompanying program manual included research topics and project suggestions. Each group decided for themselves how to preserve the shared memories and how to communicate them to others in their class, and other classes.

Through this project, seventeen older volunteers had the opportunity to have their stories preserved and 29 students began to understand what it felt like to live through a different period of history. Through a gala exhibit, the community had the opportunity to share in these benefits.

Selected Projects

Photography: A Moment Frozen in Time

June Stone, an accomplished photographer, brought stacks of large-format photographs with her to the sessions. The array includes an aerial view of our city that

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she took in 1942. The students duplicated and mounted a selection of photos to display with June's comments and additional historical information for the exhibit.

In a telephone conversation, the mother of one of the students told me that the project was very important for her daughter, because both of her grandmothers died when she was a baby. I commented that her daughter had been an especially sensitive and thoughtful partner for June, whose vision is failing. The mother gasped and told me that she herself had been visually impaired all her life and so her daughter would know how to deal with June's problems. I marveled at how things sometimes do work out.

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do work out.*

Harry Owned a Grocery Store...

Harry Blöda, a 1926 graduate of East High School, had a neighborhood grocery in Madison through the war years. His students constructed a scale model of the grocery counter at Harry's Food Shop. Aprice list was based on Harry's amazing memory of 1942 prices and the students' research of current prices. There was information about ration stamps, and a list of grocery store items not available until after 1945.

*A teenager in
Berlin during
World War II.*

Wartime Berlin

Rosemarie Lester was a teenager in Berlin during World War II. Her riveting stories were recorded on tape, accompanied by photographs for the exhibit.

Dating: Then and Now

Elizabeth Deakman's two students dressed a pair of mannequins to compare a woman headed for a date during the 40s and another during the 90s. Accompanying information compared how the women had met their dates, where they were going, and what they would do. The two mannequins stood guard over the entrance to the exhibit, welcoming visitors.

*With her husband,
stationed at
Pearl Harbor,
on December 7,
1941.*

Will this Movie Help Win the War?

Three students worked with Frank Piraino to gather movie posters from the time to be exhibited along with information about wartime entertainment.

"A day that will live forever..."

Betty Boardman was with her husband, stationed at Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. She heard the explosion. She and her students compiled a scrapbook of photos, letters, and mementoes detailing her experiences. A large-format timeline listed national events through the war years in blue, and Betty's wartime experiences in red.

*Broadcast over
WORT, a local
public radio
station.*

On the air with the invasion of North Africa

Judy Rendall's group chose one day during the war and gathered information about the news of that day for a half-hour of news and music that was broadcast over WORT, a local public radio station, the night before the exhibit. The exhibit featured a videotape of them at the station the night before, broadcasting live.

Dear Babe: Letters from the War

Alberta Piraino and her two students were interested in correspondence during the war. During an afternoon at the State Historical Society, they found a series of letters from a single soldier to his woman friend back home. They began with his arrival in North Africa and continued to the end of the war. A selection of these letters were displayed, along with pictures and samples of things mentioned in them.

A cassette tape of the letters (and contemporary sound effects) accompanied the exhibit for those who would listen and browse at the same time.

How to Eat Like a Patriot

The largest display provided a taste of the forties, literally. Phyllis George and her student had made jam, baked bread, and made cookies, using recipes and techniques from the forties. Cookbooks, Fiestaware, kitchen utensils, and food items were accompanied by notes about the items themselves and how they have changed since World War II. This energetic pair also baked cookies and made lemonade for the exhibit opening.

The largest display provided a taste of the forties.

The student in this pair was originally the least enthusiastic participant in this project. By the end of the project, she would have been in contention for most enthusiastic.

And More

Other exhibits featured diaries, music, fashion, newspapers, wartime schools, shortages and rationing.

The Gal a Opening

On the cold, dark Wednesday night of April 30, a night featuring rain mixed with the snow, there was a large crowd on hand for the exhibit opening. Patriotic red, white and blue signs provided directions to the exhibit from all four school entrances. All three local television stations sent cameras. All three made note of the event on their 10 p.m. newscasts.

And Two More Days

During the next two days, two or three classes of students toured the Home Front exhibit during each class period. From social studies, English, and art classes they came. Some of the students provided useful evaluation and commentary on the individual exhibits. Many students were envious of the opportunity Mr. Paulson's students had to participate in the project.

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Feedback From the Student Participants

Eighteen of 25 students responding developed a friendship with their older adult volunteer.

What were their favorite parts of the project?

when you put the project up and people would walk by and say,
"Ooh, ahh"

getting a new perspective on things

looking at my final product and being happy about it and the hard
work I put into it.

working with different people

listening to "real" experiences

looking at old pictures and hearing stories from my grandparents and
my RSVP volunteer, and

the artistic aspect of the finished product

Of course, if the students had it do over again, they would do some things differently. Among them:

- I would make sure my partner and I had the exact same project in mind at the beginning.
- start working on it earlier
- go to the library more
- have asked more questions
- limit groups to two people
- go without training sessions
- ask for instructions more to the point, with examples, and
- work more in the beginning.

21 of 23 students would recommend a project like this to a friend.

Twenty-one of 23 students responding *would* recommend this project to a friend.

FUND\$

The \$5,000 Learn & Serve America grant from the Corporation for National Service was achieved through Positive Youth Development and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of Dane County. The money provided huge benefits in allowing the students the freedom to copy photographs, to purchase display materials, and to dare to dream in planning their displays.

Other components I found essential in coordinating this project were: an energetic partner in Mary Phalen at RSVP, providing the project with excellent older volunteers and tons of her own good ideas; a flexible and congenial teacher in Phillip Paulson; and a supportive partner at Bi-Folkal in Jim Leide, willing to cover for me, pick up the slack, and save my life, as needed.

Primary Resource

Remembering the Home Front. Complete educational kit with extensive leader's guide features a section on using the kit intergenerationally. Borrow the kit from your public library, or rent or purchase from Bi-Folkal Productions, Inc. a non-profit corporation.

A reviewer for ***Choice*** highly recommends the kit: "This excellently produced multimedia kit containing cassette tapes, songbooks, slides, comedy scripts, and other paraphernalia is a delightful trip down memory lane for all ages. An old-time radio announcer tells the story of America's involvement in WW II on the home front from Rosie the Riveter and nylon stockings to rationing and war bonds. A review in ***Media & Methods*** concludes: "Altogether, this is a most intriguing approach to the country's social, cultural, and political history with potential for encouraging cross-generational exchanges.

Altogether, this is a most intriguing approach.

Video Project Report Available Now

A follow-up grant funded the production of a 14-minute videotape, *Moments Frozen in Time*. The students listed the steps in planning and carrying out the project and interviewed older adults and peers. Surely their goal of recruiting volunteers for a similar project with this tape will be assisted by this from volunteer Betty Boardman: "I recommend this to everyone because I think it's wonderful!... Of course I read a lot about how terrible kids are these days, but *my* experience is that they are *not* terrible. They are *wonderful!*" The video is \$30, plus \$7.90 packing and shipping.

