

VILLAGES OF KENSINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

By Lawrence Wu and Jeff Steger

During the pandemic, the Villages of Kensington (VoK) created an intergenerational program to connect Montgomery County public school students with VoK members to participate in an oral history project. Student volunteers interviewed VoK members and wrote up the VoK member's personal history. This program was a wonderful way to make connections during the pandemic.

Lawrence Wu, a 9th grader at Winston Churchill High School, enjoyed participating in the project: and noted "I liked that I was able to connect with an older generation and learn about history that isn't shown in textbooks and is more localized." Lawrence interviewed VoK member Carole Hoover and one of Carole's daughters, Lenore, and then drafted Carole's story.

Carole Ross Hoover was born during a pivotal time in American history, in 1935 during the Great Depression. Carole's mother and grandparents had moved to Washington, D.C. seeking more opportunity following the stock market crash of 1929, after her grandfather lost his banking job. Carole's mother, Hazel, was a talented pianist and helped support the family by playing organ for the silent movies. Carole's grandmother began a boarding house for other struggling families and cooked for them daily. She continued to run the boarding house on Georgia Avenue in D.C. while Carole was growing up.



At 85 years young, Carole still recalls the strength and steadfast determination her grandmother modeled for her and her siblings. Carole's father Gene was a strong role model for Carole as well. When Carole was a young child, Gene finished law school while simultaneously driving a taxi around the city. He was quiet and smart, and he often showed compassion for those in need and was not too busy to help others.

After the financial struggles of her early upbringing, Ms. Hoover recalls the joy she experienced when her family moved into their new home in Tenleytown, D.C. She finished grade school at St. Ann's and then went on to high school at Holy Trinity in Georgetown. She loved riding the trolley cars and felt a sense of freedom navigating the city. On a trolley ride out to Glen Echo Park, she met Jack Hoover while swimming at the Crystal Pool. She was only 17 and a brief romance ended as Jack left for the Army and finished college at the University of Maryland.

Carole's mother Hazel was intent that her daughters have opportunities and volunteered to play piano at a local dance school so that Carole could take dance lessons. Ironically, although her parents were strict Catholics, her mom Hazel played piano in a few jazz clubs occasionally and once performed with a young Charlie Byrd. In the 1950s, jazz and tap were new to Carole, and she fell in love with both. Carole was teaching dance classes and performing in a tap act locally with her sister Diane as she graduated high school and began college. She also ran a dance school at Tenley Circle and thrived on all aspects of this small business. She fell in love with her students and enjoyed the business endeavors of marketing, design of the space and costumes, and developing programs.

Despite the social norms for young women at the time, Carole did not take a pause when considering new endeavors. Running her own business and traveling for a semester to New York City to work on her performing career led to a new path as she took classes in design there. She recalls proudly buying her own car at 17 and later, being the first woman accepted into a management training program at a regional department store after college graduation. After her stay in New York, she transferred



from Catholic University to George Washington University and completed a degree in both Art History and Design. Some of Carole's choices were looked at as progressive for her gender and age.

One of the more ambitious actions she undertook was moving across the country to take an entry level position in the costume department of Warner Brothers Studio. She tried her best to climb the ladder there but was discouraged by the roles that women seemed to be placed in within the industry. Luckily, upon her return to D.C., she was hired as part of a new management and leadership endeavor for a local department store. Her multitude of creative and business skills led to a newly created position for the store and gave her the opportunity to develop fashion and art shows to promote the store's brand and build a connection with the community.

Having broken two other engagements to be married, and not wanting to stop building her career, she began dating Jack Hoover, with whom she had remained friends for over a decade. Other boyfriends expected Carole to put her own professional goals aside to support them, but Jack was different. He loved the energy and passion Carole showed for her career and saw her as a trailblazer with vision and independence. Just before rekindling their romance, Carole was accepted into the national VISTA corps to work with Native American artisans in Arizona. Her hope was to help establish craft venues to promote sustainable income from the talents of tribal members, especially women.

Ms. Hoover had a real passion for art, dance, and music, things for which she gained an affinity at an early age. She used these passions past her high school career, becoming a notable dancer locally. Even her ambition to complete her degree in addition to running her small business set her apart from her peers and exceeded her parent's expectations. In her first career role after college, a local newspaper article was written about her, which stated, "She's only 23 ... and has accomplished so much, how can it be done?"

Ms. Hoover wanted to continue to participate in the arts and social causes while having a family. When she got married in her early thirties in 1966, many of her friends, following the norms of the time, suggested she was too old to start a family. Despite this, she went on to have five children and cared for them all with great love and dedication. When Carole and her husband Jack purchased their family's home in Kensington, she sought out new resources in her community and found ways to give back to others. She was a constant volunteer at her children's schools and helped to create variety shows, fundraisers, and other events for children and adults using her talents in the arts.

When Carole's husband Jack died in 1988 of pancreatic cancer, she grieved the loss but showed a determined spirit to persevere on behalf of her children. She never turned down an opportunity to volunteer and share her talents with others. Her youngest daughter had some special needs, and Ms. Hoover was a loyal and fierce advocate for her and for other children with these challenges. When needed, she mentored friends of her children who needed an adult role model - helping with college applications or securing internships. She raised all her children with care and affection despite being an only parent and facing many hurdles that could have impeded her goals.

When reflecting on her greatest success, she states that her children are her proudest achievement. She hopes her children carry on her values and legacy through similar endeavors. After successfully living through the last year's pandemic, she faced some health challenges, garnering five fractures, the first in her life. However, she is walking again and plans to be as independent as possible. Her toes still tap to the beat of music which is a constant companion.

VoK is an all-volunteer, non-profit neighborhood organization whose mission is to build a supportive, diverse, intergenerational network of neighbors helping neighbors to remain in their homes and stay engaged in the Kensington community. Established in 2016, VoK has more than 80 members, with an average age of about 80, and more than 30 volunteers. VoK is dedicated to its members' well-being, functioning as a provider of services (such as rides to medical appointments) and as a social meeting hub.

In addition to conducting the interview and drafting the personal history, Lawrence Wu participated in a panel on Zoom featuring Carole and others who participated in the project. Next month, Kensington Neighbors will include another article featuring a member who participated in VoK's Creating Personal Histories of Kensington Residents. To find out more about VoK and read more oral histories, please visit VoK's website at www.villagesofkensingtonmd.org/.

