

Sustainable, Renewable Resources

I'm using my allotted 900 (or so) words this week to shine a Right Field spotlight on a few friends—John Sly, Mary Murphy and Hedda Martens—all beloved members of my Writing Your Memoirs and Family Histories classes. But first, a little background.

I wrote several months ago about Robert Wideman, who grew up in East Aurora as a member of the EAHS class of 1961, joined the Navy out of college, earned his pilot's wings, and was shipped off Vietnam at the height of American involvement in 1966. With 27 days left in his Vietnam tour, he was shot down, captured by soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army, tortured repeatedly and held captive for six years from May of 1967 to May of 1973.

I thought Robert's 2016 book, *Unexpected Prisoner: A Memoir of a Vietnam POW*, might make interesting reading for my English 12 students at the Gow School. I'm discovering that a war, even one as recent as the Vietnam War, which was so much a part of my teenage and college years, fades quickly from the younger generations' collective sense of history, so I hoped they could learn from Lt. Wideman.

In rereading Wideman's Vietnam memoir, I stumbled upon something that reinforced the belief I've developed over my 30-plus years of hosting writing classes: **good storytelling, I'm convinced, benefits both reader AND writer.**

In "*Unexpected Prisoner*," Wideman describes his weeks of isolation in a chapter called "Heartbreak Hotel." "It was the grimmest moment of my life," he says of the dark, solitary days he spent in a broom closet-sized, vermin-infested cell that stank of blood and human misery. One of his happiest moments, on the other hand, came when he was finally allowed the companionship of another captured pilot. And what did they do when they were finally granted permission to speak to each other? They told stories—Wideman about Cazenovia Creek in his childhood hometown—and in so doing, fed each other's souls. The telling of stories benefitted both teller and listener.

I was thinking about Wideman's experiences as I went to visit my friend John Sly over at Absolut Care, where he's been stationed after a health setback that has him confined to quarters, temporarily, at least.

You probably know John Sly as a legendary Boy Scout leader, or a fixture at local historical societies. I know him because he has been telling me stories for years; in fact, he's been telling stories to everyone in our Writing Your Memoirs and Family Histories classes for most of a decade. And great tales they are: of ancestors in the early days of Aurora and East Hamburg (modern day Orchard Park); of colorful relatives with names like Zebulon and Penfold, of one-room schoolhouses; of

adventures on Cook Road; of Boy Scout trips, camping and hiking adventures, gardening, pickle and sauerkraut making, geocaching, and trail blazing at Hunters Creek Park. John's one of those guys who became busier in retirement than he was as a full-time employee. And his Thursday installments of his life story and those of his ancestors have become one of the many highlights of our weekly sessions.

Lately, though, we've had to make do without any stories from John. Or so I thought. When Kateri and I went, unannounced, to visit him the other day at Absolut, he thrust out his hand to shake and said immediately, "I've got stories for Thursday class." And sure enough he did. In what must have been a laborious undertaking, John had written in longhand (with his steadfast friend Beverly Windsor's help) about winter hikes he and his Scouts had taken out Strykersville way. The story overflowed with glorious details about creek crossings, the trail meal, maple sugar shacks along the way. Kateri, bless her heart, transcribed the tale onto her computer so I could read a printed copy for our meeting last Thursday. It was a great hit.

When I reported to John on Saturday, bearing a stack of manuscripts from his fellow writers along with their kudos for the winter hike story, he lit up and his first words were, "I have another story for you; it's about camping up at Johnson's Falls in Sheldon." This time Kateri will sit with John and type as he speaks, eliminating the difficult handwriting process he endured last time around.

Our stories are what sustain us; of that I have become convinced over the 33-plus years I've offered classes and workshops in writing. I don't know if continuing to write down and share his memories will get John Sly out of the nursing home and back on his feet more quickly than if he sat there staring at the strident garbage on TV, but it's welcome therapy at the very least. Who can say if the stories that Robert Wideman shared with his fellow prisoners staved off suicide by loneliness and boredom? But they brought a smile to a face that had almost forgotten how to make one.

A few weeks ago, we attended a wake for 98-year-old retired teacher and Stonegate resident Mary Murphy, who had begun coming to the Memoirs and Family Histories Class in her late 80s. Around the reception room at the funeral home were copies of the stories she had written and laminated about her early days in Buffalo—spending her teens at an orphanage while her mother battled tuberculosis, repairing dining car linens for the railroad at the Central Terminal, managing to get herself through college while working, raising children and embarking on a teaching career that lasted into her 80s. While stories will sustain her kids, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and generations unknown, they also sustained Mary in her twilight years as she determined to finish her memoir while battling increasing physical limitations. A special lady.

And then there is my dear friend Hedda Martens, about whom colleague Shelly Ferullo wrote recently. Dr. Martens arrived at my classroom eight years ago, introduced to me by her son-in-law, Bruce Davidson, who gave me these

instructions: “She has great stories. Make her write them down.” Eight wonderful years later, her fascinating collection of vignettes about growing up in Germany during Hitler’s reign, her immigration to England and then Western New York, and her career as a college professor is nearing completion, thanks to the encouragement of her daughter Anna and the skills of editor Debby Sullivan. Those stories, which now will sustain her family and friends, have sustained Hedda, too, as she created them, even as she battled health issues that sapped her strength. And as a *pièce de résistance*, she was recently interviewed by the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo. Here are links to those videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tLkZdywCB0>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5zcp_acBBo

Perhaps the best thing about stories is that they’re free for the asking. And the telling. A true renewable resource.