

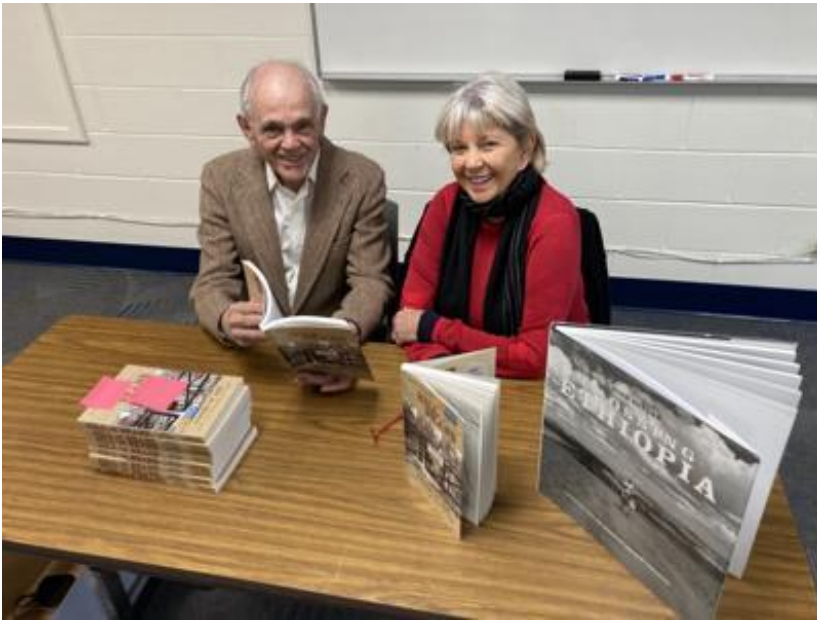
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Locals Share Their Stories

During College Memoir Class

By Daphne Larkin

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Lifelong county resident John Snyder talks to Daphne Larkin’s Memoir Writing Class at Blue Ridge Community College about his memoir “Hill of Beans,” which tells the story of growing up on Cedar Mountain during the Great Depression. (Courtesy photo)

People of Transylvania County have extraordinary stories to tell about their lives, but like most of us, they need a little help writing those stories. And so, last month, eleven men and women from Brevard, Balsam Grove, Dunn’s Rock, Cedar Mountain, Rosman and beyond sat in my Memoir Writing class at the Brevard campus of the Blue Ridge Community College and looked expectantly at me.

I began talking about my career as a journalist, magazine writer and book author. Then – and this was not planned – I told the class about the most difficult time in my life, when my young son died after a long illness.

“Writing my memoir saved my life and then it enabled me to create a new one,” I told them. “Memoir writing is so personal, so deeply felt and so rewarding, it can help you, too.”

And so, this multi-generational group, ages 34 to 95, began to speak about the writing project each would undertake during our eight weeks together. Then, they began to write.

Furman Nicholson wrote a bittersweet story about when he was a lonely five-year-old “in need of a kind and gentle friend.” He found that friend in the miller who operated his family’s water-powered grist mill near Rosman. The miller took the boy under his wing, kept him company and taught him how to operate the mill wheel – a thrill Nicholson will never forget.

Stand-Up comedian Molly Devane wrote about fleeing Manhattan for Balsam Grove with her husband at the beginning of the pandemic and “adjusting to life from the center of everything to the middle of nowhere,” her writing enabled by the deadlines and accountability provided by the class. (Devane blogs at <https://mollydevane.substack.com/>).

The challenge was different for Buddy Lawrence who had tried to write his story before, but had gotten nowhere.

“The class sparked my writing and I was finally able to take the reader with me to the hardest moment of my life,” he said. “It was something I needed to do. It was important to me to write it down.”

Michael Newberry wanted to write about his journey from foster homes, to medical school, to becoming a psychiatrist, but needed guidance organizing his story and establishing a writing routine.

“While it’s been painful at times to write about my personal life, it’s been simultaneously therapeutic,” he said. “I knew writing was a tool recommended by psychotherapists, but to actually do it has allowed me to return to past events and view them from a number of different perspectives.”

Studies have shown that writing about one’s life can be therapeutic, particularly “emotional or expressive” writing. In a landmark research study, participants were asked to write about their most traumatic experience over four days. By the fourth day, their depression lifted, their mood improved and their obsessive thinking decreased. Over time, immune functioning and health also benefited.

Writing about a difficult time in your life is good for your health because you examine from every angle what happened to you and what you felt. As you write about it, you’re no longer the victim, you’re the narrator of your story and you’ve taken control of it. No wonder writing helps heal our traumas. Writing about them is empowering.

Remembering a hilarious and adventurous time is good for one’s health, too, as Aoife Clancy discovered when she wrote about living in Galway, Ireland, in her twenties in a house filled with zany, larger-than-life characters.

“Working on my story was not only great fun, but I improved my writing skills, found my unique ‘voice’ and learned how to keep the reader interested from the first word to the last one,” she said. (Clancy will be “performing” her story at the Cedar Mountain Canteen on May 7 from 7 to 9 p.m.)

Yes, everyone has a story. The truth is everyone has hundreds of stories – stories just waiting to be told. And, stories that might need a little help in the writing.

An award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer, Larkin teaches Memoir Writing classes at the Blue Ridge Community College on the Brevard campus. Her next classes are from June 7 to July 26 (Tuesday from 10 a.m. to noon) and from Sept. 28 to Nov. 16 (Wednesday from 10 a.m. to noon). To register, go to www.blueridge.edu/ceclasses for the Continuing Education Program, and then “Special Interest” classes. For questions, email Larkin at Daphne@daphnelarkin.com.