

# The Carmel Pine Cone

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## Gaining the skill — and the courage – to put your life on display

*“Remember that you own what happened to you.”*

Anne Lamott, “Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life”

“AN ADVENTURE in neighborliness” is a quote on the front page of the Carmel Foundation’s newsletter. “The concept remains fresh as the spirit of our organization thrives,” is the rest of that quote — a sentiment foundation members have no argument with, and one that has even taken on an artistic meaning for several of them.

### Scenic Views

By JERRY GERVASE

Among the services and classes the foundation provides are Illia Thompson’s memoir writing classes. For more than 25 years, Thompson’s classes have offered members a means to document their lives.

Thompson is an accomplished writer who delights in helping other find joy in discovering their ability to write their life stories. She loves to see how class participants surprise themselves, and she takes pride in the progress they make. She told me that hearts get opened when classes meet, and people who think they know themselves often rediscover a piece of life they had stuck in some mental cubbyhole.

“Writing a memoir is a form of self-reflection and discovery. It creates pathways to memories that may be hidden,” she says. “Everyone is an interesting person, and writing down memories can be a form of interviewing yourself, leading to knowing yourself more completely.”

Seniors recognize that their legacies encompass more than just the memos they wrote at work. Grandchildren rarely ask Grandpa about the weekly planning sessions he attended at the office, but they do ask how he met Grandma. Some of the memoirs become books. Others are kept as personal life records.

A few months ago, viewing an art exhibit in the hallway, one of Thompson’s students asked: “Why aren’t we on display? Writing is an art.” It was agreed that posting writings as an exhibit would provide a novel way to showcase talent.

I’m not sure what I thought I would find when I was invited to visit the Foundation to

see the exhibit. I half expected to see poetry on post-it notes or “to-do” lists on linen paper. What I saw was artistically framed short pieces produced by members of the memoir class. Many included pictures or drawings. Some were beautifully hand lettered; all showed thought and effort.

#### Things of beauty

I’ve attended many art exhibits where I found myself looking casually at an entire wall of artwork until one painting drew me in to examine it more carefully. The Foundation’s memoir writing exhibit was different. There, hanging on the wall, were people’s very personal thoughts, almost calling out to be read. The words were put together with the same attention to detail that produces a painter’s canvas. And, just as a painter arranges his elements and follows principles of design, the writer arranges thoughts and ideas to fill his page. The framed thoughts of the members of the memoir class are things of beauty shaped into words, just as brush strokes shape images on canvas.

It is almost impossible to glide by any of the writings on the wall, and once you’ve read the first word in any piece, you absolutely have to read all the words that follow. For example, these words in “Where I’m From,” by Katherine Newsom, deftly take a compilation of mundane acts and turn them into a swiftly moving narrative of images.

*I’m from California, golden hills, oak trees,  
fields of lupine and poppies,  
I am from cow pastures, poison oak,  
tadpoles, slow moving creeks.  
I am from Oakland Hills, Lafayette, Tahoe,  
Los Angeles, Central Valley ...  
I am from hot valley summers, tow-headed  
cousins, family reunions ...*

Rita Summers presents word pictures with her poem, “Living Long.”

*My head is a swarming buzzing hive  
full of facts, ideas, people, places, events,  
songs, films, poems, regrets, joys, hurts, in-  
sights, puzzles  
They ooze as bittersweet honey onto the daily  
bread of the present,*



Students in the Carmel Foundation’s memoir writing class have not only developed the confidence to put their life stories to paper, but to put them on exhibit.

*but don’t obscure what each day offers:  
a fresh start that I do my utmost to  
savor and devour.*

Of course, simply putting a frame around words is not what turns them into art. The writing has to evoke mental imagery. Writing becomes art and can take you anywhere when it stimulates your imagination. A picture may be worth a thousand words but in the beginning was the word.

Even if none of the members of Illia Thompson’s memoir writing class become published authors, they have taken what has happened to them and owned it. They have put it out there for anyone to see.

Their creations — their art — are on display at the Carmel Foundation.

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