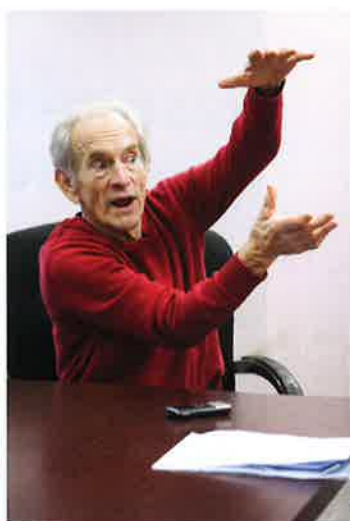


150 Years of Montclair Voices

CONTRIBUTED BY JANE M. ELIASOF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER

AS PART of Montclair's 150th anniversary, the Montclair History Center embarked on an oral history project to document life in Montclair in the early to mid-20th century. To date, we have over 60 interviews recorded with more than 70 people participating. The project was made possible through an incubation grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The stories span the 1930s to the 1970s and represent all walks of life and neighborhoods of Montclair. We have thousands of stories now in the record books about growing up in Montclair. They tell of growing up in what many people describe as "a simpler time." Barbara Williams spent the first 15 years of her life on Montague Place. "We were all Irish," she said. "There were the Walshes, the Duffys, the McGurks, and the Sullivans. She met Eileen McGurk when she was 4 or 5 years old. As they got older, they would ride bikes and play hide and seek. "I have the fondest memories, in the summer evenings, of playing board games on her porch. She had a nice screened in porch and we would play Go to the Head of the Class and Mystery, big board games at the time. We would play until it got dark and the street lights would come on and it was time to go home."

Second generation Montclair resident Jacqueline Pitts recalled how her mother came from Virginia and got a job as a



Left to right: Keith Ali, Daniel DiGeronimo, and Peter Guiffra



sleep-in domestic worker. Her father's parents moved from South Carolina when he was a young child. Her family was among the founders of Trinity Church on High Street, an important part of her childhood memories and Montclair's religious fabric. Stuart Kiel, whose family immigrated from Russia and Poland in the early 20th century, is the former long-time owner of Kiel's Pharmacy. As a child, he worked in his family's store from a very young age, stocking cigarettes, helping in the soda fountain, and mopping floors. As he got older, he took on more duties and eventually took over the business. Because his mother also worked in the store, their lives were centered around the family business. He remembers that his mother took his potential bride aside to warn her about how difficult it is to be married to a shop owner. Not to worry. Stuart had fallen in love with a woman whose family owned a five and dime store on Bloomfield Avenue.

Peter Guiffra shared how he became a fixture in Montclair's Fourth of July parade as Elvis Presley. In his interview, he talked about how he wanted to be in the parade, decided he'd portray Elvis, then had three fittings for his costume "like a bride." For him, being Elvis is his way of "thanking Montclair for being Montclair."

Keith Ali retired from the Department of Corrections in Newark after 35 years, but when he was just 19 years old, he ran the Sterington House, a nightclub across the street from

Lackawanna Plaza that operated from eight or nine at night to five in the morning. He left there to join the staff of the famous boxer Muhammad Ali.

Danny DiGeronimo was one of fifteen siblings who lived in Montclair's South End. When he was 18 years old, he was drafted into the Air Force, where he was a radio operator and aerial gunner on a B25 bomber. He served 11 months in what he described as "pretty quiet" China. When he was in Shanghai, awaiting orders to invade Japan, the US dropped the A-bomb. He returned home, married Carmella, and became a firefighter. After 32 years, he retired as Captain and became an optician.

Rafael Marzullo's family came to America in 1966, when he was a young boy. They owned Marzullo's Delicatessen on Grove Street for 32 years until they sold it in 2013. He recalled, in 1980, how the neighborhood was filled with "drunks and drug dealers." His family approached the landlord and said, "Let us take over this place. We'll do everything, and clean up the riff raff that's here." He says the opening of Marzullo's Café next to Marzullo's Delicatessen began to turn the neighborhood around.

Samuel Debnam recalled the culture shock he, as a Black man, felt when he was stationed in the south during World War II. He shared how he had played in a band in Florida and had been asked to dance by a white woman. The "boss" called him into the office, reprimanded him, and was never to do that again. He said, "you eventually learned to recognize the signs and know what you were supposed to do."

We've heard stories from people whose families harbored young children from London who stayed in Montclair to escape the bombs during World War II, of the formation of businesses

that have been an integral part of Montclair's history, of football games, skating on Edgemont Park, and Awful Awfuls at Bond's.

Once all of the oral histories have been transcribed and time stamped, they will be included in the Montclair History Center's archives for posterity. The Montclair History Center is also considering developing podcasts, exhibits, programs, and publications that would best showcase the rich history in the oral histories.

The Montclair History Center will be interviewing people until Thanksgiving. If you would like to participate in the oral history project or have an idea for how you'd like to see the oral histories used, please call us at 973-744-1796 or send a note to mail@montclairhistorical.org .



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