

*Writing the Self: Memoir, Autobiography, and Storytelling*

A PROJECT BY  
**STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**  
AND  
**LONG ISLAND STATE VETERANS HOME RESIDENTS**

*Spring 2010*

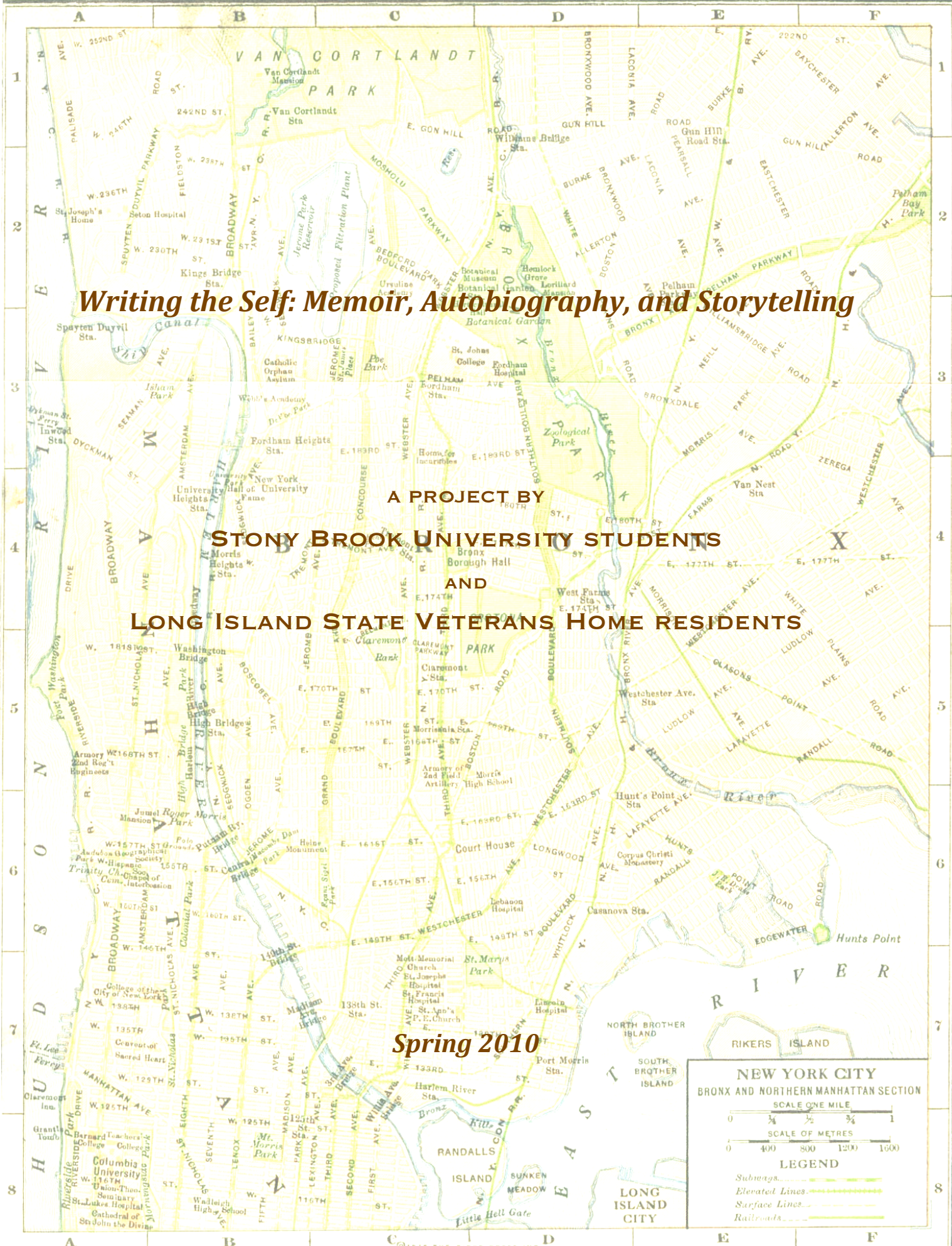
**NEW YORK CITY**  
BRONX AND NORTHERN MANHATTAN SECTION

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SCALE OF METRES  
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**LEGEND**

- Subways
- Elevated Lines
- Surface Lines
- Railroads



In his poem “The Cities Inside Us,” poet Alberto Ríos writes:

You and I, we are the secret citizens of the city  
Inside us, and inside us

There go all the cars we have driven  
And seen, there are all the people

We know and have known, there  
Are all the places that are

But which used to be as well. This is where  
They went. They did not disappear.

Through these words Ríos evokes an image of individuals as living archives of meaning and experience, private libraries of life stories. And as Ríos so beautifully reminds us, our past may no longer be visible in the here and now, but it “did not disappear.” Each time we share our stories, the city inside us comes alive. The stories we carry with us live on through storytelling.

Storytellers need an audience. To listen to someone’s story is to honor his life, to reaffirm what links us all. In this spirit of telling and listening, we created this memoir based on our experiences this semester with residents of the Long Island State Veterans Home. Over the course of the semester, we met with and interviewed residents about their lives as sons, fathers, husbands, veterans. Some of the questions that arose during our conversations include: How do we imagine ourselves in relation to our parents, siblings, children, and friends? How do our educational, work, and community experiences shape who we are? To what extent do our stories serve as a record of our personal desires, regrets, dreams, and ideals? How do our life stories tell a larger historical tale?

As one student writes, “a memory can be a mirror.” What has become clear through our experience is that stories are transformative. Through the stories told by the veterans, we learned that we are not as different as we first assumed. We learned that through listening to stories about the lives of others we can, as another student writes, see “true joy, an earnest love of living that seems rarer and rarer in our ironic, cynical age.” We are tremendously grateful to these residents of the Long Island State Veterans Home for sharing their extraordinary stories with us: John Blankenship, Thomas Deluca, Eugene Finnegan, Leroy Fonfara, Michael Geronimo, and Albert Napoli. Thanks also to Lee grace Cannella, Director of Therapeutic Recreation; Jacqueline Bodkin, Assistant Director of Therapeutic Recreation; and Susan Helmus, Director of Volunteer Services.

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Sarah Evins

*A LISVH Memoir* by Ross Barkan

When I contemplate where I am at twenty years old, I like to think I have lived a fairly interesting life. Like any egomaniacal young adult, I want to believe my life is at least somewhat novel-worthy, a unique existence that will continually enrich the world around me. Of course, I'm probably wrong, and visiting and interviewing veterans at the Long Island State Veterans Home only further convinced me that I still have a lot of living left to do. The stories I heard were funny, moving, and remarkable. The people defied the expectations I had that were unfortunately equally shaped by popular culture and my previous positive experiences volunteering at a senior citizens home. As a teenager, I spent two pleasant summers assisting senior citizens, bringing them food, playing games, conversing, and going on trips around Brooklyn, New York. I will admit that when I was told we were going to interview *veterans*, people who knew the hell that war could bring, I balked. Since no one in my family served in the armed forces, I had virtually no contact with veterans. No medals on display, no stories from grandparents, and no visceral descriptions of time spent in the line of fire. My grandparents, dead before I was born, were too old to serve in World War II and too young to serve in World War I. My father was designated 4-F for Vietnam. Any impressions I could draw from war had to come from the books I read, the movies I watched, and the stories I heard indirectly. Until my conversations with the veterans, I knew no primary contact with those who had seen combat.

As I walked into the LISVH for the first time, my thoughts turned to Ken Kesey's seminal novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey describes the oppressive existence of patients in an insane asylum—how they are degraded and dehumanized by the staff and a society that will not accept them. Running my eyes over the florescent, antiseptic hallways

of the LISVH, I feared many of the same things: angry and broken people muttering madly, resenting me for invading their space, resenting me for my youth, my health. The people I was going to talk to would be total invalids, devoid of joy, miserable that they had to be confined to this combine. How would I be able to relate to the people here? I gulped. There would be so many hurdles and so little time...perhaps I wasn't up to this task after all.

As you all know by now, I couldn't have been more wrong. From the very first day, I knew I had to scrap any preconceived notions I had about veterans. I spoke to Tom Deluca, Leroy Fonfara, and John Blankenship in our first recorded session. John told me about the thrills he got from flying airplanes and how, up until only a few years ago, he was a pilot. Amazingly, John had been a pilot for nearly 50 years. He devoted himself to the U.S. Air Force and spoke glowingly of his experiences there. Like other veterans I spoke to, he entered the military at the remarkably young age of 18. I only say "remarkably" because I can't personally imagine having that responsibility at that age. I still feel young, immature, unfit for such harrowing tasks. John told me what flying airplanes meant to him throughout his life, "It was a team sport. Like playing basketball or football. You had a co-pilot, an engineer, a navigator...I liked the competitive nature of flying. I was good... it was like winning a ball game." John, who grew up in Kentucky and attended the University of Kentucky, knew a lot about competition. He played in three college football bowl games for the Wildcats and enjoyed baseball and basketball recreationally. Laughing about his college days, he said, "I managed to get beat up pretty badly but I played in three bowl games. I didn't get beat up that bad...I did a little of the beating up, too."

Tom recalled in startling detail the historic battles he took part in. "The military made a man out of me. I was eighteen when I went in. I was a cook, a mess sergeant; I did

everything they asked me to do. I made the D-Day landing in Normandy and I got shrapnel around my leg and my knee... We were 318 men when we hit the beach. We only had 100 men out of 318 left... I came close to getting hit again at the Battle of the Bulge. Thank God I only got a scratch there. So the good lord was good to me—I came back alive. I was one of the lucky ones.” Tom spoke with gravitas but not bitterness. None of the veterans I conversed with exuded the rage or ennui that I expected. They were all upbeat and exuberant, glad that I was there.

“I was very lucky. I went to flying school, took care of planes and cargo. Went back and forth over China for about five years. All we had was a forty-five and sub-machine gun. Which was nothing,” Leroy told me. Talking to Leroy was a reminder of what actually matters in life. In my harried, increasingly chaotic life, I often forget that there is more to living than getting good grades, finding a job, or chasing a girl. “We had six kids,” he said. “My wife was an angel. That’s why we call our kids angels. Because they were all together. Togetherness means more than anything...That’s about it.” Instead of despair, I found uplifting stories from genuinely happy people. None of the veterans wallowed, nor acted in the way I had expected them to act. I could see why they all had lived so long and maintained their bright dispositions: they never stopped laughing. “That’s the only way to have any fun, make your own fun,” Leroy said through another rumble of laughter. I smiled.

Tom was eager to share his idyllic childhood in Sicily: “I was raised on a farm and we had horses and stuff like that...Whatever we grew, we ate. We had grape farms, olive trees, oranges...we made our own bread, flour, our own olive oil. We had a big grape land, raised a lot of grapes. When I was ten-years-old, we’d wash our feet and jump on the grapes. That’s how we made wine. We’d sell homemade wine to the people.” I remembered

my own travels to Italy, lamenting that I had not savored the rustic beauty of the countryside that Tom so vividly described. For a moment, I could imagine jumping up and down on grapes, making delicious wine under the burning Italian sun. Honestly, I was amazed that after so many years, Tom could recall his childhood with such clarity. I have trouble remembering things that happened a month ago. Every veteran had a plethora of fresh memories, devoid of any fog.

Leroy, John, and Tom ended the day with a conversation about the changes they had seen in people during their lifetimes. John and Tom agreed that people today seemed less likely to help one another. "I think the world has changed because the people are changing," Tom said. "People are all for themselves. If they need help, they look the other way. But if you want to be a good neighbor, you go in and ask if they need help and try to help them out... People are more independent, they have a little more money, a better job, they don't wanna bother with the next guy... They oughtta help their neighbor. That's a very important thing to me." John echoed Tom, adding that he believed the Great Depression brought a lot of people together. "I think people are more independent than they were some years ago... There's been a change over the years. I think they're willing to help if you ask but they don't offer it like they did during the Depression. People helped whether they asked or not." Leroy, though, disagreed. He chose to discuss the universality of daily existence, and how little things truly change. "Things haven't changed that much. Because you look at it, we got up in them morning, we all had jobs to do, we always had to make our beds before we came downstairs to the kitchen," he said. I wondered what I would think about the people yet to be born, whether—if I had the privilege to live to old age—I would believe morality had somehow shifted, political and technological changes breeding a new

type of person. I don't know. I tend to agree with Leroy's statement: no matter how the world shifts, we will ultimately be doing similar things and grappling with the same existential questions.

During the next session, I had the pleasure of interviewing Mike Geronimo and Al Napoli. Mike and Al are close friends, fellow Navy men who lived four doors down from each other in the Bronx but never actually met until they each moved into the LISVH. Leroy's words about laughter and togetherness making a richer life were personified in Mike and Al. They were full of witty banter, shooting hilarious stories back and forth about their experiences in the Navy. Mike served on a U.S. destroyer while Al served on an aircraft carrier, the USS Belleau Wood. Mike recalled the absurd process of "initiation," which took place for all Naval troops who were crossing the equator for the first time, "In the back of the ship, they set up a King Neptune's court. A sailor sat next to him as a princess. At the time the black people were only cooks, and they took care of the officers, they had nothing to do with the seamen. They were fanning the back of the King Neptune. There were three things I did: we sat in the chair and they gave you a shock. Then we went to one where we had to lay down, bare ass on top of the table, and the electrician had an electrified soldering iron and he'd hit you. You had to kiss the big fat guy's belly, the sun. Then the pharmacist made a concoction, you had to chew it. They had a big canvas tube, thirty feet long. After you finished your initiation, you get to the tube which is all full of garbage. As you crawl through the tube, the shellbacks are hitting you. As you get to the end, a fire hose is knocking you back. You get washed off, after you're done, you get on line and start beating the other guys. After I was done I said "freak you" and went back to my bunk. I didn't want to hit the guys because it was too much." Wild, funny, and little bit disturbing, Mike's stories were nevertheless always riveting. Al, who was 17 when he enlisted, described



his own experiences as a young sailor crossing the equator, “On the Belleau Wood, we must have had 1300 pollywogs, had the shellbacks outnumbered ten to one...We had a coffin, about four feet, I was six feet, they were pushing my legs in and I had to get in the coffin. They had a concoction in an oil can, the guy holding it is supposed to be the dentist, and he pours it in my mouth.” Ah, they don’t teach you that in the history textbooks.

Al and Mike were full of tales about hijinks on the high seas. Mike had an interesting captain on one of his voyages, “We had a crazy captain and we were coming back from Gibraltar. He said, ‘I’m gonna take some pictures.’ He takes the depth charges—you set the timing on them and you drop them off at the depth you want them to go off. He’s setting off depth charges so low, the ship went up. He did it two times. We couldn’t stop him. Anyway, he took some beautiful pictures of the explosions.” Al had his own uproarious issues with authority: “I slept on top of the life preservers in the war zones. We had a coxswain, when I wake up he says, ‘hey let’s go down for coffee.’ On my way down, I look in the coffee pot, it’s filthy. I took the pot and wash it out with hot water. I scrubbed it out. I get the coffee, I bring it up, he says, ‘what the hell you washed this pot for you spoiled the taste of the coffee!’” I was glad that I spoke as little as possible and listened to what they had to say. Their colorful anecdotes thoroughly engrossed me—not only could I laugh along, but I could laugh *with* them. The playful attitude was infectious. When Leroy joined the fray, he had a few choice words for the Bronx boys Al and Mike, “I don’t like Bronx people, they’re too bossy,” Leroy laughed. “To tell you the truth, we have so much fun together. No matter what we do, we always have laughter.” Thankfully, any previous notions I had about older people being bitter or miserable were exorcised forever. Al, Mike and Leroy, along with the other veterans I spoke to, were far more content than most people I had ever met. In them I saw true joy, an earnest love of living

that seems rarer and rarer in our ironic, cynical age. They spoke about the excitement over the upcoming Olympics between different retirement homes. Mike and Al were committed to shattering the wheelchair race record. No matter what happened, healthy, friendly competition always mattered to them.

Mike left me with a moving anecdote about what character means to him. As a part of the U.S. forces occupying Japan after the war, Mike traveled up and down the country. “We were a bunch of sailors coming back from Tokyo and we’re on a train. I stood by the doors and these other sailors started talking to these Japanese people. Calling them low-lives, terrible things. The guy standing in the corner, he listened to all that, he turns around and says, ‘Is that the way for an American sailor to act?’” Even though the Japanese were their enemy, Mike and Al had respect for the common people who were not engaging in war. I thought about all those who are caught up in cataclysm and can do nothing. The least they deserve is respect, and Mike gave them plenty of that.

My time at the LISVH defied all expectations. I found none of the bitterness, anger, or boredom that I expected, the “cranky” senior citizen stereotype that had been blasted into my head repeatedly. Everyone had something fascinating to tell me: each life was so full, making me wonder whether I would ever get the chance to experience such a rich, varied life. Al and Mike might have said it best:

“I can’t see myself sitting in the corner...I have to get myself...” Al began. Mike chimed in, “Involved.” Perhaps that is one of the great lessons I can take from the veterans. Don’t live in fear—don’t live in the corner. Savor every day, treasure your loved ones, and never stop laughing.

*A Memory Can be a Mirror* by Marcela Maxfield

When I first learned that I was going to be interviewing residents at the Long Island State Veterans Home, I felt immediately uncomfortable. My grandfather on my mother's side passed away many years before I was born, of cancer, and my grandfather on my father's side lost most of his memory by the time I was old enough to talk to him. My maternal grandmother is a shy woman whose first language is Spanish, and so communication has never been easy between us, and my paternal grandmother has always been very hard of hearing. In all honesty, I had grown to view talking to my grandparents as a somewhat futile task that was more difficult than enjoyable. This is not a conclusion that I came to with happiness, and as I thought about what questions I would ask the residents, I realized how unfortunate a situation it was.

The term memoir means an intimate account of somebody's personal life. Being associated with words like *intimate*, and *personal* creates a distinction between memoir and autobiography. Somehow a memoir is more organic, while an autobiography seems to be the jagged-edged cutout of a life. The word memoir itself sounds like the word memory. A memory is deeply personal; it doesn't necessarily correlate with absolute truth because it is colored by the context of past, present, and future. It is this coloring that seems to be the very essence of a person, which distinguishes one person from any other. A memoir is the attempt to convey that color, and it relies on communication. Whether a person writes his or her own memoir or it is written by another, the very purpose of a memoir is to communicate. This is what I have been denying myself and my grandparents by refusing to open up to them, I have lost the chance to see the color of their memories.

I kept asking myself how I was going to get to know something about these residents in five one-hour visits, when I had failed at doing so with my own grandparents in 20 years of living. But I had to do this; I was, after all, getting graded on it. So I turned on the tape recorder and the first interview commenced.

What initially caught my eye was how happy all the interviewees were. I opened with the question "Can you tell me what you do on a day-to-day basis here at the Veterans Home?" I expected answers to be uninspired, maybe even sad, because that is what I remembered from my own grandfather's experience. Albert Napoli began by telling me about the Olympics which takes place each year, where the LISVH competes with other homes in such sports as the wheelchair race and the beanbag toss. Al would go on to talk about the Olympics with more passion than most people I know talk about the sports they participate in. He and his friends Leroy Fonfara and Michael Geronimo were in the process of training for the wheelchair race to reach their goal time of 20 seconds. He made the point that some other residents in this and other homes don't take the competition as seriously as it deserves, sometimes sending less-qualified people into the events. "You're making a fool out of them," he concluded. His message was clear to me, and, strangely I heard it through the voices of my two grandmothers: we are still here, we are still here.

Al and Mike sat next to each other at each interview session and revealed that they, in fact, had been neighbors many years ago in the Bronx. They lived 4 houses down from each other and never got to know each other very well, until now. "His daughter used to go through my backyard to get home," Mike recalls. I immediately thought about the games of tag my older brother and I would play with our neighbors when we were younger, and the

feeling of running through the backyards of people whose names I never bothered to find out, just to play the game.

Mike and Al are good friends now and take pleasure in talking and laughing with each other. Al commented that he believes that some of the other, more reserved residents are jealous of the friendship they have. "I can't see myself sitting in the corner," he said with pride, and I could almost see my shy maternal grandma sitting in the corner, watching us talk. She would watch Al tell me about his friends who went to boot camp with him, who made sure to stay together, and even were ushers at one friend's wedding.

Leroy talked about how he met his wife. She and Leroy would take the same train regularly, but never spoke until one day she nearly tripped over his feet walking past him. After talking several times, they decided to, in the words of Leroy, "give it a try." That was the beginning of a 49-year marriage in which "we worked everything out and there was nothing to it." After two miscarriages, Leroy told his wife "Hun, if it's not supposed to be, it's not supposed to be, we're still going to have a beautiful life. And she says 'yeah.'" Afterwards his wife got pregnant with the first of many children. While I heard this description the image of my father's mother came before my eyes, and the resentment she felt towards her husband for much of their marriage, a resentment that has burned out over the years into a gently glowing regret, which flairs up when prodded. What would she give to tell me her story?

Eugene Finnegan's quiet demeanor, and family-oriented outlook was something I could easily relate to. When asked what he enjoyed doing these days, he said simply "I like the sunshine. Even in the winter time, I'm always out there." He told me that the people who made the biggest impact in his life were his parents. They were the ones who "taught

me right from wrong,” who always knew where he was when he left the house, and who made sure he got back before too late “or I knew what I would get,” he says with a quiet laugh. He cited single-parent households as one of the biggest growing problems with today’s society. “You need a mother figure and you need a father figure, you gotta have two.” I think about my mom who speaks by phone to her mother almost every day. She gets more and more frustrated by my grandmother’s increasing loss of mental function. I think about how her eyes always seem wetter than usual when she talks about her father, who passed away in his early fifties.

John Blankenship was very interested in learning about me, asking if I was a good student, if I liked to travel. He was a pilot for most of his life and was always happy to talk about it. “That was my thing,” he told me with a nod. He considered himself lucky for being able to travel so much during his life. “Just going to the next room, if you’ve never been there, is good...that’s what it’s all about...meeting people.” I can see his curiosity, which must have fueled his flights all those years, was still with him as he peered at me waiting for a reaction.

There was one question I kept coming back to in my mind, and that was the question of what regrets the residents had. In retrospect, I think that question was more for my own benefit than for theirs, because it is I who am faced with this regret of not knowing my grandparents. John was seemed surprised when I asked him if he felt that he’d made any mistakes in his life. “It just seems...unnecessary...I made mistakes and I rectified them.” This time I felt that I had answered my own unasked question: the question of blame. This problem, this regret I have *is* unnecessary, and only I can rectify it.

His last question to me was what I thought I was getting out of this experience, and I suppose that is the question I have been trying to answer throughout this paper. I see a possibility that I had not before considered, an opening of space, the opportunity of communication I have not strived for before, and now it is my job to go there because, as John says, that is what it's all about.

*We Always Have Laughter* by Sarah Evins

Initially, I could feel little more than trepidation when I realized that I would be interviewing residents at the Long Island State Veteran's Home. What common denominator could possibly bridge the gap of generations that seemed to separate us? I was a college freshman of eighteen years, but even more so, I was a child. Even after living on my own some 2,500 miles away from my parents for three seasons, I still felt I had missed the epiphany that ought to have come and delivered me into the world of adulthood. Worse, as I watched my friends step over that inconceivable divide, it seemed that I had never been further from maturity.

Growing up as an only child and the youngest in our extended family gave me a gargantuan sense of reverence for my elders. Unfortunately, with this reverence also grew a sort of barrier between me and my venerated grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and even my parents. Under these strains of respectful formality, I was forever made to observe and learn, but never interact as an equal with them. And thus to create a memoir of people whom I not only would just be meeting, but also whose worldliness seemed untouchable to me struck me as more than just presumptuous—it was frightening beyond belief.

Yet somehow, as I walked into the conference room, I knew that my uneasiness was misplaced. In fact, I was shocked to feel so welcomed by these men who seemed not to want to preach, but rather to share their life lessons. Most striking was the lightheartedness I saw amongst all the residents. To see these men who had lived on such a grand scale of life—fighting in and surviving a war, falling in love, leaving a legacy of children in their wake—act just as I would with my friends, I was struck with a sudden jolt



of understanding. Seeing these interactions helped me realize my supposed gap between child- and adulthood was purely invented. Based on my observations, it seemed apparent that in these men's lives one road did not end where another began, but rather roads split and converged as fate demanded it.

Hearing about how Al Napoli forged his baptism certificate to be able to enlist in the army reminded me of all the gutsy adventures I was a part of in order to be involved in something I love. After a clever rewriting of a five as a three, sixteen-year-old Al went through army boot camp for a year before being discovered as he was arranging his enlistment in the navy. As Al recounted his story, I heard an eerily familiar sense of mischievous pride in his voice, swelling at how the commanding officer allowed him an honorable discharge despite his age because he "was a good soldier." Though my memories of secretly auditioning and participating in a youth orchestra seem hopelessly inane in comparison, Al's tale seemed to hit home. I realized that despite the disparity of our ages, Al knew exactly how it felt to want something so wholeheartedly that following rules becomes unnecessary; his determination and passion was both assuring and uplifting.

In telling me how he met his wife, Leroy Fonfara showed me how serendipitous life can be at times when we least expect it. Leroy and his wife saw each other every day on the bus, but never talked. Neither, in fact, had ever paid attention to the other. It wasn't until Leroy was back visiting on a ten-day vacation from the army that either spoke to the other. As Leroy's soon-to-be wife nearly tripped over him, "one thing led to another," and as it turns out, they "met up wonderfully." And the couple met up so wonderfully that his 49-year marriage, as Leroy emphatically pointed out, "had nothing to it." That one of his most cherished figures came into his life out of pure chance seemed oddly poetic. Fate had so

easily aligned their paths at the perfect moment; I felt reassured that my epiphany would come in time as well.

Mike Geronimo, who grew up down the street from fellow navy man and now good friend Al in the Bronx, showed me that I should take pride in where I came from. I was fascinated by the pride he had in his borough's world famous zoo, whose success was at one point due to his involvement and charitable nature. Mike used to be a prominent Christmas tree salesman, and discovered one holiday season a surprising new way to get rid his leftover trees while also doing a public service. Every year for four years, Mike donated about forty balsam trees to the Bronx Zoo and helped keep the brooks where many beavers lived from freezing over during the winter months. Mike's singular loyalty to the Bronx, even after having traveled to so many exotic locales, visiting places like my home of Las Vegas, was inspiring. With this in mind, I finally understood that I would never become an adult by rejecting my childhood; just because I am separated from home by more than half a continent, I learned that my connection to home depends more so on the geography of my heart.

Though these anecdotes of each resident's past equipped me with a better understanding of my future, my fondest memories of our conversations concerned the residents' present endeavors. One special topic of interest was the Olympics, in which Al, Mike, and Leroy are all participating. Al's spirited account of his training to beat last year's record of around 20 seconds in the wheelchair races seemed to spread as the whole table erupted into raucous conversation. Despite having never been around sports enough in my childhood to cultivate an interest, I was captivated by Al's enthusiasm as well.

Such appreciation for the present has never been more apparent than in the connection these residents have with one another. Although their differences in background are often the center of their banter, what seems to tie all the residents together is a mutual protection of each other's happiness. As I continue to mature, I can only hope that I never lose sight of this goal, a goal that Leroy must have had in mind when he said, "no matter what we do we will always have laughter." And after having had these experiences in my life, I know I always will.