



The tales they tell

By Tony Omer

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When Susan Klein talks, people listen. And then they become inspired. And then they begin writing. The Spice of Life Coffee House, a project of Ms. Klein's, made its debut Sunday afternoon at the Tisbury Senior Center in Vineyard Haven, to a packed house.

Last year, Ms. Klein turned her seemingly boundless energy to launching the series of eight-week workshops she calls "Spice of Life." She explains that the workshop was created, "to challenge participants to excavate their lives through memory-triggering exercises," and adds that it leads to organizing the stories from their lives.

"It's a private exercise and assignments are given, but there's no requirement to share," says Ms. Klein. "Yet many volunteer to read aloud to the class, and we gladly listen."



Leading a workshop at the Tisbury Senior Center, storyteller Susan Klein inspires others to write.

Photos by Susan Safford

"One of the things that happens in our technological age is that we've become more dependant on an inanimate mode of communication - television, computers - and it's not the natural way for human beings to communicate," she says. "As human beings, we need to tell our stories. People tend to communicate in narrative."

Born and raised in Oak Bluffs, Ms. Klein remembers the stories her mother told her when she was a young girl. Those stories and her childhood are the inspiration for what has become her life's work: storytelling. As a consummate teacher (she holds two degrees in education) and teller of tales, she has traveled the globe performing and holding workshops. Her "Festival of Storytelling," begun on the Vineyard in 1988, brought some of the world's best storytellers to the Island for 10 years. It was so distinctive it attracted the attention of ABC "Nightline," and was the subject of an entire program in 1993.

At Sunday's Coffee House, an outgrowth of the workshops, about a dozen participants of Ms. Klein's "Spice of Life" memoir writing workshop met and read from their work: "Readings from Lives Well Lived." The stories ranged from the humorous to the profound, from sad to moving. They were drawn from adult and childhood memories, experiences as a parent or an adolescent, and from World War II.

The Spice of Life Coffee House filled the Tisbury Senior Center with people who came to listen to and share recollections.



Ms. Klein says that the Coffee House became a reality due to the help of a "quiet mover behind the scenes" - Sandy Pratt, with the assistance of Tisbury Senior Center staff, Joyce Stiles and Sandy Whitworth. It developed as a result of her earlier workshops that met eight times for two and a half hours, once a week, during May and June of last year at the Senior Center and two more workshops this year. "Over 60 people have now finished the workshop and there is a growing waiting list," Ms. Klein says.

During the workshops prompts are given to begin writing. They are drawn from sites, character, events and chronology. Ms. Klein motivates the group with anecdotal experiences as well as folklore examples.

While there is no requirement that participants share their work with the group, Ms. Klein describes the response as "incredible." She admits to being somewhat surprised about the fact that 80 percent of her participants volunteer to read their work aloud to the class. Some of the workshops have become so popular the attendees don't want to stop, and the sessions have been extended.

"Humor is no stranger," Ms. Klein says. "Classes are two and a half hours. During breaks we have homemade snacks, and it's always a kitchen-table atmosphere. We have an absolute ball."

Registration for the January Spice of Life workshops is currently under way. The Spice of Life workshops receive funding from: Permanent Endowment Fund of Martha's Vineyard Farm Neck Foundation, Inc., Martha's Vineyard Cultural Council (MVCC), Martha's Vineyard Savings Charitable Fund, and Tisbury Council on Aging. For details, contact Susan Klein, 508-693-4140.