

Ellis Island Resident Artists Draw Inspiration from Immigration



By Julie Shapiro | August 1, 2012 1:09pm
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ELLIS ISLAND — Art imitates history.

Three artists spent the month of July poring over the archives on Ellis Island as part of the first-ever artist residency program there, searching for inspiration among the stories of New York's millions of immigrants.



Theresa Loong, a filmmaker, and

Laura Nova, a performance artist, focused on food, learning about everything from new arrivals' longing for familiar flavors to their fear of mysteriously wobbly, brightly colored Jell-O.

After Loong and Nova saw an old photograph of the Salvation Army handing out doughnuts to new immigrants on Ellis Island, they decided to recreate the scene — giving free doughnuts to dozens of visitors to the historic site last Friday, and asking for their stories in return.

The tales will become part of "Feed Me a Story," a year-old video documentation project Loong and Nova conceived, in which people from all over the world describe the first food they ever learned to cook, or the food that most reminds them of home.

"It's an easy entry point into talking about more serious topics," said Loong, a West Village resident. "It's so evocative. It's a good way for people of different generations to share."

Among the many people Loong and Nova spoke to on Ellis Island was a Korean-American man who described the hodgepodge of flavors on his family's Midwestern Thanksgiving table, and a Greek-American man who told of his immigrant father making his own Greek yogurt because it was better than what was available in the supermarket.

"We want to get people's sensorial memories around food," said Nova, a Lower East Side resident.

People can submit their own stories online, and Loong and Nova are also planning pop-up story collection booths, including one at the Hester Street Fair, Hester and Essex streets, on Sept. 15 from 2 to 5 p.m.

The third artist who won a month-long residency on Ellis Island was Debra Scacco, a native Staten Islander who has lived in London for the past 16 years.

Scacco's previous work explored her conflicted relationship with her Italian roots, as she struggled to stay connected to her past while forging an independent future.

On Ellis Island, Scacco, 35, began researching her great-grandmother, who came to New York from Italy in 1921, and soon she was listening with fascination to oral histories of other Italian women who made the same journey around the same time.

The stories inspired Scacco to create a new version of a family tree, made from a replica of a wooden loom that was used in occupational therapy on Ellis Island in the early 1920s.

On the loom, Scacco wove a tapestry of five different types of lace, each representing one category of person in her family's history: Italian/Sicilian woman, Sicilian girl, Italian/Sicilian man, Sicilian boy and American. Each piece of lace represents another branch in the tree of her personal history, going back to 1904.

"I want to make people think about where they came from and make people think about their own journey," Scacco said. "It's about engaging people to research and ask questions now and not wait."

Scacco titled the tapestry "Richiamo," the Italian word "used when an Italian immigrant in America was ready to 'call for' their husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters," Scacco said in a statement accompanying the work.

Artwork from the residency program, which was sponsored by the National Park Service and New Jersey City University, will go on display in the late fall, when the Statue of Liberty reopens to the public.