

COMMUNITY Connection

A weekly call
to action for volunteers

LISTENING FOR A CHANGE



Bobbie Holmes, 78, right, tells her history to interviewer Phyllis Omstad for the Listening for a Change project Monday at the Community Baptist Church.

HISTORY HAS A SOUND

Volunteers gather people's stories to promote acceptance of human diversity

By **RAYNE WOLFE**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Listening for a Change aims to build acceptance and understanding through storytelling.

With that simple mission, the non-profit, made up of the Community Listening Project, Essence for Acceptance and the Survivor Project, captures stories from a diverse slate of Sonoma County residents.

"Oral histories are a wonderful tool to cross boundaries and to get to know others in a deep and meaningful way," said Executive Director Phyllis Rosenfield, who co-founded the original effort, the Survivor Project, in the late 1980s with Lisa Slater.

She did so in part to honor those lost in the Holocaust, including sev-

eral members of her grandfather's family who perished under the Nazi regime in World War II. The project grew to include stories of other human rights losses, including Cambodian stories of surviving the Pol Pot regime and Japanese-American remembrances of forced internment during World War II.

The mission is to promote understanding and acceptance of human diversity using oral history, the arts and education. The focus of the interviews is often the loss of human rights or civil rights.

The efforts of volunteers can be as ambitious as building bridges between cultures, or as simple as having a teen interview a senior citizen next door.

Walt Whitman wrote, "Listen, and the old will speak a chronicle for the young."

Listen?

Volunteer interviewer Marvin Rogoff, 77, was born to listen.

That's why after completing interviewer training he signed up to take oral histories and share his story at

the Martin Luther King Jr. Day memorial at the Community Baptist Church.

As a young man, Rogoff experienced the American civil rights movement up close, marching in Selma, Ala., for voting rights.

"I have a 50-year history in civil rights, one way or the other. This is one thing I can do, not only to help people remember . . . but to help people put their remembrances in current and personal terms for the entire community to hear," he said.

For volunteer interviewer Ellen Breisacher, a marriage and family therapist at PsychStrategies in Santa Rosa, just telling a story is nearly magical.

"When you hold in important information, it can sometimes create illness . . . or emotional pain. Letting go of that information helps with the healing," she said, adding that telling a story important to the community can also help a community heal.

"This is really fascinating work. If you truly want to be part of a very

diverse community — and understand it — this is one of the best ways to do so," Breisacher said.

The growing collection of Sonoma County residents' stories is being shared with the community through posters and TV and radio broadcasts. The stories offer a bounty of information for generations to come, for anyone willing to listen.

"I grew up in the South during a time when a whole culture said up is down and down is up. I know how bad it can get when we don't guard our rights. If we don't know people's stories it's easier to say we don't have to help," said Rosenfield.

Listening for a Change workshops take place at the Volunteer Center and additional trained interviewers are needed. The project is also looking for subjects willing to tell their stories.

If you would like to participate, call 578-5420 or learn more online at www.listeningforachange.org.

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