

'REMEMBER WHEN ...?'

A bid to keep history alive

BY LISA L. COLANGELO

SHE HAS lived in Flushing for almost 90 years, raised seven children there and witnessed the transformation of the neighborhood from bucolic farmland to bustling multi-ethnic center.

But Annalou Christensen's rich firsthand experiences would probably never be included in a textbook or historical document.

That's why researchers at Queens College have embarked on an ambitious effort to record the lives of everyday Queens residents in an online archive.

The Queens Memory Project is designed to be an interactive "living hub of collective memory" that users can easily peruse and expand on their own.

"We really have an obligation to the public and to the community to record contemporary history," said graduate student Natalie Milbrodt, who helped start the project as a fellow in the Queens College Libraries' Department of Special Collections and Archives.

"People in Queens have these great stories and excellent memories, but these voices are not really being heard," she said.

Milbrodt focused on the leafy Waldheim section of Flushing, where the 92-year-old Christensen has lived for most of her life.

She tells tales of trolley cars on Bowne St., ice skating in Kissena Park and pony farms.

Those stories, along with family photos and documents,



Queens College graduate student Natalie Milbrodt interviews Annalou Christensen, 92, at her home in Waldheim, Flushing. At right, one of Christensen's family photos taken at home. Photo by Jeanne Noonan

will be included on the website, expected to be launched next year.

The still-sharp Christensen, a former schoolteacher and civic leader, tells a favorite story of her mother finding a horseshoe in front of their new home when Annalou was just 3 years old.

"She said, 'I'll keep that. It's good luck.' And it stayed in her closet until the day she died," Christensen recalled.

The horseshoe now sits in her own closet.

"This was a neighborhood where you knew everybody," she said.

Milbrodt said she wants to include stories from recent immigrants who may spend only a few years in a neighborhood before moving on.

She interviewed South Asian immigrants who are devotees of the nearby Ganesha Temple, as well as a Puerto Rican family who were trailblazers when they put down roots in the area in the 1970s.

The Queens Public Library is lending its services and vast archives to the project.

"This is an attempt to capture and compile the American experience as it is being lived," said Benjamin Alexander, a professor and director of Special Collections and Archives at Queens College.

"This is a vision and perspective on history that has never been so democratic or so open."

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