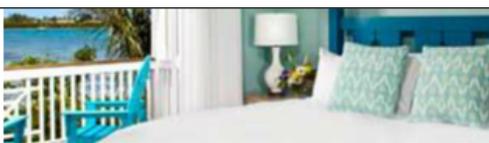


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Students use new technology to tell old stories

By Joe Wojtas

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Tim Martin/The Day

Daisy Wolcin, 15, a sophomore at Stonington High School, works with students from Mystic Middle School as they video and photograph inside Puffins in downtown Mystic on Nov. 29.

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It's light years away from the simple wooden signs often seen on the front of historic buildings that list the date they were built and their original owners.

Thanks to the work of 80 students from Mystic Middle School, Stonington High School and Independent Study Home Scholar Group (a Stonington/Groton home school organization), tourists and residents alike will soon be able to learn about the history of 14 downtown Mystic buildings with the convenience of their smartphones.

In celebration of its upcoming 40th anniversary, Cathy Marco of the Mystic River Historical Society enlisted the students to undertake a so-called GeoHistorian Project, which has was first done in Kent, Ohio, the home of Kent State University.

The historical society, the home school group and students from the 5/6th grade MayJunes program at Mystic Middle School are working with students from Tim Chokas' high school media class to create 60- to 90-second films using the iMovie program.

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A QR bar code will be placed on a plaque at each building and then anyone with a smartphone who has downloaded the QR code-reader can scan the code on the plaques and link to the films about that site.

Marco said she discovered the GeoHistorian Project after being asked to look into traditional plaques for historic buildings in the downtown. But when she came across the GeoHistorian Project, which was created by two Kent State professors, she saw it as a way to not only use technology to teach history to students, but to get them excited about the subject, too.

"Historical societies are aging. We'd love to get some new blood in them. So this is a great way to get kids and their parents involved in history," she said. "If we told them to walk down Gravel Street and look at old homes they would be bored. But asking them to do this is different."

Marco began meeting with schools about working on the project last spring and forwarded a 174-page syllabus to those who agreed to work on the project.

Lauren McGugan, one of the teachers in the MayJunes, said after meeting with historical society members about the history of the downtown and the high school students, her students have been visiting 10 of the buildings, taking photographs of them and researching what has been in the building or on the site in the past. They looked at old photos and talked to some of the building owners.

Marco said students working on the Mystical Toys building next to the drawbridge discovered it was once a movie theater and dry goods store and saw photos of the businesses.

The students have amassed large amounts of information about their buildings and now must decide what they will use to best tell the story, McGugan said.

She said they have viewed old photos of horses plodding down dirt streets, evidence of how the downtown has changed over time. They've also learned why certain buildings and stores are named what they are.

"It will be interesting to see what stories they will tell," she said.

McGugan said the students now have to write scripts, decide what photos to use, integrate sound effects and voice overs and then make the iMovies with the technical assistance from the high school students. Then they'll need to edit their productions and make revisions. Marco said she envisions unveiling the project in late spring.

Some of the businesses selected by the historical society for the plaques are Mystical Toys, the Whaler's Inn, the Gilbert Block, Smith Plumbing and the Mystic Drawbridge Ice Cream Shop.

More information about the GeoHistorian Project is at <http://www.rcet.org/geohistorian/about/> while examples from Kent, Ohio can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/geohistorian>.

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