

Young adults find interesting tales and sometimes new family through senior storytelling program

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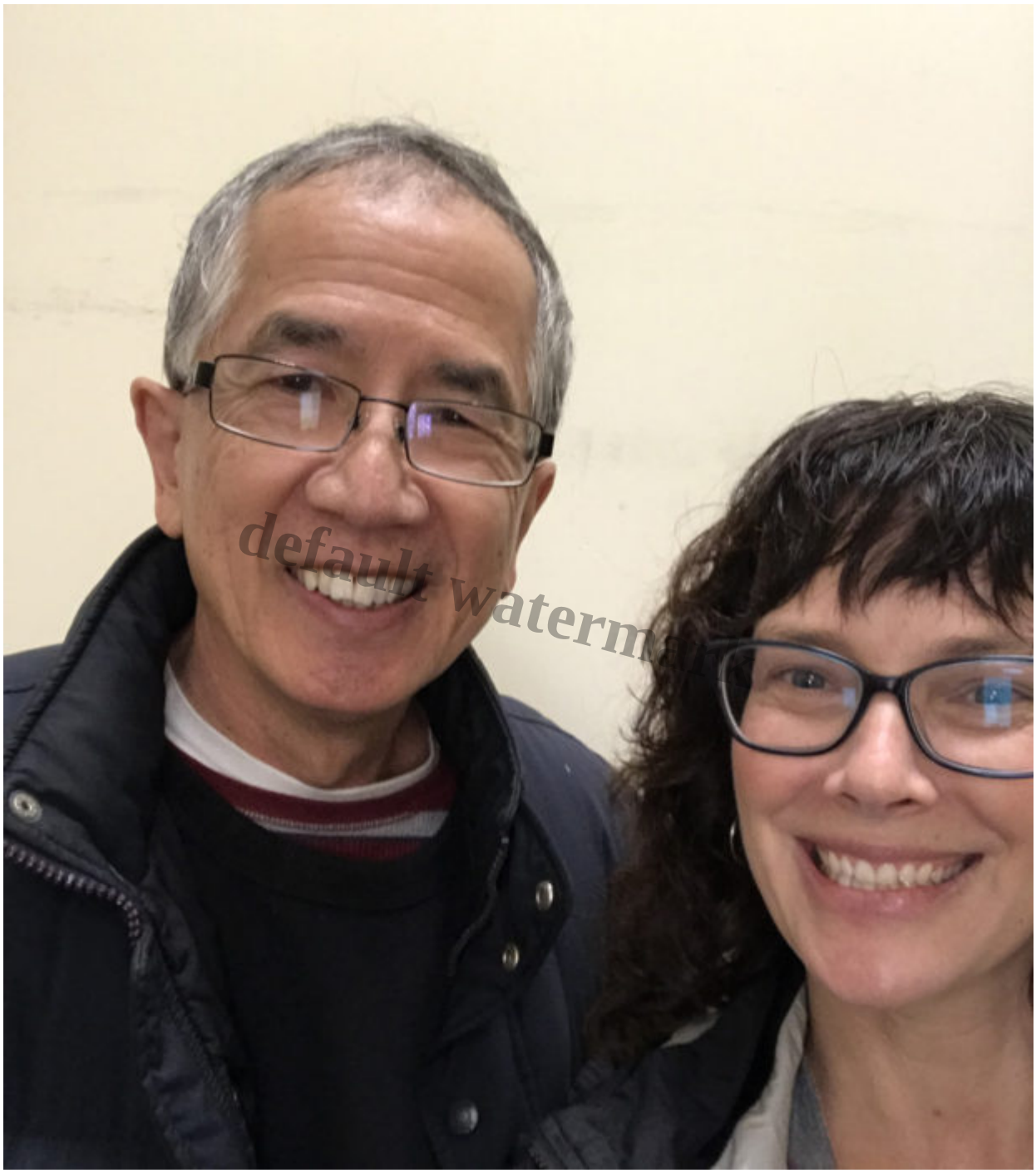
CREATING COMMUNITY â?? Tiffany Hasker has been listening intently to Harry Wong over the past several months. Sheâ??s going to write a book about him.

The two have met at least 10 times in a private room in the Rosa Parks Senior Center. A former editor and now full-time mom in her 40s, Hasker was paired with Harry through a new nonprofit called â??*My Life*, My Stories.â?• In matching younger generations to record the stories of vulnerable seniors, the program hopes to build a more empathetic community.

Wong told Hasker he grew up feeling alone despite having six siblings. Raised in a one-bedroom Chinatown apartment by a father who was a gambler and a mother who was a hardworking seamstress, he said, the siblings just went to school, did their homework, helped their mother sew and never really talked with one another.



Harry Wong and Tiffany Hasker

â??This has been just as wonderful for me as for Harry,â??â?? Hasker said, â??so rich. Thereâ??s so much there.â?•

As for Harry, itâ??s been life-changing.

â??I went in with an open mind and it focused me on my powerful loving self,â?• he said. â??What a wonderful, positive, self-awakening and examining experience. I love it and my new friend Tiffany. â??

While Harryâ??s story may be haunting, his meetings with Hasker have been hopeful. After one particularly wrenching session, Harry decided it was time to focus on positive things, she said. â??He told me our sessions are like therapy, that theyâ??re a more honest conversation than he has with friends.

â??Itâ??s really simple,â?• she said. â??At the end of the day, itâ??s really just somebody listening.â?•

â??So many in the Bay Area without granniesâ??

Hasker stumbled on *My Life*, My Stories while looking for volunteer opportunities. The program offered her a chance she had missed with her grandmother. Hasker had given her a journal but only 20 pages were completed before cancer took her. She tried again with her husbandâ??s great great aunt.

â??When she turned 100, we decided to record her telling her stories. When she passed, I had the stories transcribed and gave them to her family. Her children were so grateful; they had never heard these stories.â?•

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My Life, My Stories was a natural follow-up. â??I learned so much history listening to Harry. Itâ??s different talking to someone whoâ??s lived through an experience not just reading about it in a book.â?•

Itâ??s also filled an emotional gap. Harry has become part of her life.

Hasker wants her daughter to meet Harry. She has plans for them to go out for coffee. She wants to take him to a restaurant where they serve food from the familyâ??s region in China; he really misses his motherâ??s cooking, she said. And she is planning to take Harry to see his motherâ??s grave.

â??I keep talking it up to my friends. There are so many of us in the Bay Area without grannies. I wish the City could see the benefit and fund this program. It could truly help seniors, and it could help younger people. Itâ??s not just a fluffy experience.â?•

The power of stories to connect

Like Hasker, program founder Brittany Bare learned the power of stories to build connections when her grandmother lent her autobiographies written by Brittanyâ??s great grandparents. They told of family adventures during the Westward Expansion and what it was like to live in the United States during the movement toward desegregation.

Her grandmotherâ??s gift birthed the idea for *My Life*, My Stories: to foster sharing, learning and connecting through storytelling. By telling their own stories, Bare believes, seniors can re-discover their passion in life and overcome the chronic loneliness and isolation that can cause serious physical and mental health issues.

For the younger adults who volunteer, hearing and helping seniors tell their stories offers them an opportunity to develop empathy and learn some interesting history, she said.

Millennial Sofie Kodner was looking for something to get involved with when she moved to San Francisco in October. Her *My Life*, My Stories partner turned out to be the perfect match, someone she

describes as with â??high energy and a killer sense of humor.â?•



Sofie Kodner and Ling Tom

She meets Ling Tom on Sundays at the Aquatic Park Senior Center, where Tom volunteers.

â??Ling is hilarious. Sheâ??s one of my people. She has a vibrant life, but she still makes room for me. She loves hanging out. Iâ??ve told all my friends about Ling and want them to meet her. Sheâ??s part of my life.

â??I love stories, and Ling tells some good ones. She tells me about her life and what happened during the week, and I talk with her about my problems. She knows what itâ??s like being a woman in a male world. Ling also knows all the good restaurants and places to go.â?•

As they neared the end of their sessions, having met about 10 to 20 times, Tom suggested they continue on.

â??The granddaughter I wish I hadâ??

â??Sofie is like the granddaughter I wish I had. We bonded from day one,â?• Tom said. â??We both have a love of cats. Sheâ??s caring, down to earth and easy to talk with. We still meet; we have so much to talk about.â?•

Bare said she has a long list of younger volunteers. Most are women grandparents have passed away or are new to San Francisco. â??They tell me they feel like theyâ??re stuck in a bubble, working and socializing with their own kind. They want more perspective.â?•

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Her challenge has been in finding seniors willing to tell their stories. Bare has partnered with a number of senior-serving organizations and hopes to recruit 100 seniors this year.

Bare matches people based on common interests and hobbies. The younger volunteer receives six pages of suggested questions and strategies for conducting the interview. The pair agrees to meet around 10 times over three months. The volunteer records the seniorâ??s story, which is then transcribed and edited. The memoir is turned into a small book, with the senior receiving three copies to share with family and friends.

Bare once conducted all the senior interviews herself, but a year ago she started recruiting volunteers. She reaches out through Facebook, VolunteerMatch and other social media and a Valentineâ??s Day storytelling event that she said gets over-subscribed within days.

Ling was one of four seniors who told their stories at the Valentineâ??s Day event. â??Three-quarters of the audience were young people. I didnâ??t think we could capture their attention, but we did,â?• she said. â??They wanted to hear about how we adapted and survived. I had a blast. Younger people do care about us.â?•

Seniors interested in telling their stories can sign up at https://www.mylifemystories.org/senior-signup. Those who want to hear their stories and record them can sign up here: https://www.mylifemystories.org/volunteer

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