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## Curating Words

A collection of interviews captures the essence of a changing neighborhood

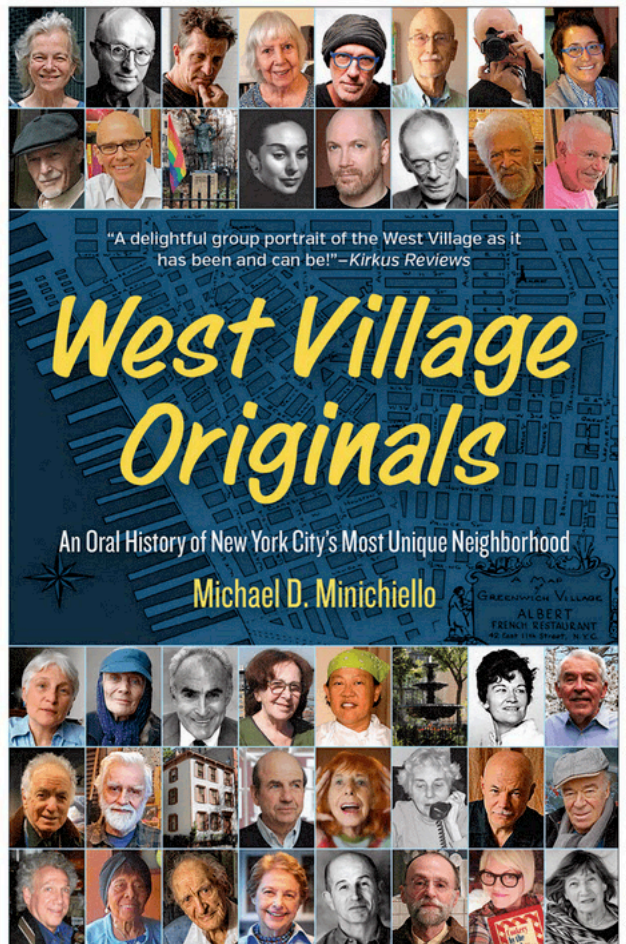
BY MICHAEL D. MINICHIELLO

I'm probably not the only writer who created a body of work over the years without thinking that it would eventually lead to a book. It was only after reading a series of 90 interviews of mine that the cumulative effect of them dawned on me.

My recently published book, *West Village Originals: An Oral History of New York City's Most Unique Neighborhood*, covers a 12-year period when that Oz-like neighborhood of New York was going through enormous changes. The interviews are taken from a column I wrote for a local paper, *WestView News*.

The idea to create the column came about when I was writing movie reviews. One day it occurred to me that there had to be many longtime West Village residents with interesting things to say about their lives, their careers, and the changes that had taken place in the area.

It turned out they did. They shared insights into times now past, amusing anecdotes of people and places that no longer exist, and poignant tales of what makes the Village such an inspiration to this day. They certainly



reflected on the changes that have occurred through the years, but even this wasn't necessarily with regret. Instead, there was an overwhelming theme: spending so many years—oftentimes 40, 50, or 60—in the West Village had given them a quality of life they felt certain they never would have found anywhere else.

The funny thing is that I've never personally met most of the people featured in the book; all my interviews were done over the telephone. It was surprising how quickly people agreed to talk when the option to do it by phone was on the table. Interestingly as well, it created an atmosphere in which my focus was on their every word, without the distractions of in-person conversations.

Afterward, I felt like I had truly taken an intimate journey through someone's life. Some of the questions I asked were to provide backstory, but it was the more disarming personal questions that brought the full person into view. My favorite was "Tell me about your parents." For most, this elicited touching and revealing responses, confirming that what their parents did for a living or enjoyed as hobbies had profound influences on their choice of a career.

After an interview, I had up to three pages of single-spaced copy that needed to be honed into an 800-word article. The challenges were to find a "hook" that introduced a defining theme and to show how interesting each person was—in other words, to do them justice.

Finding that hook was always more difficult than I imagined it would be. I discovered a way to solve it for myself, though: I would begin with the last paragraph and work backward from there. Like using a map, it was easier to start out when I knew where I was going.

Next was the greater challenge of giving life to each person's words and allowing their individual voice to shine through. A colleague of mine used the phrase "curating words" to describe that process. As each published profile almost entirely draws upon quotes from the interview, my greatest satisfaction was having subjects express their delight in being presented just as they might have hoped.

This led me to propose the regular interview column, West Village Original, that would later



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become the book. There was a good lesson for me here and one that I imagine applies to many writers: take any opportunity that you are given to write. It just might lead to a particular style of writing that best suits your talents and interests. Even better, you might discover that you love doing it.

When interviewing people, there's something else to remember: it's not about you. Recently,

I was doing a radio interview about *West Village Originals* and the host asked me if any people featured in the book had been a dull or uninteresting interview. When I hesitated, he laughingly said, "You don't have to answer that!" However, I wanted to. I think everyone is interesting and, at the very least, everyone has a story. It's the writer's challenge to uncover that story and then present it in a way that makes one's subject the most interesting person in the room.

A couple of final decisions had to be made before publishing the interviews as a collection. One was not to update any of them. As a result, they became timely snapshots of both the people interviewed and of the West Village itself.

The other question was how best to present the interviews. I assumed that I would organize them chronologically, but as I sorted through them, a more relevant idea came to light. The subjects fell into 13 different categories of professions that very much defined the nature of the West Village: from writers, artists, and business owners to activists, dancers, poets, and performers. Suddenly, the breadth of the project became apparent. As fascinating as each story might be on its own, together they defined the West Village in a way that no one story could.

One reviewer called the book a "celebratory collection," and I appreciate that observation. *West Village Originals* does indeed joyfully celebrate an era, a neighborhood, and a group of personalities both fiercely loyal to it and full of love for it. Writing these columns and publishing them as a book made me realize that I'm also a West Village original. I'm proud to be one and even prouder that my neighbors trusted me to tell their stories.

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