

Linda Seward

at the sharp end

Where passions can lead...



I HAVE BECOME an oral historian. Who would have thought that quilting would lead me to this? But it has, and I'll tell you how.

I've been involved in the Talking Quilts project for the past five years. Pioneered in the UK by Pauline Macaulay, Talking Quilts is based on an American model called Quilters' Save Our Stories (QSOS). You may have already read about this project in *The Quilter* (issue 139, Summer 2014 and issue 143, Summer 2015), but just to remind you, Talking Quilts is a grassroots effort to save the stories of British quilters by recording, preserving and sharing today's quilting history in the UK.

I want to talk about what being involved in this project has meant to me personally. One of the benefits of becoming an interviewer is that I learned about oral history, what it is and how to do it. Before the project is rolled out in a Region, local volunteers have a training session with the Project Manager, Vicky Martin. One of the things we, the volunteers, quickly realise is how important the human voice can be when telling a story. You can read a letter, article or book, but you do not get the slight hesitations, inflections and emotions. These communicate almost as much as words, which is why obtaining an oral history can be so rich and revealing.

On our training day, we learned how to use the recording equipment and tested our new-found skills by interviewing each other. More importantly, we were given lessons on *how* to interview. In essence, this means how to listen and encourage the interviewee

to talk. You would think this was easy – just start a conversation and take it from there. But it's not. The tendency to interrupt, supply a word or interject an anecdote into someone's story is irresistible, because that's the way most of us carry on normal conversations. An interview is different. It's not about you, the interviewer; it's about the person telling their story. So I learned how to listen, to step back and encourage the person to carry on, even if there were moments of silence in the conversation. If you try to fill those silences, you could actually be changing the speaker's train of thought. They might be deciding what to say next and need some space to do it. Or the person might feel they have answered adequately, but the interviewer's silence might encourage them to expand on what they had already said, often with remarkable results.

Once you get people to start talking, the conversation can go in a variety of directions and you never know what the outcome will be, or what revelations will ensue. No matter how nervous or reserved an interviewee is initially, they seem to find the act of talking about themselves to an avid listener quite uplifting. By keeping quiet, smiling and nodding, further revelations are encouraged. One can almost see the interviewee blossom as they warm to their subject.

I conducted two enjoyable interviews with quilters in my Region, but felt that I didn't want to waste the skills I had acquired, so decided to interview my parents when I visited them in New Jersey last summer. I bought a very inexpensive recording device that

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Talking Quilts
Find out more about the Talking Quilts (TQ) project at: www.quiltersguild.org.uk/learn/talking-quilts-oral-history-project
If you'd like to get involved or would like to sign-up for the newsletter, contact TQ Project Manager Vicky Martin at: info@talkingquilts.org.uk

hooks up to my computer and told them what I planned to do. My 90-year-old father was extremely doubtful. He has never been much of a talker and he was very uncomfortable with what I asked him to do. I was there for three weeks, but there was never a 'good time' for our interview. Two days before I was leaving I said that enough was enough and we were going to have a short chat and he finally agreed. We sat on the sofa, the device between us and I started asking him questions about his childhood. When he realised the device wouldn't bite, he began to relax and told me things I never knew. It was wonderful to listen, and see him become increasingly animated. An hour later (I couldn't believe it!), I said that we had done enough and turned off the machine. 'But', he said, 'I'm not done!' This from the man who didn't want to be interviewed at all. I said we'd continue the next day, and we did. I now have a treasure trove of stories and information in my father's own voice and words that my family and I can listen to and learn from. You cannot put a price on that. I then also enjoyed interviewing my mother and have hours of stories from her, but then she wasn't reluctant to talk. I kept turning off the device saying we were done and she'd then start reminiscing about something else, so I turned it back on again.

Great stuff, and all because of quilting! You never know where your passions will lead...

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