



“Just living longer doesn’t mean anything. You have to live better.”

—Harris John Frank, one of the founders of the National Senior Games Association

games we host. That’s a good indicator of the quality of program we’re providing for adults who are 50 years and better,” said Margaret Schatz, director of marketing and communications at the JCC.

One St. Louis-area competitor is Erich Dahl, who at 90 years old competed in

five events at this year’s local games. In 1938, at age 18 he escaped his hometown of Aachen, Germany, the day after the infamous Kristallnacht, traveling to Holland then England, and finally arriving in the United States on Thanksgiving Day. He later learned he had lost all of his family

and friends at the hands of the Nazis, and he joined the U.S. Army where as a staff sergeant he was sent to the Pacific.

“Other people tried to get out of serving,” he said, “but I wanted to get in for good reason: I had lost all of my family” and wanted to help win the war.

From Generation to Generation

By Dara Kahn

People today of all ages, stages, and backgrounds are taking up the rewarding art of writing personal memoirs and family histories, not only for the sheer joy of writing but with the hope of clarifying their own lives and passing their stories on to the next generation.

Pat McNees, an author, editor, and personal historian, teaches about life stories and legacy writing at the Writer’s Center in Bethesda, Md. There she encourages her students to write about whatever is most important to them—things they feel ambivalent about, difficult memories, pleasant ones—but always with an emphasis on storytelling. Participants read their work aloud and receive feedback from others in the class. She said that writing one’s life story in such a group setting with the help of a mature leader encourages people to view their past positively. This in turn promotes mental health and overall well-being.

While the classes attract men and women of all ages, McNees said many seem to be over 65, in what she calls the “making sense of my life” stage.

“We’re at a stage where it’s natural for us to be trying to find the patterns of our lives,” said McNees, 70. “It’s a period of nostalgia when the early part of our life in some ways is often more important than the middle and later part. Those memories are much stronger somehow.”

Among her students is 65-year-old Ruta Sevo, who signed up for one of McNees’ classes after retiring in 2006 from a career

that spanned information systems management, budget planning, and human resources development—including nearly 20 years at the National Science Foundation. Though she still consults, retirement has freed her to pursue what she had always wanted to do: become a writer.

“Part of it is introspection,” she said. “A lot of bad things happen as you age. You’re constantly feeling your physical being diminish. [There can be a sense of] constant loss, but your memory of the past gets richer. It’s very satisfying to close the loop.”

Sevo has written her own “ethical will,” bequeathing not tangible wealth but passing on values and conveying a meaningful message to loved ones after her death. In her document, Sevo has written of her family’s immigration from Lithuania to America after World War II; her encounters with sexism; her education, career, hopes, and fears. She wants those who read it to understand they had an important role in her life, and to learn something from it.

Another student of McNees is Lili Bermant, 83, a self-described “ordinary person with no ambitions of publishing” or writing a chronological biography. She took two consecutive legacy writing courses from McNees during which she chronicled her childhood experience leaving Belgium in 1940 to escape Nazi persecution. While her family’s original intent was to go to Portugal, they ended up going from Antwerp to unoccupied France, then to Spain and Cuba, ultimately landing

in New York City in December of 1945.

Inspired by the writing classes, Bermant began to collect her stories in a notebook, including narratives about her wedding day, the best decade of her life (the 1970s), her dreams, and religion, as well as a piece about what it was like to turn 80.

“I write for myself, but I also want something to leave behind for my children and grandchildren,” Bermant said.

Lenore Sack, 73, also took the legacy writing class after retiring 10 years ago. She began by writing down her recollections, ranging from positive memories of family meals and Passover seders to the difficulty of living in a predominantly Christian neighborhood during the holidays to dealing with deaths in the family.

“Besides the personal satisfaction I get is the ulterior motive [of giving] your children and grandchildren the history of the family in a different way,” said Sack, who took McNees’ class with her husband. “It’s a way of chronicling my memories, and it’s been a very stimulating and satisfying experience, both intellectually and emotionally.”

Appropriately enough, Sack’s husband Marty wrote a story entitled “L’Dor Va’Dor,” from generation to generation. And these stories can do exactly that: preserve one’s legacy for generations to come.

To learn more about life story and legacy writing, visit www.patmcnees.com, www.personal-historians.org, or www.lifestorywriting.com.