

OUR STORIES, OUR WORKING LIVES

Selfhelp Innovative Senior Center
45-25 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, NY 11355

Jane Qiu, PhD, LMSW
Director

Marsha Gildin and Robin Bady, Teaching Artists

Teachers & Writers Collaborative

Spring 2019

Table of Contents

- A NOTE FROM MARSHA 4
- A NOTE FROM ROBIN 5
- BIOS 8
 - Annell Barton 9
 - David Chow & Yok Yen Chow 10
 - Kay Hom 12
 - Carmella Iovino 13
 - Ruth Lee 14
 - Mary Medard 15
 - Echo Mei 16
 - Zofia Pienkos 17
 - Indira Prasad 18
 - Yen Yun Shu 18
 - Athena Wandzilak 20
 - Elena Wolfe 21
 - Lee Zheung 22
- OUR STORIES, OUR WORKING LIVES 23
 - WORK 24
 - FIRST JOBS 25
 - BEST JOB/WORST JOB 27
 - WORK: LESSONS LEARNED 28
 - A FRIEND AT WORK 29
 - IDENTITY: HOW OUR WORK SHAPED US or HOW WE SHAPED OUR WORK 30
 - LEAVING YOUR JOB: SNIPPET REMINDERS 31
 - WORK: THE UNEXPECTED 32
 - THE STRANGEST, WEIRDEST, FUNNIEST, MOST DISGUSTING, SCARIEST, SADDEST TIME AT WORK, OR OTHERWISE 34
 - HEADLINES: Retirement – Letting Go 35
- OUR STORIES 36
 - Annell Barton 37
 - David & Yok Yen Chow 38
 - Kay Hom 39
 - Ruth Lee 40
 - Mary Medard 41
 - Echo Mei 42
 - Indira 43
 - Yen Yun Shu 44
 - Elena Wolfe 45
 - Lee Zheng 46
 - A Few of Our Dream Jobs 48
- GROUP REFLECTIONS ON THE GROUP EXPERIENCE 50



A NOTE FROM MARSHA

The Selfhelp Innovative Senior Center hums like a beehive.

Activity is going on - discussion groups, English and Spanish language, dancing, chair yoga, movement of all kinds, karaoke, Chinese opera, Chinese sword dancing, LUNCH and so, so, so much more. The schedule is packed to the max! And under the guidance of Jane Qiu and the Selfhelp staff, the center is run by a slew of friendly and hard working volunteers. What a world!

The Flushing community is a world I have loved working in as a teaching artist for over 20 years. Here's a little history. I have had the joy and privilege of coordinating an intergenerational living history theatre program with Selfhelp senior volunteers and PS 24 5th graders for twenty-three years through Elders Share the Arts (ESTA). Sharing stories from our life experience and creating original presentations for the community grew in depth and meaning for us. Most importantly, we grew as a community, connected in friendship and appreciation. When ESTA closed its doors last year, after 40 years of service, we were lucky enough to be 'adopted' by Teachers & Writers Collective and funded by SU CASA so that we could return. Thank you!

We returned in a new way. Robin Bady joined the team. Two teaching artists - a storyteller and a story gatherer. Letting go of the intergenerational piece for this year, we wanted to cultivate the riches of more stories and more storytellers from within the senior center, to hear and give voice to your life experiences. We created a Story Circle of Storytellers based on the theme *Our Stories, Our Working Lives*, and were thrilled to welcome so many new members to our weekly gatherings.

And the stories we've heard! This anthology you have in your hand, produced by Teachers & Writers Collective, is a taste, a sampling, of what was discovered and shared each week, as we grew in our remembering, our telling, our listening and our reflecting back.

Thank you, storytellers, for taking the leap. It's been a joy to get to know you.



A NOTE FROM ROBIN

Humans are, as the anthropologists tell us, “the storytelling animal.” Storytelling is our primordial art form. It is natural, easy and fun!

The storytelling sessions at the Selfhelp Innovative Senior Center were just like that - natural, easy and fun! Our topic was “Work”. Once we got started, the stories rolled off the tongues of the tellers and into the ears of the listeners. We became attentive listeners as well as strong tellers. Connections were made one story inspired the next, and our different experiences became part of a new shared experience. Our anthology consists of these stories, poems, bios and pictures.

And did I mention the food? Stories were originally told around the fire and at meal times, and we (Marsha and I) wanted to replicate that. So, Jane and the wonderful people at the Center brought us cookies, crackers, fruit and water. As each told his or her story, the others listened contentedly, with a full brain and a full stomach.

Storytelling is magic. It reaches across years, cultures and language, and connects people, open up hearts and minds, and offers realization and release.

And pleasure. As one of our participants said, “I go home and don’t watch TV. Why should I? I just go over in my mind the stories I heard in the class. They are much more interesting than what’s on TV.”

Thanks! To Jane, the staff of the Center and the storytellers who made our class and our time together so extraordinary.



We would love to call Jane Qiu “the Queen Bee,” but she would never go for that.

Jane is the senior center director. Her work is her art form.

Over the years, Jane has meticulously shaped, encouraged and illuminated the merging of two senior centers into one. Different cultures, different languages, different interests, different tastes, different ways, different needs all evolving into ONE engaged, respectful, organized, fun-loving community. In our humble opinion, this is the art of relationship building at its best.

Jane's commitment helped our program continue successfully at the senior center. When asked about the importance and impact of this type of program, Jane offered these thoughts:

There are 4,000 members in our senior center, but many may not know each other very well. As a culture, we are not used to opening and expressing our feelings or thoughts. We tend not to speak about ourselves or our work. This is a valuable kind of form of the arts. To share personal experience. It encourages us to socialize, be more open and become interested in one another.

Especially for women, when we speak of our work experience, we want this to include the work we do in our house, our home. When we refer to 'home maker' or 'house work', this does not mean something of 'no value'.

There is liberation in the US. In China, and the Chinese tradition, there is an attachment to being dependent on the husband. We want to encourage a feeling of being proud of taking care of the home, proud of being part of the family, part of life, part of society in this way.

We can say to our elders, "Your daughter stands on your shoulders. You are still valuable." We hope all our members feel, "I can recall my life and say, I've done something GOOD."

Thank you, Jane, for your encouragement and care.



We acknowledge the wonderful participants who joined our group this year to make it what it has been and add to the delight, revelation, honesty and fun - filling our hearts with one another's stories to remember.

It is good to get to know one another.

Everyone has a story to tell.

Thank you, storytellers!

Annell Barton
Gloria Castellanos
David Chow
Yok Yen Chow
Chun Lee Chung
Kay Hom
Carmela Iovino
Michael Lee
Ruth Lee
Mary Medard
Echo Mei
Zofia Pienkos
Indira Prasad
Susan Rodgers
Yen Yun Shu
Athena Wandzilak
Elena Wolfe
Helen Ying

BIOS

The Long & Short of It

*"Everyone has a different story. We come from different backgrounds.
It is fascinating to hear."*

Annell Barton

I was born in Flushing Hospital and grew up in Flushing, in the Bland Houses on Lawrence Street. We were the first family in the building.

I worked for thirty-three and a half years in Flushing Hospital. I love that hospital! There are nice people there of different nationalities. It is rewarding work. Though it was sad at times because you are dealing with sick people.

First, I was a dietary aide, then a nurse's aide, then I worked in the X-ray department special procedures, and then the union sent me to school to learn to be a radiation oncology tech. Finally, I became supervisor for the transportation department.

I grew so much.

And then I met Denise, the bitch. And I was glad to retire. Now, I cruise myself to death!



David Chow & Yok Yen Chow

So much coincidence!

I was born in Canton, moved to Hong Kong, then my father sent me to Argentina in 1953, says David. Yok Yen was born in Canton, moved to Hong Kong and two years later, in 1955, took the same boat I did to come to Argentina, to meet her father.

I was studying out in a boarding school in the countryside. She was working for her father in the city. We never met until a friend's wedding. After that, we would see each other on the weekends and holidays. Sometimes Yok Yen would help me write letters to my father, since he could read only Chinese and I could not write Chinese.

We had been going steady for a long time. My parents were not happy, because both of us have the same last name. Our parents did not approve of our being together because of having the same last name, which is considered unlucky in China. But we said, "We don't care," adds Yok Yen. "We keep going steady."

Almost 10 years passed by, and we decide to get married. So I ask Yok Yen to write a letter to ask my father's permission to get married. Those days the mail had to cross two oceans, and would take almost a week to arrive, but after two days, I received a letter from my father telling me to get married. We were so happy! Our letters had crossed the ocean at the same time.

We had a big wedding in Argentina, and my parents had their party in Hong Kong without our presence. Well, we have had our 51 years anniversary, with two children and 4 grandchildren.

Yes, we believe in fortune and destiny.

We opened the first Chinese take-out in Argentina. When we were starting, we asked David's father for loan, but he said no. (David had been a bad boy when young.) David had a college friend who said she would speak to her father. Her father gave us a loan for \$3,000 dollars in 1966-67. On a handshake!



You can trust this, David says. I told him that in five years, I would pay him back. It was good at business. I paid him back in three years!

Decisions, decisions, choices, choices. Yok Yen's sister had been living here in the US a long time. It seemed to us that there was an American future. So we came for a visit.

At that time in Argentina, Peron was in power. There was a coup. It was dangerous. We never went back, we never returned. We left everything there in Argentina and bought everything new over-time in America.

We opened the YOKEN Delicatessen in Woodside, Queens at 65th and Broadway.



I was always in business, says Yok Yen. So we expanded. First, we were landlords and bought two small houses. (Bad idea! says David) Then we turned to commercial rentals and bought a strip mall. Then we converted two houses into another mall.

Then we got our children educated.

Now we can retire, says David. That is in the planning. Whatever we planned, came out. It was more than luck.

Now we come to enjoy life at the senior center for six years. We love exercise. Tai chi, chair yoga, sword dancing. Teaching Spanish. Tango ("But not David," says Yok Yen. "David does not dance.")

Kay Hom

I was born in Bellevue Hospital, New York City. Growing up, I had three older brothers. We moved to Jackson Heights, at 32nd Avenue and 90th St., right across the street from the elementary school we ended up going to.

The last year of school, when I was 11, I had to be bussed to a black neighborhood because the schools were integrating. I wore fishnet stockings waiting for the bus. I did not wear a hat or anything. I was freezing! But that's how I was bussed out of the neighborhood.

The new school was fine. I do not remember much except one boy, Ronald Rencher, who chased me around the classroom. He liked me. But for junior high and high school, I got to return to my neighborhood. It was all within walking distance.

I was a Jackson Heights girl. It was fun! My brother used to have a band, and his friends came over and practiced. It was a no name band. But if you Googled it in Jackson Heights you could find it.

I went to FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) for college. After graduation I went into advertising at A&S in Brooklyn. It was a low-pressure job. I worked there for 11 years, then left and went to Fortunoff's for a year. Then I returned to A&S because Fortunoff's was going to close the department I was in. A&S then merged with Macy's and I went to work at Macy's. I worked there for 26 years, in Brooklyn and Manhattan. I worked for 38 years combining A&S and Macy's. I did take some time off, in the summer, before I went to Fortunoff's.

I retired because they were laying off people, and because of the new bosses, who were never happy with anything. Also, I retired to take care of my mom during the day. At night we hired other people would get up to be with her. She did not have teeth, and she got tired with the food I cooked for her. The last month of her life I took care of her with home hospice. She passed about a year ago.

About retirement? I come to the center about 4 days a week. I keep moving so my knees do not hurt so much. I like the center. I like my friends and the fun we have. And I like to sing karaoke. I am not shy about it anymore. I am not a great singer, but I like it. I even went on a cruise to Bermuda, the Bahamas, and stopped off in Florida. On the cruise I karaoke'd!



Carmella Iovino

I was born in New York City at New York Hospital, and grew up in East Harlem at East 122 and Pleasant Avenue. We lived in my grandmother's four family cold water flat.

I worked at Universal Pictures as a secretary in the advertising department. I liked it! It was a happy uplifting place. Most people there were in good places in their lives. The atmosphere was friendly and outgoing. I met many stars. I met Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood, and Marilyn Hassett.

Retirement? I do what I want when I want to do it! I keep busy doing lots of things – dancing, Atlantic City, volunteering. I have many friends. I have been coming to the senior center for 20 years. Lots of my friends have died. Now I am alone.



Annell: No, you are not! I am with you every day

Carmella: But you are always with your boyfriend

Annell: Well, we can still go out!

Carmella: Remember when we went with 15 people out to breakfast? Most of them are gone now.

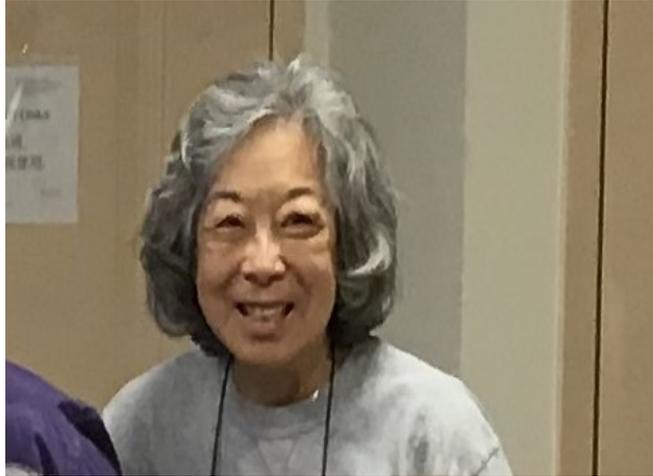
Ruth Lee

I was born in Brooklyn, NY. I was the third youngest of nine children. I grew up in Brooklyn, and have been a Brooklynite all my life!

I was a sales associate with Macy's for 34 years, in the jewelry department. What did I learn? That doing work that is expected of me brought me recognition and pride.

I retired at a time in my life when I needed to take a leave for medical reasons. It was a blessing because I was able to care for my husband when he was going through cancer.

I have becoming to the senior center for about seven years, after I moved from Brooklyn to Flushing. I enjoy being among people and getting the energy from them, participating in group exercise, and volunteering in the small lunch room on Wednesday.



Mary Medard

I was born in Haiti and I grew up in Haiti and the U.S.

I worked at the front desk of a hospital. I helped everyone that I could. Something funny happened, and I will share that story later.

Since retirement, I am enjoying myself but I still am searching.

I have been coming to the senior center for three months. I enjoy meeting people there.



Echo Mei

I was born in China and grew up in Taiwan.

I was a senior paralegal and office manager for a law firm. I was very happy to help people to get residency in the United States.

How do I feel about retirement? Very happy!

I have been coming to this center for just a few months. I love that there are a lot of classes to participate in and fill my life and increase my health.



Zofia Pienkos

I was born in Poland and grew up there in the countryside. Ever since I was a child, I helped my family with the farm. Because I liked farming, I attended agricultural school. After graduating, I travelled around the country talking to farmers about their agricultural practices, to help them get better product from the land. They were very interesting people!

I came to England and learned English there. I worked at the Royal Botanic Gardens in London. When I left there, I came to the United States, and continued learning English, attended horticultural school, and began working at the Queens Botanical Gardens. I worked at the Botanical Gardens for a long time. The wedding garden, that's what I cultivated. Planting seeds, raising flowers. When I told my boss I was going to retire, he said, "It will be difficult to find someone like you."

About retirement - I was happy to retire. Now, something good in my life!

I have been coming to the center for three years. I enjoy taking computer classes, health classes and other interesting classes. I come here because I make new friends.



Indira Prasad

I was born in Guyana, Canal No 2 Polder E.B.D. I grew up in Guyana Georgetown.

I learned to sew by myself and made a lot of money. It made me feel good.
About retirement: I love to give back to my community.

I have been coming to the center March 2015 – 2019. Since being here I have been sharing what I learned – yoga and cooking Indian food.



Yen Yun Shu

I was born in Shanghai and went to elementary, middle school and high school there. But when the Communists came I could not even go to school. I came from a poor family and I could not afford to study classical Chinese song as I would have liked to. I was lucky to get a job at a Shanghai radio station.

At the radio station, people would call in with requests. I wanted to learn so much. So I learned songs from the movies and also folk songs and popular songs. I told myself, I must learn them all. I wanted to be ready for any request someone might make or call in to the radio station.

After Shanghai I escaped to Hong Kong for seven years where I lived and sang. I took a ship to Taiwan where I had an uncle living. I stayed with him. I would send money home to my mother and baby brother.

With the customs people, the Japanese would have drinking parties. My boss would let me sing. I wanted to be a singer who could sing my country's songs. I had to support myself. Make money. And, always, I had a feeling to sing. This is my experience.

Although I travelled a lot of places in my life, I have never taken a detailed look back at that time. Retirement is a wonderful time for me now. The senior center has many helpful people. It is a good place to have lunch.

Yen Yun (3rd from left) with co-workers in front of the Shanghai radio station



Athena Wandzilak

I was born in Manhattan, into a family of four generations. I grew up in Sunnyside, Queens with my great grandmother, my grandmother, my mother and father, and my sister and brother.

I was a nurse, and what was important to me was that I was helping people restore their health. I was helping them to heal.

Retirement? Honestly, sometimes it sucks. I need to be busy. Being sedentary doesn't work for me.

I have been coming to the center for over ten years. What do I like doing there? Well, I like John's Advanced Computer Class. I have been going to that for nine years. I enjoy teaching Basic English Writing. I enjoy meeting members of Selfhelp and joining the different programs.



Elena Wolfe

I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico and lived in the area known as Santurce. We were raised in my father's hometown of Cabo Rojo when he dumped us in his mother's house and left. We were desperately poor. He came back 13 years later to divorce my mom. I'd say my biggest plus being raised just by my mom is there was one set of instructions to follow. It made my head lighter. I was the youngest of four sisters and brothers who came to the US first, got established, and then sent for my mother and I. I came when I was 21 years old.



I was lucky. The labor laws were changing in the US. My sister in law was working in an executive office of a textile company. She told me about a job at A&S Manhasset. I started doing bookkeeping. Then I did accounts receivable, then the payroll; and my favorite job – sales! I worked there for 25 years. It was the time of fake fur, aka fun fun!

I went to Hunter College taking education courses, where I met my husband Harvey in the elevator. Harvey wanted to go into business. So we ended up in business for 30 years. He made accessories for affairs, events, and the like. We made cummerbunds, bow ties. We were very successful. We did a lot of traveling.

When I got sick, I was laid off from work. It changed my life. We had no money problems, so now we can do a lot of traveling, and I can enjoy my life. Harvey and I are snowbirds. We go down to Florida. We play cards. In the summer we go to the Poconos.

Retirement? I have been at the senior center for ten years, doing computer, volunteering, making friends, getting together and going out. It is good connections. And I am very busy doing things I did not have time to do when I was working. I learned how to drive. I love reading. I get my knowledge that way. And science? I keep up with the changes. I watch PBS. That's how I stay up to date.

Lee Zheung

I came to the United States in 1984 from China. I was a geophysicist and computer center manager, QingHai branch of national oil company.

So here are all my jobs in the United States:

1. Visiting scientist
2. PhD student
3. Research associate
4. Grocery store owner
5. Middle size wall street company – IT
6. Merrill Lynch – IT - 6 months later promoted to Assistant Vice President of Global Tech Center
7. Bank of America



I made it because

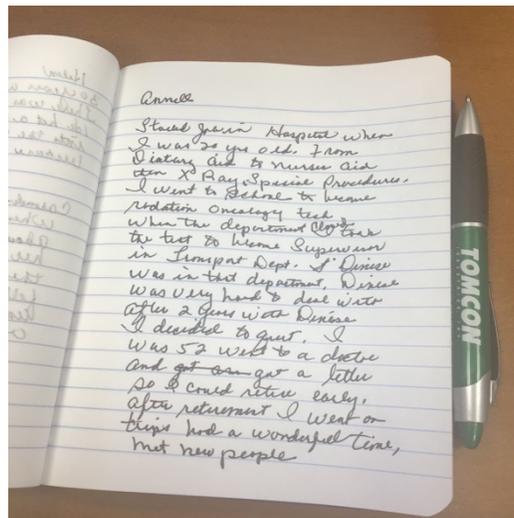
1. I got a US degree,
2. I kept moving ahead,
3. I was supported by my family. They understood that I wanted to make a change.

OUR STORIES, OUR WORKING LIVES

How do we find our stories? How do our stories find us?
Story? I don't have a story!
Oh, yes, you do.
We all do!

Here are some prompts and themes we gave ourselves
to discover the stories wanting to be told

WORK
FIRST JOB
BEST JOB/WORST JOB
A LESSON LEARNED
WORK FRIENDS
HOW DID WORK SHAPE YOUR IDENTITY (OR NOT)?
LEAVING YOUR JOB
THE UNEXPECTED
THE STRANGEST, WEIRDEST, FUNNIEST, SCARIEST,
SADDEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED AT WORK
RETIREMENT OR LETTING GO
WORK AND PLAY OR THE WILD CARD STORY
WORK AND PLAY
REIMAGINE WORK



WORK

WORK !

I want to work
I want to make a little money
But it takes three times the money earned to cure your knee
Bills. Responsibility.
Remember, you have to support your family
Now, I can say, I have completed my father's assignment

WORK !

For Chinese women, work is their life
I can't imagine life without it - - it's part of my identity
I sang across all the nightclubs in Southeast Asia
Work is for the young. You may want to take it easy
Money. Health. Be animated.
Do something you enjoy
Keep moving.

WORK !

If you love what you are doing, work is not work
Work is healthy.
Work is helping people. I loved what I was doing
I'm a retired nurse. Later in life I realized - I should've been a VET!
I enjoy volunteering.
Feeding people means a lot to me
I finally did it! A Legacy Workshop with family histories.

WORK !

I still work, but I have slowed down a bit

WORK !

I'm glad I don't have to work anymore.

FIRST JOBS

I.

Work in the night, go to school by day

Work in a restaurant

Work as a reporter. A cashier. A singer. A nurse.

In the garment industry. On the radio. With the land and its farmers.

The Cultural Revolution. There was schooling, but no studies. Everything stopped

So I was sent to the Gobi Desert because of my family. Wind, pebbles and pain.

My first job? Petroleum on the QingHai Plateau

No, I did not want to go.

My first job was at Universal Pictures

Sure, I met the critics. I met the movie stars, too.

And we always got to see the pictures first.

My whole life, I have been a teacher.

A Math professor and nothing else.

Math. Since 1956.

I started in the post office, I started in high school

People stamped slowly, but I figured out another way

I've always liked to challenge myself to think about things differently.

How can I get it done? What is the best, most efficient way?

I was part of a pilot program to become an LPN.

Bird S. Coler and other state hospitals. They found us work.

It was a great training opportunity

My family goes way back. To the garment industry

So I became a reporter for Women's Wear Daily.

II.

To begin with, I was given my first job, to sing on a radio station
Singing on the radio started me off.
From there, onto night clubs all over Asia.
First class all the way

It was the Communist era in Poland. I was trained in agriculture.
My first job sent me out to the farms in the countryside
To help people learn how to improve the productivity of their land
The interesting people I met....

I was 16 years old when I got my first job - a cashier at the A&P.
One day, I came up short.
The girl's father brought the \$10 bill back. Here. You gave the wrong change.

My dad was a tailor in Guyana.
One day I began to make patterns from newspaper. No scissors. I just used my
nails!
I made clothes, too. People loved my work.

100 campers every two weeks. Wheelchairs, crutches, different ways of speaking.
Listening to one another from the inside out.
And then there was the graveyard shift surprise! Yikes!

Long ago, I was an architecture student in Argentina.
My first job was making money working in a restaurant.
This helped me to start a new life with my wife.

From there, we got our first apartment and moved in together,
AFTER we got married.

BEST JOB/WORST JOB

What I just saw in pathology, I will never be here again.

This was the worst, worst, worst job.

6 people died same day in oncology

I couldn't take it.

30 years on stage.

No matter what I felt, I had to be cheery and smile

Chinese people say boy is number 1

It was scary - to make sure he was alive!

I was crossing the street and heard a bang, and a car losing control

I pulled her back and saved her, and my child too

My husband pushed me out of the house

So I worked part time at Macy's for 35 years!

It was best when the story wrote itself.

I knew I nailed it when I knew it was the way it should be told.

The wedding garden, that's what I cultivated

Planting seeds, raising flowers.

The lady I worked for was nice, very kind.

Every Sunday she went to church, wearing the dress I ironed.

My friend could eat, but could not cook

She got me a job cooking for Father Roderick at the church.

They said I was the best cook ever!

He was a very immoral person, my boss

I did not like to help him trick others

WORK: LESSONS LEARNED

Spring is the beginning of growth
A time of planting, no blooms, much brighter

It appealed to me more than my fantasy
I am not estranged. I am a fruitification celebration!

93 years old - She did not speak a word of English
But wrote it beautifully

She always told the truth to the clients
Built up her reputation

The three monkeys
See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil

Very good advice
Very useful for life

Crossing the street between between two buses
She learned to never do that again!

She thought of me, not herself
Learned not to trust everyone

In the beginning I did not want to accept that
I was very stubborn.

After 9/11 I cooked for one week
For the firemen and sanitation department

She worked at a camp with 100 developmentally challenged men
She found communication. A common journey.

I am not going to be fired.
I will retire voluntarily

When she worked
She was serious

Knowledge is important in this type of job
How to serve the people

A FRIEND AT WORK

LISTENING TO ONE ANOTHER'S STORY... HEARING AN ESSENCE...

Bernie was very helpful to her,
Helping Helen understand what she did not know.

Friar Dominick was very funny
He made me laugh.

Patricia was a nurse, who changed to gardening, and had Zophia's interest
Both worked in the office – an artist and a painter – they were very funny.

Whenever we had troubles, or good things,
We always shared them with each other.

She is right to make friends nearby – those become real friends.
You have more time to get together, to socialize.

She worked with her husband,
But it was while playing tennis that she made a LOT of friends!

She has a widowed Puerto Rican friend who is a talker.
She is a listener, so that's OK.

Her friend did not ask for advice or take advice.
And then, it would come too late.

When she finished work, that was it!
Don't bring work problems home.

My ex-friend was a taker instead of a giver
He conned me out of two thousand dollars!
He did not pay me back.

You can stand your ground and still be proud of your decision.
No regrets.

Your pain is my truth.
That's how friendship comes about.

IDENTITY: HOW OUR WORK SHAPED US or HOW WE SHAPED OUR WORK

I enjoyed my work. I worked at the same place for 34 years.
I was a good listener, a helper, a server.
I got joy & satisfaction from helping people make choices they were happy with.
They thanked me....

I have always had a feeling God sent me here for something.
But still I feel I have not found my purpose.
I had a dream about my homeland that said, "I have to go."
When I got there, I wanted to help. What could I do?
There was so much hunger. The people were poor, poor, poor....

Once I did nursing, I wanted to go back to school.
We were four generations living in one home. The classic Greek household.
True to my nature, I was the main caregiver for everyone.
All the generations needed something....

For work, I did everything. I just did everything.
No particular skills. I had many different jobs out of necessity.
I had to support my wife and my family.
I've been a draftsman, a dishwasher, I've run a delicatessen....

I am a tennis player, a householder, a housewife. And I was always a business
person. I've never worked for someone else.
We started the first Chinese Take-Out business in Argentina.
Very successful and popular!

I am the oldest. The caretaker of my family.
I had the responsibility to support and help them along the way.
When I came to the United States, I brought a quality of patience
and the ability to assist others in my job and with my co-workers....

My nature is to help people.
I worked as a paralegal, in a law firm, on immigration.
I was like a fortune teller....

LEAVING YOUR JOB: SNIPPET REMINDERS

Injustice.

I was happy that I left. I never stayed home.
I cruised myself to death!
So happy that I didn't have to work anymore.
Ah, summer enjoyment.

Disappointment.
Disappointment that I had to leave.
But in hindsight,
I think it was a good idea.

I left because I wanted to try a different thing in life.
I wanted to see what was in the world.
I took early retirement.
Before 65.

The Communists were coming in 1949.
I had no chance for college.
I left my job at the radio station and escaped
from Shanghai to Canton to Taiwan.

Friar Dominick made me laugh.
He had a dog who always did his business
when I was coming to work.
When I was let me go,
I missed Friar Dominick the most.

WORK: THE UNEXPECTED

I told the boss I was leaving.
"You must be joking! This is your home."
I was surprised.
I never knew they liked me so much!
Even some of the men were crying.
That was me, leaving Sloan Kettering for a different life.

At the Deli, my sister was helping me. A busy lunchtime.
She *knew* how to use the machine, but then...she cut her finger!
We were in rush hour, getting to the hospital
Then waiting, waiting, waiting, so long...
we went back home and took care of it ourselves.

I worked 20 years for the priests.
It was my second home. A kind, loving, peaceful place.
Every year they changed the superior.
You are fired. We cannot afford to pay you. Tomorrow is your last day.
I was speechless... I don't know what to do anymore!
I was strong, but at home, the tears came.
When I returned the next day to get my things, he had thrown out everything.

In my kitchen, the water did not go down for 3 days.
I was leaving for vacation in 2. What to do?
Pour the chemical liquid and hot water. I fixed it!
But then the water started to rise from the bottom....
When I returned from vacation, they had changed ALL the pipes!

I worked at Business Week magazine's production department – 8 years.
Three promotions in three years
Then I was forced to make a lateral move. I tried to avoid it.
Two months later my replacement got the promotion.
Me, a lateral move, and she gets a promotion.
It was an Italian majority. An injustice.
So I quit.

I told my boss I was going to retire (from the Queens Botanical Gardens).

"It will be difficult to find someone like you."

Then they made me a big party.

All the senior volunteers came.

They only paid me 1/2 sick days, 1/2 vacation days I had coming!

Well, I had a problem -

Denise tried to turn all the co-workers against me.

I told my doctor, I have to retire. I'm having a heart attack!

She and my therapist wrote a letter.

There was NO PARTY for me so I gave one.

6 foot hero sandwich with all the fixings, soda AND cake.

"Why did you do that?" someone asked

"You were takin' too long!"

My doctor called.

I was on the work floor.

You have cancer.

Can you imagine?

I am a lucky woman.

I was married to my husband for fifty years.

We loved being together

He didn't want me to do anything. He would do everything!

Come back from work as a bank manager, he would cook and sew. Everything.

But I cannot do nothing! So, I sing.

My singing made him happy and peaceful.

**THE STRANGEST, WEIRDEST, FUNNIEST, MOST DISGUSTING,
SCARIEST, SADDEST TIME AT WORK,
OR OTHERWISE**

They thought it strange that *I gave THEM* a party for my retirement!

At the hospital. Why do you care, Mary?

Mistaken for my brother. We looked almost the same!
Even though so much time had passed since our return visit to Argentina.

No, no! I can handle it...crash! Family legend at Winston's.
What's the funniest thing that ever happened to us?
When dad spilled the soda!

I was a waitress/barmaid at an upscale bar
A drunk customer tried to stuff a balloon in my apron.
I emptied a glass of white wine on his head.

Unusual how a friendship crosses paths through time and space
From London to Greenpoint. Meant to be.

Disgusting. The deli had a bathroom.
This customer came in and peed in the corner of my store!

More disgusting. Give the young LPNs the dirty work.
Stench. Really?? Really??????

Brother Giles? Dead on the bathroom floor?
I was just talking with him.

Thirty years ago in Chinatown. I see it happen.
A car going too fast hits a young girl. She dies. So sad.

My childhood girlfriend's brother is killed playing between the subway cars.
We were all so young. I don't like to think about it.

Who are you speaking to? My imaginary friend.
She has 3 hearts. One is pink. One is Arabic. And one is Chinese.
She has to go now....

HEADLINES: Retirement – Letting Go

IT'S ABOUT TIME TO RETIRE

SATISFACTION

RETIRE TO BE CARETAKER OF ILL SPOUSE

LOOK FOR THE RIGHT TIME TO RETIRE

RETIRED! HAPPY DAY! TO ENJOY MY LIFE!

LAYOFF. VOLUNTEER TO RETIRE. SOMEONE ELSE KEEPS THEIR JOB

ENJOY FREE TIME, BUT KEEP SOME HOBBIES

RETIREMENT. VERY GOOD. MORE TIME WITH GRANDCHILDREN

SICK OF WORKING. CAN'T WAIT TO RETIRE

MY TEEN YEARS ARE BACK! FREEDOM!

AND NOW, SOMETHING GOOD IN MY LIFE

OUR STORIES

*"You never truly know who you are standing next to
until they open up and share a story."*

Annell Barton

I was happy when my daughter got married, but I did not like my son-in-law. He was alright. He was okay. But at that time, I wanted her to marry someone else. I had my eye on a guy who grew up around us. He worked in Corrections, like my daughter.

The wedding was nice. I have to say, the most special moment was my mother being there.

There were 150 people there. That was 30 years ago, and it was not too expensive. Now it would be very expensive!

I liked the outcome of the wedding - three grandchildren, one girl and two boys!

I did not like my son-in-law in the beginning, but I like him now. I learned to like him when I was babysitting from Friday to Sundays.



David & Yok Yen Chow

In Argentina we opened the first Chinese take-out. We were very lucky; news got out all over without any expense of ours! We heard from shoppers that there were important shoppers in our store. Some came from far away; others sent their chauffeur and pilot to take home our food.

We were doing very well in Argentina. One day we decided to come to New York to visit Yok Yen's family. During our visit, the economy and the political situation in Argentina got worse, so we decided to apply to stay in the United States. We waited for some time, and got our green cards, so I went out to find a job to support the family. But the salaries were low and the jobs were bad. Then we decided to open a business – a delicatessen.

We started out very slowly but within a short time our sales per day got much better than the previous owners. We were able to pay off all our debts. That was hard work and long hours seven days a week.

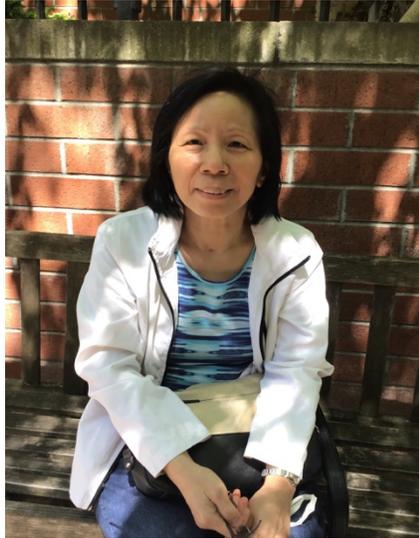
After our first holdup at gunpoint, we decided to sell and change our businesses into investments which are safer, maybe with some risk but not life threatening.

Little by little our businesses have expanded, our children have finished their studies, they have become independent, so we feel free to retire. Since then we are enjoying our lives with sports, exercise, travel, coming to the senior center, meeting new friends.

Happy, happy and very happy!
Satisfaction!



Kay Hom



I stayed in the same career for 38 years. At A&S, then Fortunoff's, and then back to A&S, which merged with Macy's. Maybe I should have moved around and tried something else. But I did not want to manage anyone.

I did not want to get promotions.

I was just a layout artist, and was comfortable with that.

I did not have ambition.

I retired from Macy's when they began layoffs.

I was happy to retire.



Ruth Lee



My story is not unique or outstanding but it's about how I got my first job, and how my growing up years, helped me through the 34 years that I worked there.

I was born into a family of nine siblings; me, being the third from the youngest. As we grew up we had to share the toys we had and the candy our uncle bought for us. The sisters (6 of us) shared clothes (hand me downs) but we were never in need. Our mom and dad taught us to always be grateful for all that we had. My dad also taught us to turn the other cheek or look the other way (especially when ever we were taunted in school for being Chinese). I lived on a block we called the UN (we had Greeks, Italian, and Blacks as neighbors) It made me realize that living among people of different nationalities helped me to better understand and realize how they wanted to be treated.

My first and "only" job ever was at Macy's as a sales associate. My husband thought I was spending too much time with his mom and said, "Why don't you go out and get a job? It will help you to be active and independent." I applied at Macy's and it was a God send. I was looking for a part time position which allowed me to go to work after the children went off to school and I would be home before they returned. Macy's gave me that opportunity. I was with the company for 34 years until I retired.

I don't regret retiring because, after 34 years, I received the company's perks (life time employee discount and a matched 401 pension). My retirement actually was a medical decision. I had come down with Grave's disease (due to an overactive thyroid gland) and my family thought it was best that I retire.

Throughout my 34 years at Macy's, I was merited and commended for my customer service, and met many people, co-workers and customers. I learned that if you treat people with respect and acknowledge their presence, they too will treat you the same way. If I ever go back to work, I would like to have a job interacting with children or adults.

Mary Medard



It was strange! I went to apply for a job at Sloan Kettering Hospital, and I was rejected. The lady said, "You are not qualified for any job we have open." I was really hurt, and I cried when I got outside.

The next day, I went to look for all different jobs. Unfortunately, I had to go through that street, 64th Street by Sloan Kettering, to get to NY Hospital.

A lady called out to me, "Are you looking for job?"

"Yes," I said.

"Okay," she said. "We are looking for people for jobs here at the hospital." She sent me inside where I filled out an application - the same one I had filled out before - and the same lady who told me I was not qualified yesterday hired me today!

I worked 10 years at that place. That lady and I still talk. She considers me her friend.

But it is so strange that I do not know why she did not hire me one day and then hired me the next day. I never asked her about why she did not hire me.

She always says, "Hi Mary! I love you!" And I tell her, "I love you too."

I keep thinking about it. Why didn't she hire me at first? Was it because of prejudice? Because of being black? I don't know. There must have been something inside of her. It is strange - I was not qualified the first time, and then less than 12 hours later I was qualified! We still meet once in a while. But I have never asked.

My husband tells me, "Why don't you clarify it with her?" He says, "Your friend/enemy called you."

But after so long, I think ... well, why?

It is strange. Really strange. And after so many years, it still bothers me. What is really strange, she keeps calling me. I try not to call her.

Echo Mei

I was working for a law firm for 34 years. I used to be a senior paralegal and a manager in an immigration law firm. I always told my clients the truth.

I remember, about 30 years ago, a father called me from Chicago. He said he had heard of me from his friend, and that his friend told him, "If you talk to Ms. Mei, and she says you can get your green card, then you can."

He had come to the United States on a student visa. He was a scholar and an artist. He had a six year old daughter in China who played piano well. He had been her teacher, and helped her to practice every day.

It was after the Cultural Revolution and the father did not have a job, so he came to the United States on the student visa and wanted his daughter to come, too, to have a better opportunity for music education here. Actually, he did not go to school after he came here. The visa was his way of getting here. He just wanted to work, and get a green card.

When he called me, he was in a restaurant working as a dishwasher. He asked, "How can I get my green card?" It took 7 years for him to get his green card. His daughter and wife immigrated another 3 years later. His daughter entered a famous music school in Texas and became a performer. I could feel the father's heart. The family was separated for 10 years!

The father had his own restaurant, and they live in New Jersey. They go to church, and he is in a chorus group. He always writes for the Chinese community. Their daughter married a violinist and has two kids.

So many stories I have heard!



Indira Prasad

The topic was about my dream job.

I landed into the cooking job for the priests and worked for 20 years. I loved it! They were like family. They had no issues with me.

They kept changing superiors every four years. I had no problem with that. But in 2014, they got this young brother as the superior, and he said, "We are paying you too much money for a part time job. We cannot afford it. Tomorrow is your last day."

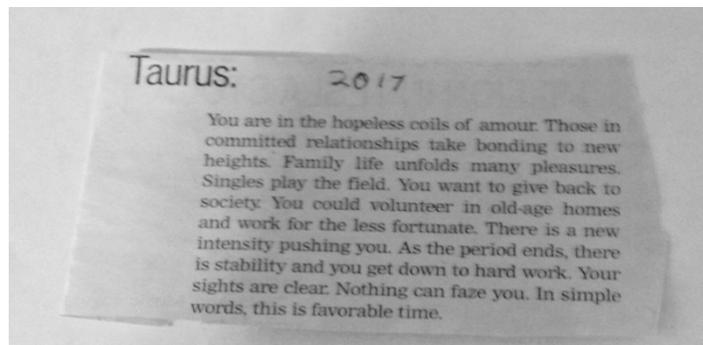
I was shocked, devastated and cried and cried and cried. For 20 years, what did I do wrong? Then one day I said to myself, "I have worked 20 years and I got fired. Buck up! So what?" I never went back to look for a job. I went back to sewing again, in my house.

I moved to Flushing, and I joined the center in 2015 of March. I started teaching chair yoga and I loved it. I cooked a bit – Indian food – in their kitchen. And I loved it. I do all the shopping!

I enjoy my retirement - every bit of it.

These are my jobs: cooking, sewing, and yoga. The three best jobs ever. I love it! So much fun! I have no regrets. Nice and peaceful and graceful, I come in and everyone loves it. I went from dream job to dream job to dream job.

I looked at my horoscope – on December 2017 – and got this message:



I saw Jane. Can you read this and tell me what I am supposed to do? She read it and said, "You are destined to do this work. You are doing it already."



Yen Yun Shu

I sang in night clubs all over Asia. My husband had a weaving factory. He had other businesses also. We went from Singapore to Kualalumpur, Thailand and Indonesia. Once I married my husband, he did not want me to do anything. He would cook and he would clean! He just wanted me to sing. My singing gave him a peaceful heart. We had five children together.

From my 50th year, I stopped all the performances, which means I am not working for a living now. I began to relax, live and enjoy myself. All the stress could be put down. In New York City I was very happy to perform with the Hsiang Ying Chorus. We perform all around the city. In 1985 we performed in Symphony Space. The title of this performance was "Chinese Poems and Folk Songs." We also performed in Lincoln Center and many other places.



Yen Yun (left) performing in Symphony Space with Hsiang Ying Chorus

Although I travelled a lot of places in my life, I have never taken a detailed look back at that time. Now I can use all my time to enjoy it. In my home, I still like to learn all new things. Everything relates to music and new songs. I join some parties for entertainment. It is a wonderful time which is totally different than before. I still have a song in my heart.



Elena Wolfe

The story involves Albert Einstein, my mother and Russian people.

I read a short story that Einstein was said to have written. He was using this story to illustrate what stupidity was. He placed himself in a foreign country on a bridge. He was going one way and someone was coming the other. When they got in the middle, neither spoke to each other because they did not speak each other's language. Einstein called this stupidity.

I totally disagreed with this. He was such a big genius of our time – for a genius he had no imagination!

My mother only spoke Spanish. She hung around with a group of Russians who did not speak Spanish or English. One day I came home. I wondered, “Why is my mother hanging out with these people? What gives?”

So, I was about to ask her when she said to me, “Mamushka today was so happy!”

I asked her, “Why was she so happy?”

“Her husband is in the hospital.”

“Why is he in the hospital?”

“He fell down because he was drunk and broke a leg. Back in Russia, he used to drink and beat her up.”

“That's quite a story,” I said. “How did she manage to tell you ...in Russian?”

My mother got up and used pantomime to show me what happened!

I felt validated. Einstein, you take that! Wherever you are!

I was feeling very good

A few days I went to the Chinese store looking for chicken soup. I was browsing and could not find it - all the labels were in Chinese. Then I see an envelope with a chicken on it. I take it and am ready to pay when I see a lady coming down the aisle. I ask her if she can help me, “Is this chicken soup?”

She starts laughing, “No that is something you can catch in the sea. What makes you think it is chicken?” She was laughing hysterically.

“There is the chicken on it,” I say.

She said, “You shouldn't assume.”

So that's one for Einstein! Sometimes you need the language. So, we both win. He is right and I am right.



Lee Zheng



I came to the United States in 1984 from China. I was a geophysicist and computer center manager at QingHai branch of their national oil company. When I passed a national exam, I was allowed to study abroad. I was admitted to Stanford as a Master student. I asked the Beijing ministry if I could go. But they said, “You are too old. You cannot be a graduate student.” I was 39 in 1984.

So, I went to Cornell as a visiting scientist, and was there for two and a half years. I wanted to become a PhD. For the last 40 years there were no PhDs in China. United States was the most advanced country. If you had a US degree, there is lots of opportunity for immigrants with professional degrees.

So, in 1990 I got a PhD from Western Virginia University. Then I got my first job in the United States as a research associate at WVU. My salary was \$28,000 a year. I worked for three years. But I could not support my kids’ college tuition, so in 1993 I quit my job to take a new position.

I could not find a job! I had to leave my wife and children and go to a large city. It was crazy. I bought a Chinese grocery store – in Moorestown, New Jersey, and drove a cab in Chinatown. It was crazy! I just tried to survive. I worked hard and had no time to find a job. I wasted three years.

But then I learned that I could get a high income job if I got a professional IT certificate. So, at 51, I sold my store and took a two month training class. I passed the exam and got a Sun Microsystems certificate.

I tried to get a programming job. I would talk to people in Human Resources. They asked if I was a US citizen. When I said I only had a green card, they said, “No! We work with the Defense Department.”

So, then I started over, doing hardware maintenance and repair. And finally, I got a job! In a midsize Wall Street company. I liked it! My first job in IT in the United States. Even though I was a computer system manager in China.

Then, I got a job at Merrill Lynch in IT. Six months later I was promoted to Assistant Vice-President of Global Tech Center. In large Wall Street companies, this is a technical title, not an administrative position. Wall Street companies are very happy to assign some employees a good title, let them feel better, then work hard.

When I was sixty-four, Bank of America merged with Merrill Lynch. I kept my job and was a senior member of the team.

I had lots of opportunities. I made six moves. Not all were right. Still, I kept going. I would regret if I did not meet my goal.

If a new immigrant is over 40 years old, he/she should face many challenges to be able to survive in a professional field. Almost everyone has their own story. My story was common among them.

I was lucky, because finally I came to New York City always with a lot of opportunities. So many people made much better achievements than I did.

For example, my son-in-law's mother, Mei-ling Wang, was one year older than me. She arrived US in 1988, received two Master degrees at evening classes while she was working. When she retired in 2015, an American health journal published a special notice about her retirement and called her an authority of US lung disease control. Unfortunately, she passed away due to a heart attack last year at 74 years old.

I had another female distant relative, Rong-yu Wang. She came to United States when she was 49 years old and got a PhD degree in the Midwest. When she was 65 years old, she was elected as a member of National Academy of Engineering related in mineral processing. She passed away at age of 73 due to breast cancer.

A Few of Our Dream Jobs

Marsha

I can't imagine another dream job. I love what I do. I harvest people's stories. I've worked with all different types of people, young, old, people with different abilities. I love getting to know everyone. It really is a dream job for me. Sometimes stories are scary, sad or sometimes they are joyful and amazing. It changes overtime. I love making a connection with others. I feel blessed and privileged.

Indira

I had my dream job for 20 years working for the priests cooking Italian food. We laughed, I went to several masses, we had fun together. After 20 years the brothers laid me off. I cried when I got laid off. I loved working there. Now I have fun making and altering clothes. I love to do Yoga. I volunteer to do Yoga at the senior center. I learned yoga from the temple. I also do Indian cooking for the senior center on Saturdays.

David & Yok Yen

David and Yok Yen's children were in a day competition in ice dancing. The person who made their costumes got sick and could not finish them in time. Each competition needed 3 or 4 outfits. Each music had different costumes. David designed them and Yok Yen made them. Then she knit and made dresses, all matching warm up outfits for the competition at Rockefeller Center. Yok Yen also made her son's tuxedo. She measured and she learned.

David quit medical school. Then, he tried to be an architect but also did not finish. "When I opened my first store, I did all the designing for it. I designed everything - the electric, lighting, gas. My architecture teacher passed by and complimented me. He said I did a beautiful job. I never became an architect, but I put my experience to good use.

Kay

When I was twelve, I use to draw pictures. I did not know how to do patterns but I made a thin corduroy vest I wore it all the time. My nephew was going to be in a play, so I made him red and blue velvet robe costumes with gold ribbon. There

were gold chains around the waist. They looked great on stage! I went to Fashion Institute of Technology. I did black and white drawings.

Carmela

My dream job would be to be a professional singer, dancer, and actress because I love to wear beautiful designer clothes and wear nice jewelry. I also love to make-believe. Marsha asked me who would I like to play, and I said Scarlett O'Hara in "Gone with The Wind". I loved her character in that movie; regardless of what happened her spirit was never broken. I love the line she had after being so hungry she ate something straight from the ground and said "As God is my witness, I will never be hungry again!"



GROUP REFLECTIONS ON THE GROUP EXPERIENCE

It opens my mind and keeps me busy.
My daughter is so happy when I tell her I am in this class

Everyone has different stories. We come from different backgrounds.
It is fascinating to hear.

Story is experience.
Hearing everyone's different experiences, I learn something!

Gathering is good.
In the senior center we pass one another by and say hi,
but that is all.
Here we get to know one another.
We develop relationships.

You never truly know who you are standing next to
until you open up and share a story.

It's educational
warm
a pleasure
great
happy
surprising

I find comfort here