

WHITEAKER FOREVER

Longtime community members look to document the colorful neighborhood's history

Eugene's Whiteaker neighborhood has a lot of stories to tell — and folklorist Emily West is in the process of compiling them for the community at large.

West is working on a project called Whiteaker Tales, a dive into oral histories from the area in the form of audio recordings and video footage from local filmmaker and Whiteaker resident Tim Lewis, as well as through other mediums such as live presentations.

The project involves other community collaborators as well. Another folklorist of note, Makaela Croin, was also working on the project originally but is now doing other work in Washington state.

West, associate director of the Oregon Folklife Network at the University of Oregon, was living in the Whiteaker and serving on the Whiteaker Community Council when she got the idea for the project a few years ago. OFN documents, supports, preserves and celebrates Oregon's cultural traditions.

"I was hearing a lot of conversation among community residents and business owners who expressed a lot of concerns about the way that the Whiteaker was changing, and who would be included or not in the process," West says. "It occurred to me in hearing folks' concerns that everyone had a different Whiteaker that they wanted to save. I thought it would be interesting to hear people's stories about what their Whiteaker is."

The original idea for the project was to have it exist on a website, with stories viewable on a "story map." Along with that, West says, community involvement has also pushed the project into a more public, interactive space.

"As the project evolved it gained the interest of local folks, so that's how Tim Lewis got involved and he has a lot of video archive footage that he was willing to contribute, so we expanded to include video of some of these stories," West says. "Part of the outward facing to the community would also be a staged presentation to bring people together with a dialogue."

On Saturday, Jan. 19, at Sam Bond's Garage there will be a live conversation about the 1990s-era Whiteaker with local personality Elliot Martinez interviewing community members like Lewis, muralist Kari Johnson and anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan, with music from Hansi Golightly.

Lewis, who has been in Eugene for 55 years and living



TIM LEWIS

in the Whiteaker off and on since 1991, will provide B-roll footage of the neighborhood in the '90s "projected behind the musician while he plays," Lewis says.

People at the live event will also have a chance to tell their own stories, West says, but there will still be chances for others to share in a more private environment.

"We do want to continue doing the oral history project that is more of a private interview for people who are elders who don't get out so well or who would not want to do a live-on-the-spot environment," she says.

Along with stories from the recent past with community members who are still in the area, West says she will look further into the Whiteaker's history.

"When I hear people talk about their concerns about change and losing their sense of community and place, it is also very easy for me to have in my ears people who have been in the same place in the past 200 years," West says, reflecting on her work as a folklorist and working with older Native American tribes.

She continues: "Another interest of mine was to hear the variety of stories today, but also to look even deeper into the history of the place and learn stories of the people here before the current residents — whether it be in the '40s, the turn of the century or before the pioneers." For now West is doing what she can with the funding the project currently has.

The Oregon Heritage Commission is one of the project's grant-funders, West says. The commission offered the project two years of funding that will be gone in October of this year. The project is also receiving funding from the Neighborhood Matching Grant from the city of Eugene that will be finished at the beginning of May, West says.

With those funds, along with putting on events and conducting interviews, West has also commissioned heritage art in the Whiteaker neighborhood, such as "portraits of Whiteaker historical figures mounted on the fence along Van Buren between 2nd and the railroad tracks," she says. "We plan to install interpretive signage about those individuals this month, but the images come largely from an oral histories project commissioned by George Stathakis in the 1970s."

"We found his documentation through the project's partnership with Lane County History Museum," she adds.

After the Jan. 19 presentation at Sam Bond's Garage, West says she hopes for another similar public event slated for sometime in February or March. That event will cover the 1970s in the Whiteaker.

"The two eras we have chosen to focus on in these presentations (1990s and 1970s) are not comprehensive of the history of this place," West says. "Achieving that scope will require more interviews and more presentations than our current funding allows. We're hoping that these pilot presentations to the community will generate the support needed to guide and continue the project when funding is over."

Specifically, Lewis says, after the funding from the grants has ended, the project will be reaching out to local businesses to inquire about fundraising.

"Let's not forget our past and our history no matter how wonderful or challenging it was, because the Whiteaker is one of the most colorful neighborhoods in Eugene," Lewis says. ■

Whiteaker Tales is 6 pm Saturday, Jan. 19, at Sam Bond's Garage, 407 Blair Boulevard.

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