

David Cecelski's reflections on the "Listening to History" series ^[1]

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author and photographer reflect on the chronicling of N.C. history, one speaker and one image at a time

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News and Observer*. Published 9/14/2008. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I will never forget my first "Listening to History" interview. It was with a retired nurse named [Gretchen Brinson](#) ^[3]. She was 82 years old and lived in a waterfront neighborhood in Morehead City called the Promise Land. That part of town was settled originally by fishermen who had been driven off their island home on Shackleford Banks, eight miles east, by devastating hurricanes in 1896 and 1899.

Ms. Gretchen was a nurse in Morehead during the Second World War, when German submarines sank more than 140 merchant ships off the North Carolina coast. She had cared for the sailors rescued at sea - the ones who had jumped off their sinking ships, plunged into the waves and come up into burning oil slicks.

I can't keep writing "Listening to History" other duties now call but I will sure miss visiting people like Ms. Gretchen. As I thought about these past 10 years, I remembered many voices and faces, but especially that first interview in the Promise Land.

Comic book and a burger

I later traveled, tape recorder in hand, from the Outer Banks to the Blue Ridge Mountains, listening to our oldest residents' stories. But I started close to home. I grew up near Morehead City, and when I was a child, my grandmother used to take me to the Promise Land every Saturday morning to see my great-great-aunt Rosa.

Those visits were part of our weekly shopping trips to "town." We treated them like a sacramental rite. Every week we'd start in Beaufort. We'd go to the Rose's Five and Dime, the Colonial Grocery Store, and a little newsstand where my grandmother always bought me a comic book. We'd grab a burger at Mike's, a little lunch counter on Taylor's Creek.

Then we'd cross the bridge into Morehead and go to Ottis's Fish Market, where a sea turtle swam in a water tank out front and naked mermaids decorated the walls. Last of all, we'd visit my great-great-aunt Rosa in the Promise Land.

So much to learn

Years later, when I drove into the Promise Land to visit Ms. Gretchen for that first interview, I was nervous. Her neighbor, my friend Miss Alida Willis, had warned me that Ms. Gretchen could be gruff and intimidating. She did not tolerate fools gladly, Miss Alida said. I wasn't feeling like my Harvard doctorate had done much to prepare me for that interview, either.

At least not to ask her the kinds of questions I wanted to ask.

I wasn't just interested in the who, what, where and when of things. I wanted to know more. How many times, I figured, will I get the chance to talk to someone who has lived 82 years and ask them anything I want in the world? Especially someone who did what Ms. Gretchen did during the war?

So, yes, I wanted to know about the German submarines. Yes, I wanted to hear about the ships burning for weeks offshore and the way that oil and debris and, yes, bodies, washed up on the beaches.

I wanted to hear how the patients lay in the overwhelmed little hospital's halls because the rooms were all full. And how Dr. Ben Royal, the county's only surgeon, cut away burned flesh, day after day, with Ms. Gretchen at his side. She was a young newlywed, barely out of a Red Cross nursing program.

And yes, of course, I wanted to hear about the caskets they loaded, as she told me, almost every day, onto the 3 o'clock train out of town.

I wanted to hear all those stories. But I wanted more, too. Even riveting tales about an ocean on fire couldn't satisfy my

hunger.

Beyond the facts and figures, I wanted to know where Ms. Gretchen got the strength to pull away the scorched flesh that Dr. Royal was cutting. I wanted to know whether she listened to their prayers at night, when they were lying there, so many of them hopelessly burned, waiting to die. I wanted to know what she said to comfort them.

I wanted to know her prayers, too. I wanted to know if she learned something important about being human by those bedsides. And why didn't she flinch? Wasn't she afraid?

And what had her long life taught her? Did Ms. Gretchen have things to tell me before she left this Earth? Surely, at her age, she had sized up life at least a bit. If there were secrets to life, I was ready to listen. Eager to listen. Desperate to hear.

Seeking life's essence

When Ms. Gretchen met me at her front door, I was too afraid to put my hopes for our visit into words. Instead, I just prayed that she would see it in my face. He's here for everything, I wanted her to realize. I was seeking the distilled essence of her life, her unspoken dreams, and the revelations of a life (like all our lives) of love and caring and sorrow.

I wanted to know what she would tell me if it was her last conversation in this life. What did she want to pass on? A story? A few lines of poetry? A lullaby or prayer? An instant of unspeakable joy or a memory of a loved one's tenderness? Maybe a lesson that might make our own passing into the night a little easier one day?

I know I was hoping for a lot.

Ms. Gretchen's story

What surprised me is that Gretchen Brinson opened her front door and acted as if she had been waiting for me all her life. She was thin and frail, but full of fire. She looked as if she had the will to move mountains, too. And she knew exactly why I was there.

She understood that my visit wasn't just about history, if by history you mean dates, headlines and dry facts.

No, Ms. Gretchen knew better, and she didn't do small talk. She sat me down in her parlor and chased her husband Bull Brinson, the town's old fire chief out of the house.

Then she took my hand and, with a look of iron-willed resolve, stared straight into my soul and said, "Son, I am not easily frightened."

We talked for hours. We talked about her childhood, the war and her 30 years as a nurse. We talked about her mother, who never got her health back after her sister's birth, and how Gretchen, an 8-year-old girl, raised her little sister.

She told me how she cared for her father and mother, her grandmother and an uncle in their old age. She told me what it was like caring for the dying in the hospital. And she told me what she taught her Sunday school classes about life, faith and why we are here on this Earth.

And she told me everything.

A listening adventure

That night, after I finally left Ms. Gretchen's, I took a long walk through the Promise Land. I strolled by the house where my great-great-aunt Rosa used to live. Then I walked by the site of the old hospital, long gone, and the fish market, boarded up, where my grandmother used to take me every Saturday morning.

I looked toward Shackleford Banks, the island that the Promise Land's settlers left a century ago. I had seen the island's cemeteries, the gravestones turned all willy-nilly by storms and half-covered by sand dunes. I wondered: Who remembers their stories?

I thought once again of all that Gretchen Brinson had told me. Her parting words, spoken with a tender, but very firm, voice, stayed with me: "This, too, shall pass, son. No matter how good it is, no matter how bad it is, this too shall pass." I was overcome by emotion. This listening to old people's stories, I knew then, this was going to be an adventure.

Subjects:

[Biography](#) ^[4]

Authors:

[Cecelski, David S.](#) ^[5]

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