

Many Voices of Montclair

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

“WHEN AMERICA went to war in 1941, I was 19. I was living out of the country in Quebec, doing a year as a study abroad student,” recalled Anita Magistro Udell during an oral history interview conducted in 2003. “I’m not sure it had real meaning to me because I wasn’t in the United States, and I had never experienced a country going to war before. I came home [to Montclair] in the summer of ’42. ... Each family was issued coupons for the amount of wheat, sugar, and butter [they could get] ... Every street had an air raid warden and there were periods when you had to have all your lights out.” ...

“Every family had someone in the war. My brother was in the Navy, I had two cousins in the Navy, one on a destroyer and one on an aircraft carrier. Every boy that we knew at Montclair went to war. There were no boys left.”

Ms. Udell passed away in 2015 at 94 years old, having been raised in Montclair and East Orange by parents who immigrated from Sicily. Her memories of World War II, however, are kept alive through the Italians of Montclair oral history project she participated in when she was in her 80s.

While census records give us the facts and figures of the people who have come before us, oral histories bring those facts and figures to life. According to the Oral History Association, an oral history “begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee (also referred to as narrator), both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past. A verbal document, the oral history, results from this process and is preserved and made available in different forms to other users, researchers, and the public.” The Montclair History Center is lucky enough to have oral histories from the African American community and from World War II nurses who hailed from Montclair.

As part of the 150th anniversary of Montclair, the Montclair History Center is excited to be expanding its oral history archives. Thanks to funding from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, we will be collecting oral histories from people who grew up in Montclair and/or lived here prior to 1960. The goal is to record the oral histories of people



Anita Magistro Udell

MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER

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Oral History Events

Montclair Fire Department Community Room
1 Pine Street
Friday, March 23, 11am–2pm

First Montclair House Community Room
56 Walnut Street
Friday, April 6, 1–4pm

Montclair Fire Department Community Room
1 Pine Street
Saturday, April 21, 11am–2pm

who grew up in Montclair in a wide variety of neighborhoods and decades.

As part of the “Many Voices of Montclair” project, the Montclair History Center will host a minimum of three events where people can come to be interviewed. The Montclair History Center is reaching out to community organizations and inviting them to identify their “elders” who carry the history of the community. In addition, people are invited to reach out to the Montclair History Center on their own (973- 744-1796 or mail@montclairhistorical.org) if they lived in Montclair in the first half of the 20th century or for more than 50 years.

The Montclair History Center has enlisted the help of Montclair resident and Professor Chris Matthews from Montclair State University. Professor Matthews’ class will be trained on the art of conducting oral histories, principles, and best practices, and will help with the project.

The oral histories will be transcribed so they are easily searchable. They will be housed in the Montclair History Center’s archives and perhaps StoryCorps or the New Jersey Digital Highway. Once the oral histories are complete, the Montclair History Center will look for ways to compile and disseminate them to the public,

such as programs, walking tours, exhibits, and/or podcasts. ■

If you are -- or know someone who might be -- a great candidate for the Many Voices of Montclair project, please reach out to the Montclair History Center at 973-744- 1796 or mail@montclairhistorical.org.