

Glendale  
**News-Press**

Glendale immigrants tell their stories now so the future can listen



South Korean-born Jina Nam describes how she arrived in the Jewel City for an ongoing oral history video project documenting the stories of local immigrants. The project is being helped by Glendale's downtown Central Library. (Lila Seidman)

By LILA SEIDMAN

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Seoul, South Korea-born Jina Nam [recalled Glendale's 2013 installation](#) of a controversial statue honoring Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese soldiers during World War II. Previously calm, her emotions heightened.

“That was such a moving and personally important landmark for me,” 20-year Glendale resident Nam said on a recent Saturday afternoon in the Downtown Central Library.

Nam was telling all this to the future. An iPad was recording the conversation for a yet-to-be determined audience interested in learning about Glendale through the eyes of its immigrants and longtime residents.

As a participant in the library's "[Tell Me: Stories of Migration to Glendale,](#)" Nam's narrative will be edited into a three- to four-minute video to be incorporated into a growing oral-history archive of Glendale residents. More than 35 had been collected by mid-March as part of a project that launched last fall.

"The impetus behind all of this was to start capturing the stories of Glendalians before they basically were no longer on the Earth," said Lora Martinolich, who co-applied for a \$20,000 grant from California Humanities that funded the project, for which the library partnered with StoryCenter, a Berkeley-based nonprofit that promotes digital storytelling.

"Tell Me" will culminate this fall with an exhibit at the Central Library's ReflectSpace gallery, incorporating the collected video narratives and various artists' works.

A video previewing the first dozen interviews, which were conducted last fall in a different format, [was shown earlier this month](#) at the library. About 60 to 70 people attended the screening, according to Ara Oshagan, who co-curates ReflectSpace.

While the exhibit will come and eventually go, the oral-history project has no expiration date. The hope is that, one day, there will be a substantial indexed archive where people will be able search the videos for key words or other markers, according to Oshagan.

"If you want to know the history of Glendale through the people who lived here and experienced it firsthand, here it is," Oshagan said. "That's what we want to see."

For "Tell Me," there has been a conscious effort to include a wide variety of voices, including older and younger immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds, Oshagan said.

Now that the library owns a pair of iPads and lapel microphones — and StoryCenter has trained some library staff to interview and edit videos — Oshagan envisions hosting ongoing, once-monthly story-collection sessions to grow the data base.

“We’re hoping that they can hold the ball and pick it up, that they learned the things they need to learn about doing this,” StoryCenter chief executive Joe Lambert said, adding that library staff members were largely handling the interviews themselves.

A good interviewer listens “for people to land in a time of change,” with a before and after, Lambert said. “If you can get them in that moment, then you get something that somebody else wants to listen to.”

Since joining the library in 1987, Martinolich said she and her colleagues have amassed lists of people whose stories they wanted to preserve. They have already made their own recordings of some staff members from the library and city’s planning department. Unfortunately, others on the list have either died, fell ill or left the city before the “Tell Me” project was funded, she said.

Veering meta in her narrative, Nam echoed Martinolich’s call to preserve the past before it’s too late.

Referring to the surviving Korean “comfort women,” spotlighted by the Glendale Peace Monument, Nam said, “they are getting older and are dying off, and we really don’t want their stories to be lost.”

ReflectSpace [hosted an exhibit on comfort women](#) last year, which Nam lauded in her video interview.

Since the California State Library commissioned StoryCenter in 2016 to bring digital storytelling to libraries statewide, the organization has come into contact with many libraries.

According to Lambert, ReflectSpace's effort to shine a light on civil and human-rights issues, on which his organization also focuses, is unique among libraries across California.

"It feels like they've already created a place where people's stories matter," Lambert said. "It's an environment in which people can arrive and feel supported and listened to in a way that allows them to speak their truth.

Just before discussing the Glendale Peace Monument, Nam was reflecting on days when Glendale had a more small-town feel. That was in the 1990s, when Central Avenue was still home to quaint brick buildings before they were torn down to make room for luxury apartments, she said.

It's largely those quotidian details that will convey the color and texture of an earlier Glendale, Martinolich said.

"It's not always about wars or things like that, but it's wonderful for people to know how things have changed here over time," Martinolich said. "How they remain the same and how they change."

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