

VILLAGES OF KENSINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

By Paige Tasin and Jeff Steger

During the pandemic, the Villages of Kensington (VoK) created an intergenerational program to connect Montgomery County public school students with VoK members to participate in an oral history project. Student volunteers interviewed VoK members and wrote up the VoK member's personal histories. This program was a wonderful way to make connections during the pandemic.

Paige Tasin, an 11th grader at Winston Churchill High School, participated in the project and noted, "I enjoyed working with VoK because I got to develop a connection that I never would have had elsewhere. Getting to hear this amazing story and talk to this incredible person was an unreal experience." Paige interviewed VoK member Sandy Gottlieb and then wrote this story.



Sandy Gottlieb is someone who always brings the things he is passionate about into action. He never stood by and watched other people fix the world's problems. Instead, he took a leading position in advocating for what he believes in.

Sandy was born in 1926, and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Sandy says about growing up there, "it was a lot more politically active ... than most of the rest of the country." It was there that he developed his strong opinions on politics that would eventually become his career.

In New York City, Sandy met his wife, Gladys, who he has been married to for more than 70 years. They were both working at the New York City Department of Welfare and within a year knew they wanted to be together. They married at the age of 21 and left for Paris within a week of their marriage.

The two lived in Paris for five years during which Sandy studied at a school of political science and then switched to the Sorbonne to a doctorate in French and American labor. During that time Gladys was a librarian at the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune which was known as a major English language newspaper in Europe at the time. Later on, when the couple moved back to the states, Gladys became a librarian and editor for various educational associations.

The two have three children, Steven works on patents, Barbara is a Director of Environmental Activity at Physicians for Social Responsibility, and Gordon who recently retired as a consultant on personnel for nonprofits.

Before Paris, Sandy had joined the U.S. Navy at the age of 17. He recalled, "I was at an officers' training program which fortunately was held on college campuses; in my case it was Dartmouth."

The Navy's program required all the participants to finish college, so

VILLAGES OF KENSINGTON

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Sandy spent time getting an education at Dartmouth. However, near the very end he had an asthma attack which led to a medical discharge. Despite his education at Dartmouth, Sandy was eager to go abroad and continue his studies in France.

Once Sandy returned to the U.S. he worked for labor unions in New York, West Virginia, Iowa, and D.C. Sandy says he was "always interested in labor," but his interests led him in a very different direction when the Cold War started. "In the late 1950s," Sandy said, "I was a volunteer in a new organization called the National Committee for Sane Nuclear Policy which is shortened to SANE. After a couple of years as a volunteer I was hired as the political director and then stayed there for 17 years working on both nuclear weapons and then the Vietnam War."

Sandy, like many others, was very worried about the impending threat of nuclear warfare. He said, "The fact that these new weapons, as of 1945, could destroy a whole city ... was a great concern." He advocated for peace and the halting of the use of these dangerous weapons. Sandy has always worked for peace and saving human life. He traveled to about 40 states, and internationally to discuss his platform with anyone eager to listen as an attempt to get his powerful message across.

Sandy started out as the Political Director of SANE and then became the Executive Director and helped "organize a grassroots activity that could try to affect Congress."

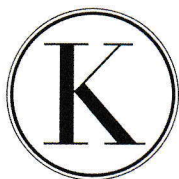
Sandy not only traveled across states but also traveled internationally for his work. He "visited South Vietnam as an advisor to an interdenominational group of clergymen on a fact-finding mission in

South Vietnam." He "also went back to France and also to Algeria to meet with diplomats from North Vietnam and the Vietcong in the south."

His visit to South Vietnam was during the early stages of the war and he met "with Buddhists who were playing a political role." Sandy had previously met Vietnamese students and could feel that they had a strong sense of nationalism "because they had been occupied for many hundreds of years by outsiders." Sandy said that he "had a kind of leg up by the time the United States got involved." He felt that the majority of the people in Vietnam when he went there "wanted no part of anybody, either from the communists or from the American side. They didn't have much of a say."

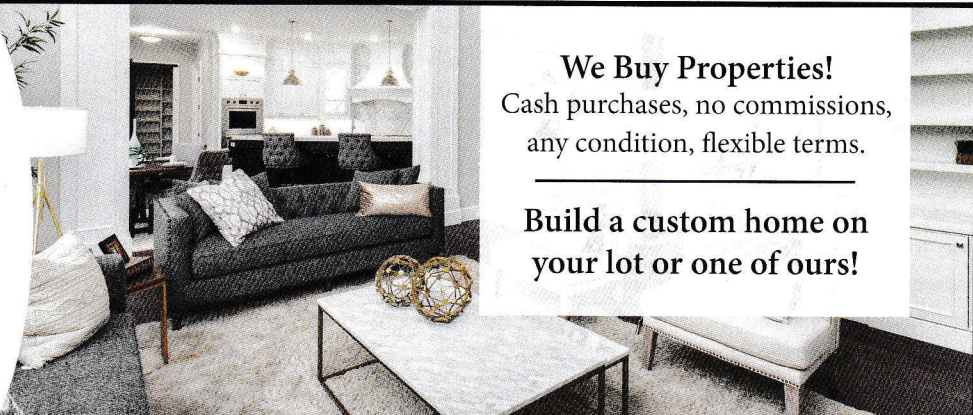
Sandy felt that the Vietnam War was "totally unnecessary because the United States was so obsessed with communism taking over in the Cold War that it ... involved us in something that was hopeless and a failure in terms of (raising) American interests." Sandy was very politically active in these times and did everything in his power to advocate for peace.

During Sandy's many talks he became a very important speaker that many people greatly looked forward to hearing. One time Sandy was invited to Aspen, Colorado to speak and he "arrived in the midst of a snowstorm at the Denver airport." He managed to arrive at his meeting at 12 o'clock for an 8 o'clock meeting. "Half the audience was still there, so they became my favorite audience." Moments like these show the impact that Sandy's speeches had on the American people. Half the audience waited four hours for their speaker to show up, therefore the talks clearly had a large impact on audiences.



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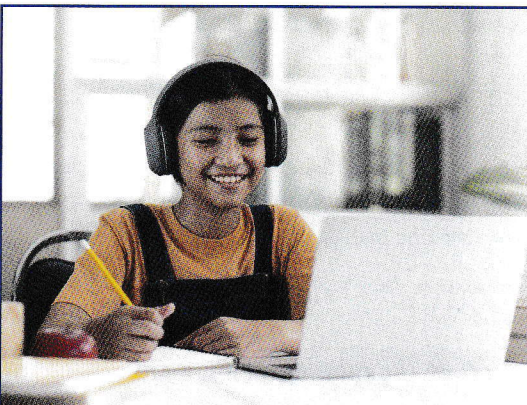
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During these talks Sandy “talked mostly about the history of the country, particularly the foreign invasions and how that shaped what was happening at that time, the importance of nationalism and Vietnamese reactions.” He also discussed the need for a political settlement. He wanted the countries to “have a negotiated settlement that would have some hope of lasting.” At other meetings, focused on the nuclear arms race, Sandy would “talk first about the problem and then the solutions (which) also involved negotiations with countries like the Soviet Union”. His goal was to “find a common interest in reducing the dangers of the arms race.”

Once, Sandy was supposed to go to the Soviet Union for a conference but was sadly refused a visa on account of the fact that he was placed on Richard Nixon’s enemies list that same year. However, Sandy does not look upon this as a bad thing. He says that he “was on the Vietnamese list both in the Nixon White House and in Moscow at the same time. So, I figured I was doing something ok.”

Most of his talks only provided positive reactions from the audience as “the people (who) opposed stayed away”. However, there was one time that Sandy was speaking at a meeting in New York and was greeted by a few audience members shouting to bomb cities in Vietnam and Russia. Sandy interrogated them and asked what they would do after they had bombed those places. The men listed more names of cities to bomb. Sandy simply answered with “You don’t have much concern for human life, do you?” This quick response quieted the protesting audience.

Despite these rare cases of protesters “the folks that showed up to hear me were the best people in the country.” Once Sandy mentioned that there was an audience that was “so silent and so unresponsive that I had no clue as to what their reactions were.” Sandy had no idea if the audience loved or hated him, which was rare for his discussions. “At the very end ... I found they were very sympathetic to my message.”

Sandy was also involved in “quite a few debates and I learned early on that it’s not necessarily the argument that you’re making or the superb intelligence of your presentation that changes minds. It depends very much on whether the audience thinks of you as an authority figure on the subject.”

He learned this lesson in his early years as a debater when he went against a retired general in a debate at the All Souls Unitarian Church in D.C. A survey was taken at the beginning and the end of the debate and Sandy realized that because the general was considered an authority figure on the subject, they were swayed to his side instead of Sandy’s. But he says this taught him a great lesson and helped him improve for debates in the future.

Sandy has lived in Kensington, Maryland since 1957 and though he left many times to travel on his talks he has always decided to stay here. He originally came to Maryland for a job. “When we were in Iowa, I was working for a national daily labor paper that was published in Iowa but had a Washington Bureau. By that time, it was running downhill and I became the one Washington Bureau until the paper finally folded. We had to live somewhere and Kensington, Maryland turned out to be the place where we found a house and we lived in the same house since 1957.”

Currently Sandy spends a lot of his time reading. “I have been reading a lot of government-related nonfiction books. For example, I read recent books about Nixon and about Senator George McGovern who is a big anti-Vietnam war senator, and Barack Obama’s latest book.”

Due to age, Sandy and his wife have “stopped being terribly active” and therefore the pandemic has not affected them greatly. The only thing they are disappointed about is not “being able to see our children and grandchildren as we have before, or having friends come in freely.”

Even now Sandy still makes contributions to political candidates in order to stay somewhat politically active.

Sandy is one of the best people in politics, one who truly cares about human life and protecting people above anything else. He spent so much of his career advocating to keep people out of war and away from nuclear weapons. He traveled to many states and a few countries to advocate for what he believes in. He is not the kind of person to stand around and watch others clean up our country’s mess. He became involved and did everything he could to advocate for his purpose, and a very noble purpose it is.

VoK is an all-volunteer, non-profit neighborhood organization whose mission is to build a supportive, diverse, intergenerational network of neighbors helping neighbors to remain in their homes and stay engaged in the Kensington community. Established in 2016, VoK has more than 80 members, with an average age of about 80, and more than 30 volunteers. VoK is dedicated to its members’ well-being,



functioning as a provider of services (such as rides to medical appointments) and as a social meeting hub.

In addition to conducting the interview and drafting the personal history, Paige Tasin participated in a panel on Zoom featuring Sandy and others who participated in the project.

Next month, Kensington Neighbors will include another article featuring a member who participated in VoK’s Creating Personal Histories of Kensington Residents. To find out more about VoK and read more oral histories, please visit VoK’s website at www.villagesofkensingtonmd.org