

Seniors help write history of working-class life

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Kathryn

Harvey was 14 when her family left

Verdun for a new life in Lachine. Although her house was only a short dis-



Passionate Verdun residents helped bring back memories of swimming at the community's waterfront.

tance away, it would take more than two decades – and a community history project – before Harvey returned to wander down Wellington and de l'Église (formerly Church) Sts. and get a fresh flavour for the old neighbourhood.

A McGill-trained historian, Harvey was recruited a couple of years ago by the Dawson Community Centre, which was eager to help anglophone seniors in Verdun capture their story at a time when the working-class district was undergoing a transformation from manufacturing hub to gentrified suburb.

"The anglophone working-class often feel as if they don't fit anywhere in Quebec history," said Harvey, who sees a parallel between Verdun and other vanishing – in some instances, already gone – English-speaking pockets in Rosemont, Park Ex and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve.

Working with 12 "totally passionate" Verdun residents ranging in age from their late 60s to their mid-80s, Harvey's team put together a short film, a website (verdunmemories.org) and a community quilt.

The Verdun old-timers made collages to showcase their vintage photos and shared stories of school days at Riverview or summer afternoons on the boardwalk, connecting with their past

and reconnecting with their community, whether they live in Verdun, the West Island or the West Coast.

On Saturday, the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network, in concert with the Concordia's School of Extended Learning and the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, will host a conference aimed at helping amateur historians, particularly those in the English-speaking Montreal community, learn how to preserve their stories.

"People want a sense of connection to their environment," says historian Lorraine O'Donnell, who curated such community-centred projects as the Irish exhibit at the McCord Museum last year and another which focused on the once-vibrant, now mostly disappeared, Jewish community in Quebec City.

"For some, it's a wish to know more about their ancestors who settled here 200 years ago. For newer arrivals, it's a desire to better understand where they are. For English-speaking people, there is a special desire to understand how they fit into the conception of who is a Quebecer."

Erin McDonagh, co-ordinator of the daylong conference, said often people have great stories to tell but don't know where to begin to access resources. Discussions and workshops are designed to



Pictures of the Verdun Boardwalk are among those collected in the community history project.



Anglophone seniors also had fond recollections of the Verdun Tourist Camp.

help people get started, find funding from government and private sponsors, archive documents, and develop a website.

O'Donnell said access to government services has improved a great deal over the last few years, yet often English-speaking Quebecers aren't aware of what's available or don't know how to

make government programs work for them.

"People might know the history, but not know how to share it with others. Or sometimes stories and experiences are very well known within a particular group or neighbourhood, but they don't know that other people aren't familiar with that slice of Montreal life."

O'Donnell and Harvey see such community-based history projects as a way to inject vitality, confidence and a sense of belonging, especially for English-speaking Montrealers from working-class backgrounds.

"Verdun and the whole southwest sector went through a terrible time after the free trade agreement, as factories closed, jobs were lost and young people moved away," said Harvey.