

Collecting historic Queens memories

BY ASHLEY C. HENRY

Walk through any neighborhood in Queens and more than likely you are walking past an historical moment. This is what Natalie Milbrodt, Queens College graduate student, felt was going on in her Waldheim neighborhood in Flushing.

"I was so interested to see the diversity and rapid development in Flushing" said Milbrodt. It's a site of global migration trends with history of diversity that goes back to the 1600's with the Flushing Remonstrance."

Beginning in June 2010, as an independent study Milbrodt conducted while in a Fellowship Program, she presented a collection of 20 oral history interviews from her neighbors. Later on Milbrodt was invited to contribute her findings to the permanent holdings of the Special Collections and Archives of Queens College.

By doing so, Milbrodt was able to receive a \$25,000 grant from the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO) which allows her to establish the collaboration with the Queens Library.

"I saw an opportunity to combine my interviews and digital photography of a contemporary community in Queens with holdings from the Archives at Queens Library to create a digital archive."

Though Milbrodt's original project was limited to her neighborhood, the scope has grown to all of Flushing to include a wide variety of cultures that are present. Milbrodt's work includes subjects such as 92-year-old Annalou Christensen (née McQuilling), whose parents purchased the lot for their home in the early 1900's from a packaged farmland as well as Annalou's own memories of seeing neighbors rent out rooms in their mansions for extra income during the Great Depression.

"The act of listening is powerful" said Milbrodt on how she interacted with the people and their own personal history, "I think that once we understand that an interviewer truly values our perspective and wants to learn more about our experiences, it has a way of opening us up to sharing truthful stories about our lives."

Milbrodt also spoke with Nilda Tirado, who along with her sister Rosa Tirado and their mother, Carmen Miranda bought their house in the 1970s and was among the first women in the area to be given mortgages, and the women also discussed their early efforts to be accepted as the first Puerto Rican family in the area.

Devotees of the largely South Indian Ganesha Temple, a vibrant community whose temple is currently undergoing tremendous expansion, were also included in Milbrodt's interviews. Along with the interviews, Milbrodt presented photographs that documented an annual ritual in which temple members pull a sacred statue of the Hindu deity Ganesha through the streets of Flushing on a chariot.

"This is a framework we're building for a project that will hopefully take on a life of its own within the documented communities themselves. There will be ways for people to contribute their own stories, images and other records of memory to the project," she said.

With hopes to launch a public version of The Queens Memory Project by fall 2011, Milbrodt ultimately hopes the archives will serve as a site for others to contribute their own photos, maps, and documentation.

"I think there are lots of ways for people to forge deeper relationships with their communities," she said. "The Queens Memory Project will hopefully become one way that many of us in Queens will learn more about the place we call home."



Photo Courtesy The Queens Memory Project

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