

Senior Focus

NEW 'AGING WISELY' SERIES

... On March 30, Avenidas senior center will launch "Aging Wisely: Your Roadmap to Long Term Care," a new series of workshops focused on long-term care planning for people of all ages. Paula Wolfson, Avenidas Care Partners manager and creator of the new program, will present the six workshops offered weekly on Thursdays through May 11. (Note: There will be no class on April 20). Each workshop will cover a different topic: exploring personal values, retirement and financial management strategies, advance planning goals, patient advocacy, the challenges of care giving, and practices for managing stress. Participants can pick and choose sessions, which are offered independent of each other. Sessions are in-person at Avenidas, 450 Bryant St. Each session is \$25 and limited to 30 participants. For more information, go to avenidas.org, click on "Classes" and search "Aging Wisely."

'INTO THE WOODS' ... The Wise Owl Players will perform a lively and dramatic reading of six classic, but lesser-known, traditional folk and fairy tales from around the world from **2-4 p.m., March 19**, in the art room at Avenidas, 450 Bryant St., Palo Alto. Created and directed by folklorist and storyteller Enid Davis, "Into the Woods with the Wise Owl Players" (not to be confused with the Sondheim musical), will include costumes, props and live music by flutist Christine Mendoza of the Nova Vista Symphony. Admission is \$15. For details and tickets, go to avenidas.org and click on "Classes."

'FIDDLER ON THE ROOF' EXCURSION ... Adults 65 and older are invited to travel with the Palo Alto JCC to **San Francisco's Golden Gate Theater** on Wednesday, **March 22**, to see a performance of "Fiddler on the Roof." The event is part of the JCC's travel and day trips program. Cost is \$80 and includes a round-trip ticket by private coach from the JCC and an orchestra seat at the theater. Participants are required to meet at 10:30 a.m. in the lower lobby of the JCC's Schultz Cultural Arts Hall at 3921 Fabian Way, Palo Alto. Participants will return to the center at 5:30 p.m. To register for the trip, contact the Customer Service Desk at 650-223-8700. If you need personal assistance, must bring an escort, or want to sit with a friend, contact Michelle Rosengaus at mrosengaus@paloaltojcc.org or 650-223-8616.

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Living Well

A monthly special section of news & information for seniors

Everybody's got a story to tell — especially these 8 women

Memoir classmates recount 80 years of war, revolution, family holidays and ugly hats in new book

By Elizabeth Lorenz
Photos by Magali Gauthier

It was a Christmas to remember: the one with the sad-looking tree. Many decades have passed since that holiday, but Susan Molloy recalls clearly how when she was a child, her father waited until Christmas Eve to find a tree, only to end up with a scrawny one. After he got home, he drilled holes into the trunk all the way up the tree so he could glue in branches and extra twigs to fill the gaps.

This childhood memory is one of many that Molloy and seven other Midpeninsula women have penned in the new memoir "Our Voices, Our Stories: A Collection of Memoirs," capturing snippets of their lives growing up in various parts of the world from the 1940s to their present-day lives as older adults on the Peninsula.

The authors, Molloy, Ann Gila, Khris Klint, Anne-Marie Lemoine, Maureen McNevin Locke, Barbara Nachman, Kinga Perlaki and Jacqueline Raine, all met in a memoir writing class at Avenidas senior center in Palo Alto, where they ended up compiling the 44 short stories in the book. The stories recount everything from living in Europe during World War II, surviving a deadly virus and living through a terrorist attack to holidays spent with family.

Each account shares one common thread: The authors wrote them to document their life stories as a legacy for the next generations of their families.

Molloy said her daughter had been asking her for years to write down some of the family stories. It wasn't until joining the class that Molloy's life stories started pouring out onto the page.

"I joined the class hoping to jump-start my efforts and perhaps learn how to write better. I've written about 25-30 stories now and have lots more to write," Molloy said. "There's a definite advantage for me to write in the class setting. Sometimes a story one of the others brings to class jogs a memory of my own or inspires me to write about a similar time or event."

Perlaki, who penned four stories in the book, said the class provides "supportive camaraderie" and constructive criticism, which helped her document memories she has wanted to write since she was in her 20s.

After living through World War II, experiencing the Nazis, then the Soviet occupation and a revolution, Perlaki said she didn't want her stories to be forgotten.

One of her stories in the memoir recounts her time as a small child in Hungary. "The Explosion of Margit Bridge," tells the story of how her brother wanted the family to take a ferry across the Danube River. When they were halfway across, the bridge they would have



Top: Teacher Barbara Nachman, center left, and students chat during a memoir writing class at Avenidas in Palo Alto on Feb. 13. Above: Anne-Marie Lemoine, left, and Kinga Perlaki are among a group of students who contributed stories written in class to a newly published book. At right: Teacher Barbara Nachman, who also contributed stories to the book, said writing one's life stories is a lot like writing fiction.



driven over exploded.

"Some of these recollections blend together," she writes. "I can recall bits and pieces, but the gaps between them are wide and full of parts unknown. Yet out of this dark abyss some scenes can suddenly emerge with such clarity and details that they could have happened yesterday."

Nachman, a former newspaper features writer who contributed stories to the book, helped launch the Avenidas Memoir-writing Workshop in 2019. As the instructor, she melds the mindset of fiction writing with teaching memoir.

"All the people in my classes benefit from

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Memoir

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how to write a memoir as opposed to writing essays. What makes memoir-writing different is it's very much like fiction," Nachman said. There are characters, settings, action. The memoir brings stories to life in a "show, don't tell" way, using all five senses.

"We're not talking about autobiography. Biography is a road, when you're born to the end. A memoir is more like a curve in the road — something that happened."

Nachman believes strongly in making sure writers use their own voices and syntax in their writing. "Their voices may be long sentences. Someone else's may be choppy. I want it to be in their syntax, the voice and personality of the writer."

Avenidas Executive Director Tracy McCloud said most people over 70 have many stories to tell, from life overseas or during a war, or how they experienced family



Susan Molloy, left, and Khris Klint, right, listen to their teacher while in a recent memoir writing session at Avenidas. Molloy and Klint are among the eight authors who contributed to "Our Voices, Our Stories: A Collection of Memoirs."

and careers over the span of seven or eight decades.

"I think it's important that we

capture those stories," McCloud said.

Each week during the class,

one writer signs up to read their work while the others critique it, offering suggestions and

Avenidas Memoir-writing Workshop

Registration for Avenidas Memoir-writing Workshop which meets Mondays from 2-3:30 p.m., is available quarterly. The class has a waiting list, but one to two spots typically open up during registration. Avenidas also has launched another writing class, Guided Autobiography. For more information, go to avenidas.org.

constructive criticism.

"The help, encouragement and advice that I have received has been a great help in my endeavor," said Lemoine, whose stories in the book comically detail her childhood in a medieval city near France's Loire Valley.

She said finding a new way to write her memoirs has been enlightening.

"It was to write them with a very personal viewpoint. In other words, it was alright to be the center of your story," said Lemoine, who recounts in the book the time her mother made her a bright-green felt hat she dreaded wearing to church.

Perlaki said documenting her stories has been one of the wisest things she's ever done. She sees great value in sharing stories.

"The one common element that emerged during in-class discussions is that we all realize how little we know about our parents and grandparents," said Perlaki. "Now we all say, 'I wish I would have asked more questions when they were alive.'"

"Class or no class, I would encourage everybody to preserve their life stories or memoirs for the benefit of their family."

"Our Voice, Our Stories: A Collection of Memoirs" is available for \$12 on amazon.com. ■

Contributing Writer Elizabeth Lorenz can be emailed at elizabethlorenz@gmail.com.

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FINDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING ...

Avenidas senior center is scheduled to hold a free educational and informational workshop from **11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., March 14**, for those looking for low-income housing in Santa Clara County. The nonprofit residential housing organization **Silicon Valley Independent Living Center** will talk about their services, local housing options, what to expect when conducting a housing search, and strategies for finding housing locally in-person and online. The workshop will take place at Avenidas' Tech Plus Space at 450 Bryant St., Palo Alto. Registration is required. For more information, go to Avenidas.org and click on "Classes."

Items for Senior Focus may be emailed to Associate Editor Linda Taaffe at ltaaffe@pawekly.com.

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Memory Care Manager, Kensington Place

Thursday, March 16th • 5:30pm-7:00pm

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