

A novel way to beat loneliness: pair up and write a book through Extraordinary History Project

The Extraordinary History Project matches older people with volunteer writers.

By [Katy Read](#) Star Tribune

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Photos by ELIZABETH FLORES • liz.flores@startribune.com

Zenobia Silas-Carson, right, was all smiles as she met her memoir writer Mecca Bos outside her home in Brooklyn Park. The two have become fast friends.

At 73, Zenobia Silas-Carson has been through enough life experiences to fill a book — maybe several books.

She did well in school, married at 17, was physically abused, got divorced, spent time in jail, moved from Chicago to the Twin Cities, was homeless, got her general educational development (GED) diploma and attended community college. She had six children, wrote plays and poetry, got involved at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, organized a journal-writing class, obtained a minister's license and wrote two books of inspirational fiction. She distributed food and taught tai chi.

And that just scratches the surface.

"She has lived probably 10 of my lifetimes," said Minneapolis writer Mecca Bos.

So when Silas-Carson and Bos, 47, get on the phone together, they have plenty to talk about. They're participants in the [Extraordinary History Project](#), a program that pairs older people with professional writers for regular conversations and to collaborate on a memoir — or, in some cases, just talk.

"I love talking to people and I figured that would be a way to beat my new doldrums," said Silas-Carson, who lives in Brooklyn Park. She has already written about 200 pages of a memoir on her own, so she and Bos focused more on developing a bond than a book.



Writer Nicole Garrison shared a laugh with Jerry Kloss, who is blind, as he told a story during their first in-person meeting.

"We began this journey and it has turned into months and months, really beyond our wildest imaginations. ... It's been so fulfilling and surprisingly intimate."

Bos agreed. "I don't see our relationship ever ending," she said. "We developed a very deep connection and a friendship that will be ongoing."

That's what the Extraordinary History Project calls a success. The program is designed to combat social isolation and loneliness — a serious health risk particularly common among older people (extraordinaryhistory.org)

Founder Lynne Morioka came up with the idea last year, in the depths of the COVID-19 shutdown. She knew social isolation was already a problem and figured it would be even worse under quarantine.

"Gosh, if I have 24 hours in a day to fill and I'm just sitting in my living room, it's cold outside, there's nowhere to go, nothing to do, everything is closed, what do I do to fill my time?" said Morioka, 47, a Minneapolis writer and consultant.

"What do I do to give my life meaning? How do I not get bored? How do I not get depressed?"

That type of unhappy experience can have serious health consequences, research shows. [Studies have linked loneliness](#) and social isolation to depression, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline — even earlier mortality.

"They're similar in impact to smoking cigarettes, to being obese, to drinking excessive amounts of alcohol," said Kasley Killam, a San Francisco-based social scientist who has written extensively about the topic for Psychology Today, Scientific American and other publications.

The Extraordinary History Project's regular conversations (by phone or e-mail when taking pandemic precautions) give both elder and writer something to look forward to, Morioka said. There's no hurry or deadline on the memoir — they don't even have to actually write it. But it's a way to stimulate conversation between strangers, spurring discussions of major life milestones, family, work, goals and big decisions.

"One of the barriers that people often have to overcome is, 'OK, fine, I'll call somebody on the phone but what do we talk about?'" she said. "For some people, it's easy to make a conversation. For others, you start talking and they're like, 'Yep, it's hot.'"

The finished memoirs are for people to use however they like. They can keep them as a family heirloom or for their own reference. But those shared with the public could potentially become part of historical records, Morioka said. Older people have witnessed history firsthand. The writers take those details "and put them together in a way that has a coherent narrative and fills in the gaps," she said.

Jerry Kloss of Plymouth had also been working on a memoir when he was paired with Nicole Garrison of Mahtomedi, a corporate communications writer and former newspaper reporter. She took the 60-some page draft Kloss had written and gave it a "professional spin," he said.

"Nicole sort of started following along in the book I had written — the rough draft, I call it," said Kloss, 84. "She just brought the whole thing to life."

Much of Kloss' version of the book focused on the 35 years he worked for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. He can remember when the only freeway in the metro area was a stretch of Interstate 494 between the airport and Hwy. 100.

Kloss' life is distinctive for another reason: He was born blind in 1937 and underwent experimental surgery at age 8 that partly restored his vision. In recent years, his vision started fading and now he is blind again.

Garrison, 41, coaxed Kloss into expanding on parts of his life he hadn't mentioned or described in detail in his draft. "I would take a little nugget and pull at that thread and get a little more from him. What was that like, tell me more, tell me more, tell me more ..."

A self-described "history nerd," Garrison was fascinated by Kloss' account of the Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940, a vicious combination of heavy snow, high winds and bitter cold blamed for 146 deaths.

"I really dug into that," said Garrison.

"For him to describe this blizzard without the benefit of sight was really interesting — what he heard, what he felt, what he could smell, vs. what he could see."

Because her parents died young, Garrison felt a lack of relationships with older people in her own life and considers the Extraordinary History Project "a fantastic, brilliant idea."

Similarly, Bos is finding the project as beneficial to her as it is to Silas-Carson. When their conversations started during the height of COVID-19 restrictions, she realized that, as an unmarried woman with no children, she was the more socially isolated of the two.

"My connection with Zenobia was absolutely one of the most important touchstones during the pandemic," she said.

Because Silas-Carson was already writing a memoir, the two decided they would not focus on writing a book and instead let their phone conversations wander.

"One week we might be talking about her mother, another week we might be talking about her life here in Minnesota," Bos said.

"It quickly became clear to me that [a book] was not the purpose of this project. It was to form a bond to help each other make it through this really horrible time."

Katy Read • 612-673-4583

Katy Read is a reporter covering Carver County and western Hennepin County. She has also covered aging, workplace issues and other topics for the Star Tribune. She was previously a reporter at the Times-Picayune in New Orleans, La., and the Duluth News-Tribune.

katy.read@startribune.com [612-673-4583](tel:612-673-4583)