

NEW

by WILL KALEC photographs by ALYSHA JORDAN

IBERIA

A CAJUN JEWEL CARVED
FROM THE BAYOU
TECHE, NEW IBERIA'S
SUCCESSFUL RECIPE AS
A COMMUNITY BLENDS
OLD-SCHOOL VALUES
WITH THE MODERN-DAY
JOB CREATION AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
METHODS, SPRINKLED
WITH A LIBERAL PINCH OF
GOOD TIMES.

A

As Taylor Barras — the Louisiana Speaker of The House in temporary title, a proud product of New Iberia in perpetuity — takes a walk down memory lane, he's soothed by the knowledge that the road remains the same, even if the sturdy, wood-frame country store is long gone.

Without question, the Shadows On The Teche remains the crown jewel of downtown. Built in 1834, this former sugar plantation is visited by more than 25,000 tourists annually and was the first National Trust for Historic Preservation site in the Gulf South.



In the 1950s and most of the 1960s, if you lived in New Iberia and needed flour for that roux, eggs for that birthday cake, or sugar for your coffee, the best place to find all of that under one roof was the grocery owned by Barras's father, Elton. The scents changed with the seasons and the sections of the store, the yeasty smell of baked goods in one corner, a refreshing waft of produce in another. The patrons used pleasantries with the shop hands — the littlest pair belonging to Taylor. Throw in a whistling theme-song for a soundtrack, and it was pretty much Mayberry.

"I don't know if I could call it working," says Barras. "I called it working, but I'm sure my father would question that use of the word, considering we were busy enjoying the candy counter and the cookie counter, for sure. But it was a different time. You paid cash, and if you didn't have cash you put it on a tab and came back at the end of the month and paid my dad for your groceries. And I'm just like wow, that was credit before I even knew what credit was. But these are the type of stories that if you don't come from New Iberia, if you're in a bigger larger community, you wouldn't have the opportunity to appreciate."

For the next few minutes, as he tries to beat a nasty-looking storm home from Baton Rouge to New Iberia, Barras reminisces about the past before purposely fast-forwarding to the here and now. As much fun as it is to reflect on what New Iberia *was*, analyzing what New Iberia *is* also produces the same warm fuzzies as venturing back into yesteryear.

New Iberia is a vital and strategic economic piston powering South Louisiana, a tiny town in population but nonetheless an energy and agricultural titan that's home to the Port of Iberia, a 2,000-acre

industrial and manufacturing site for more than 100 companies in fields like oil and gas fabrication and production, materials handling and marine services.

New Iberia is home to a public education system whose district performance scores have increased for nine consecutive years and a vocational/technological college that partners with local businesses to turn out graduates that are “work-ready” for highly-skilled, competitively-compensated jobs.

New Iberia is witnessing an infrastructural revolution. Bridges and roads are being expanded and repaired at a dizzying pace while the Acadiana Regional Airport is experiencing a complete transformation including a brand new terminal along with other improvements, not to mention the 64.3-acre site on the property that was recently certified and is now classified as “development-ready.”

And finally, New Iberia is a downtown destination on Friday nights, Saturday nights, heck, really, any night. Nestled along the Bayou Teche, Main Street features new shops, restaurants, museums and is the backdrop to some of the most well-attended festivals in the state, the Sugarcane Festival provides, more than enough reason for the thoroughfare to be recognized at a National Register Historic District, and for it to win the Great American Main Street Award by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

For all that (and more, which we’ll get into) New Iberia is *Acadiana Profile’s* City of the Year for 2017 — a place that has evolved but done so without compromising its cultural authenticity.

“Considering I’m born there, grew up there, went through elementary, junior high and high school there and live there

now, you can say New Iberia has been a part of my entire life,” Barras says. “It’s a community with quality neighborhoods and schools, teachers that I still know today, a close-knit church and faith family, and jobs that can provide.

“So, it’s carried me far and it’s carried a lot of other people far.”

Like many communities in Acadiana along the Highway 90 — a major asphalt artery of the energy sector — New

certainly been a challenge for all the parishes that are heavily involved in oil and gas, but we’re optimistic about 2017.”

Perhaps Tarantino’s positive thinking is rooted in economic developments at the Port of Iberia in 2016, where several major expansions of existing facilities or construction of new businesses were announced last year.

Logan Industries, an oilfield services and equipment

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Iberia certainly wasn’t immune to the two-year long economic sucker punch to the gut caused by the drop in oil prices. The bad news? In June 2016, Iberia Parish reached 10.3 percent unemployment — its highest rate since the turn of the century. The good news? The price per barrel looks like its slowly crawling up from the canvas, causing a quick bump for those seeking work according to the latest number at press time. Oct. 2016 reports from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the unemployment rate at a more tolerable 8.7 percent.

“Oil and gas is still king,” says Mike Tarantino, CEO and President at the Iberia Industrial Development Foundation. “The vast majority of our economy either supports or is directly involved with the oil and gas business. So, of course, 2015 and 2016 have

company, is currently building a \$4.5 million dollar facility to store deep-water drills — similar to the building found at company headquarters in Texas. Once operational, Logan Industries estimates it will hire 300 employees to man the new site. Bayou Companies, an oil pipe producer, is spending \$39 million to modernize its facility. Dynamic Energy Services International has begun delivery on the topside modules fabricated at the Port of Iberia for the Sasol Ltd., ethane cracker project being built in Lake Charles. They are also currently working on fabrication of a number of modules for Shell Oil’s Appomattox project. In total, Dynamic Energy hired 500 workers combined for these two projects.

“We’re attractive (for businesses) because we’re a coastal community and we market ourselves as intermodal,”

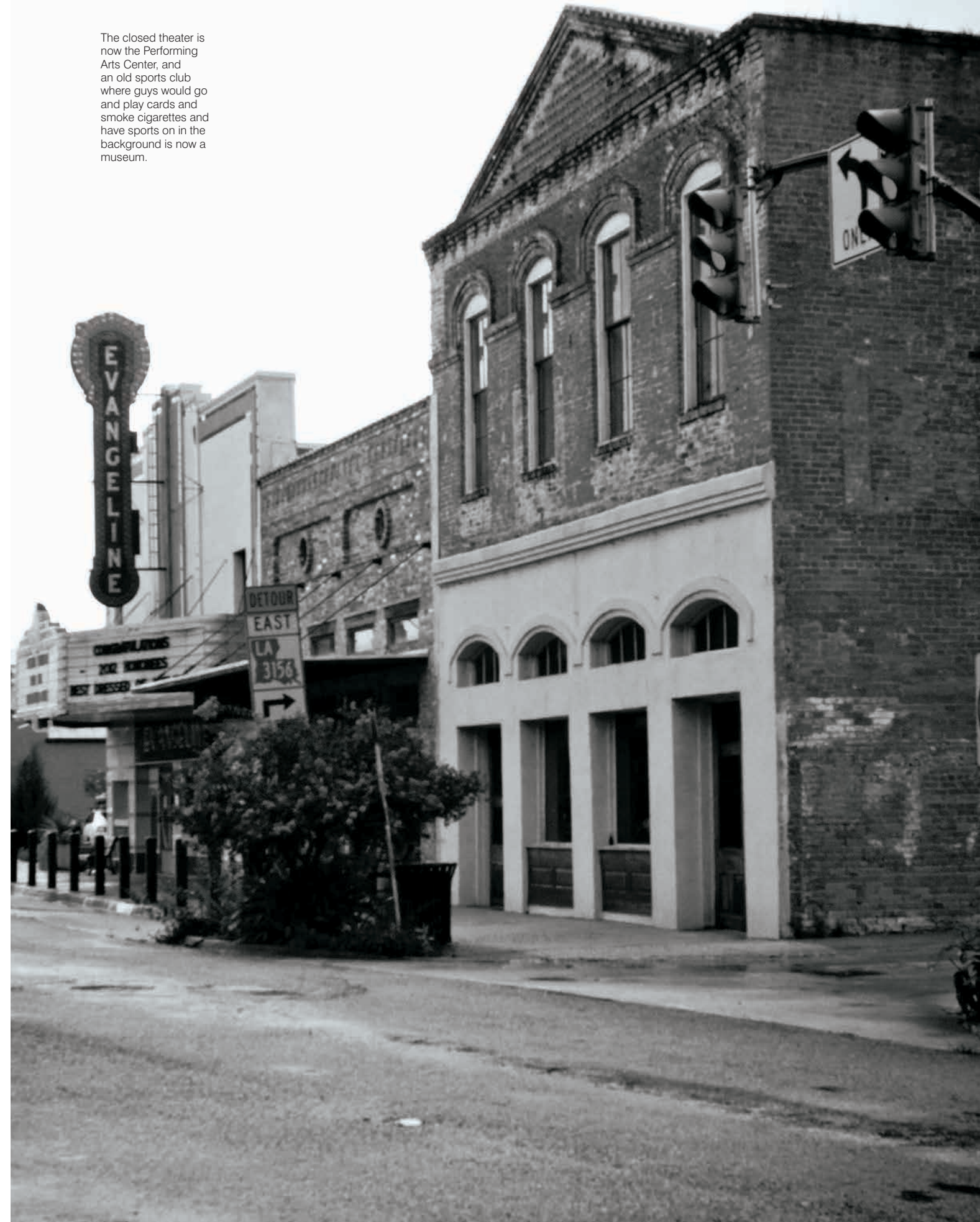
Tarantino says. “In other words, if you want to bring in goods, or bring in raw materials and ship out goods, you can move those things in our parish through water, air, rail or truck — anyway that you can move items, we can do it here.

“We have great assets, great workers, great work sites, but the thing we’re focusing on is improving the infrastructure — roads, bridges, sewer pipes — so that when oil and gas comes back like we all predict it will, we’re ready to take full advantage of that economic upswing.”

One road that crews in New Iberia can pretty much leave alone is Main Street. This once depressing vestige of the 1980s oil bust was resuscitated roughly a decade ago. Without question, the Shadows On The Teche remains the crown jewel of downtown. Built in 1834, this former sugar plantation is visited by more than 25,000 tourists annually and was the first National Trust for Historic Preservation site in the Gulf South. Downtown also hosts the annual World Championship Gumbo Cook-off, an event so flavorful the Chamber of Commerce tells those looking for directions to “Drive into Iberia Parish on Hwy 90, Hwy 182, Hwy 31 or Hwy 13. Roll your window down — inhale — and follow your nose to downtown New Iberia. Aroma should get stronger as you get closer.”

“It’s been a transformation, a good transformation,” Barras says of downtown. “The closed theater is now the Performing Arts Center, and an old sports club where guys would go and play cards and smoke cigarettes and have sports on in the background is now a museum. Little bit of culture, a lot [of] art and historical properties — it is just an interesting combination that allows the whole community to appreciate it.”

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CULTURE

JOIE DE VIVRE

LES ARTISTES

fighting shape

Sunset sculptor Annie Hendrix spent decades bringing life to lumps of clay until a severe stroke suffered a year ago took away that gift... temporarily

BY WILLIAM KALEC
PORTRAIT BY
ROMERO & ROMERO

THOUGH IT IS WET, THOUGH IT is cold, though it temporarily stains Annie Hendrix's talented and tired fingers there is a comfort in holding clay.

Inside a room that looks like all the other rooms in this cookie-cutter, senior-living community in Sunset, Hendrix squeezes the gray clump in her left hand, an act so simplistic it doesn't really warrant description until you realize she can't do the same with her right.

Once the loquacious general to an army of customer-adored figurines, and a regular vendor who sold what she sculpted at festivals and art markets throughout the Gulf South, Hendrix hasn't added to her fleet in more than a year. In December 2015, after selling out of her supply at a two-day

"People came and hugged me and I didn't know their names – that's what the shows were like. It's a whole comradery surrounded by all the art. It's another whole family. It is. We refer to each other as family."





art festival, Hendrix had a stroke. When paramedics arrived at the scene, Hendrix was not responsive. Eventually, she came to, but the entire right side of her body was “frozen,” as she puts it.

The long road back has been like a freeway on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving — tiresome, maddening, stop-start-stop-start, progress measured in feet not miles.

“I still don’t quite understand this stroke,” Hendrix says, somewhat defeated, somewhat determined. “I had never met anyone with a stroke, so this

was all new to me, for sure. I’ve had problems before. At 60, I had open heart surgery, which wasn’t great but it let me do more shows, ya know? But this, this I can’t really do anything with one hand. It’s frustrating, but I’m going to do it again.”

The deep attachment Hendrix formed with this for-now lost love of making clay figurines originated on a night Annie took a musician home. No, it’s not what you’re thinking. Sure, back in the day, the bands at Maison Bourbon — when the French Quarter was really the French Quarter

— knew her by name and often invited Hendrix on stage to sing, play guitar or pound a few bars out on the piano. But this has nothing to do with that.

No, this musician was the short, quiet type — four or five inches tall, Hendrix reckons, sporting a kiln-hardened perpetual expression. They met, Annie and the “laidback musician” as she’d called him and hundreds others over the years, at a continuing education class at then-named University of Southwestern Louisiana in 1987. The focus of study: ceramic art.

The way Annie tells it, she decided to enroll when she was 42 years old, doing so on the recommendation of a friend who suggested Hendrix stop messing around with children’s clay and graduate to the real thing. On the first day of class, the instructor proudly pronounced that she’d teach everything — including how to “throw” on a spinning wheel.

Annie stood up. “Oh, I’m not interested in throwing on the wheel,” she said. “I make things. It’s different.”

Surprised, the teacher responded, “Well, that’s what I

teach, so you’re gonna have to learn to throw on the wheel.”

Annie pauses now (not then) and laughs a little at the retelling.

“I said, ‘That’s fine, but I just wanna know about clay.’ So I took the class and threw on the wheel a couple times and I said to her, ‘You know, I really make things. Maybe one day in my life, I’ll throw on a wheel but I really just wanna make things.’”

Perhaps exasperated, the teacher said, “OK, Annie, go make something.”

So she did — the aforementioned musician, to be specific.

His nose was perfect. His hair was slick, even after it hardened under the 1,450-degree heat. His hat was tilted, all cool-like. He’d be the first of many — jazz musicians, Mardi Gras Indians, cowboys, chefs — that Annie’s skilled hands would bring to life over the next 28 years.

She showed the instructor the finished project. The teacher looked the musician over a few times before surrendering by saying, “Annie, you know what, you do make things.”

Without missing a beat, Annie replied, “Yeah, I do.”

Six months later, Hendrix secured a booth at Jazz Fest. It was a thrill. Strangers handed her money. People whose names Hendrix didn’t know gushed over her little creations. Single purchases morphed into full collections as Hendrix expanded her figurine list to accommodate



a receptive customer base. Equal parts sad and beautiful is the fact that other than a few holdover figurines, Annie is pretty much out of inventory.

For now, she says. For now.

"As far as working with clay and sculpting again, I've told that it could be never or I've been told it could be years," Hendrix says. "I'm not so sure about all that. They say, 'Annie, it's a long road. You're just gonna have to keep working at it.' And that's fine. Trust me, I'm trying real hard."

"But right now, it just feels good to feel the clay in the hand. It's just nice to have that connection to the thing I loved doing above anything else in life. You can ask anyone here and they'll tell you, I'm full of determination." ◀



To learn more about Annie Hendrix and her work, visit anniehendrix.com

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ARRIVAL OF REX, KING OF CARNIVAL

the storyteller's story

Olivia Spallino Savoie preserves and publishes stories of the past for future generations

BY WILLIAM KALEC | PHOTO BY ROMERO & ROMERO

"Honestly, I think it might be easier for someone to tell their story to someone they don't know. You don't have the social pressure. You don't have the concern that you're saying something that you've already said before.

You're talking to someone who doesn't know anything about you, someone who's there to learn about you and everything you've experienced."



THE HISTORY OF ACADIANA – OR, AT LEAST, this very specific and personal chapter of it — is told by a 103-year-old woman who last summer still had enough gumption to cast a reel on a salt-water fishing excursion, and is recorded by a 22-year-old woman who takes notes with pen and paper.

Next week, the topic of conversation and the person sparking it will be completely different. Economic hardship told by a self-made man who now lives in a big, old house. Gruesome military battles recited by the gentlest soul. A first kiss. A meager investment that bloomed into a multi-million dollar corporation. The birth of great-grandchildren. You never know.

The only constant in these scenarios is Olivia Spallino Savoie, the aforementioned note-taker and founder of Raconteur Story Writing Services out of Lafayette — a start-up business venture efficiently offering old-fashioned services like tribute books and memoir publishing that unintentionally preserves the fading history of the diverse and eclectic region.

"I've always had a love for history and older people, just going around to nursing homes in the area, or my grandparents, or their neighbors, and just hear their stories," says Savoie, whose love of writing manifested at an early age. "In college, these are things I'd just do for my own pleasure. That's how much I enjoyed it. And the spring before I graduated, I started thinking, 'How could I make this my reality?'"

"As far as I know, there's no one else who does this in the South."

Well, that might be because this isn't the easiest trick to pull off. Within a week, Savoie, who graduated from University of Louisiana at Lafayette, conducts a wide-ranging interview that touches upon every aspect of a full life, sifts through that extensive transcript, plucking out key details, then pounds out (with her gifted prose, of course) and creates a 50-to 60-page first-person memoir, basically a literary time capsule. From there, the not-quite-yet-a-book goes to a proofreader and gets the final thumbs up from the family before it's shipped to the printer. From first interview question to hardcover finished product takes eight weeks.

"I can't quite figure that out," Savoie says when asked why her subjects are so forthcoming. "I consider it a real honor, and I don't take the responsibility that comes with

that honor lightly. These stories are for their children and their grandchildren, so that 50 years from now, someone in their family can pick up the book and know their story.

"And it's important that the story not only reads, but sounds like their story. I'll read aloud a couple times, so that it sounds like the way it sounded when we talked."

To ensure prompt completion of the finished project, Savoie sticks to a script when interviewing her clients. As you might imagine, the list of inquiries is quite long considering Savoie needs to excavate a lifetime worth of love, laughter and lament — roughly 150 questions. Though there's wiggle room for nuance and follow-ups in the course of Savoie's back-and-forth with the people she's putting in ink, for the most part she doesn't deviate off-script.

"I literally just write down every word they say," Savoie says. "And then I go back and spend a few days with the transcript and try to shape these thoughts and memories and everything that's all jumbled up from our talk, and turn it into a cohesive narrative."

"I tested the water with this for about six months, before I started going into business for it, and when I'd just walk in and ask people to tell me their stories, we'd end up with massive holes. We'd miss out on their teenage years, or I wouldn't know where they were born and I felt with the questions, it really gets the broad scope of their life — the biographical framework but also the funny stories, the travel. So the framework really isn't designed to limit the story but have it be more well-rounded in the end."

On more than one occasion, a younger family member than the one Savoie is writing about has commented (while fighting through tears sometimes) that the writer has unearthed tales even they haven't heard before. She's been privy to acts of selflessness and heroism, moments of paralyzing heartbreak and agony, and oh-so-human snapshots that are timeless.

"The thing that really stands out is how ambitious these people were at my age," Savoie says. "What they accomplished, a lot of it occurred at a pretty young age. So of course our lives are different. I've interviewed a gentleman who fought in Korea, another who fought in World War II and a woman whose husband fought in World War II, so the issues they faced were a lot different than the issues I face." ◀



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