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TOP STORY

## WKU professor shares childhood stories of WWII

By CAROLINE EGGERS [ceggers@bgdailynews.com](mailto:ceggers@bgdailynews.com) 45 min ago



Margaret Curtis speaks about her childhood growing up in London during WWII on Monday, April 8, 2019, at Knicely Conference Center. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

World War II spanned six continents between 1939 and 1945 and resulted in the deaths of an estimated 35 to 80 million people. Millions more people were injured or lost their homes.

The major forces were the Axis – made up of Germany, Italy and Japan – and the Allies that included Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the U.S. Other countries were also dragged into the war.

Unlike Poland, France and other countries subjugated to Germany's land invasions, Great Britain had the English Channel between it and Europe. But by 1940, Germany regularly began bombing the island.

E. Margaret Curtis lived in London during World War II.

On Monday, the Western Kentucky University professor emerita presented childhood photographs, radio recordings and personal memories to a full house at Knicely Conference Center Auditorium.

It was similar to a college lecture, but more casual – and the students were part of WKU's Society for Lifelong Learning, a non-credit educational program for individuals 50 and older. (At one point, Curtis asked if there were any high school or college students in the audience. A single person was identified.)

“As a child, I did not really understand what was going on,” explained Curtis, who was born several months before the war officially began.

She wasn't aware of the Axis or the Allies. She did hear about Germany, and she did experience frequent “nervousness.”

From 1939 to 1942, there were more than 50,000 air raids and several millions tons of bombs “just in London alone,” said David Keeling, a WKU distinguished professor of geography who assisted with the event.

Not far from her home, a row of houses had the front part of the structures blown off, appearing “like a doll’s house,” Curtis said.

Kitchen tables served as makeshift shelters, which Curtis said was merely a false sense of security.

“I never saw a bombed-out house with a kitchen table standing,” she said.

Curtis recalled blacking out the windows each night to help prevent attackers from knowing where the houses were. Before bed, Curtis and her sisters huddled near the radio for updates.

Curtis played an audio clip of whistling bombs dropping and sirens sounding, and momentarily became overwhelmed with emotions, struggling to speak through tears. More than 70 years later, noises still trigger responses and remind her of anxious nights peering out into the London skies, which always had search lights running through them, she said.

Because the war limited non-combat material production, Curtis said her toys were mostly made out of paper or spare fabric.

“My most prized possession was a Mickey Mouse gas mask,” she said.

Despite the bad, Curtis recalled pleasant memories of her small garden of snapdragons and berries.

She played on the street and in a local park.

“We played like children do,” Curtis said. “It wasn’t like the whole six years we sat with our hands over our head. We had a good time.”

But when the sirens sounded, “that park was empty in seconds,” she said.

To conclude her presentation, Curtis suggested that everyone with connections to this world history should get together and share their stories.

Elizabeth Honeycutt of Bowling Green grew up in the U.S. during WWII and was able to draw parallels from Curtis' stories to her own experiences.



"I remember rationing. I was a young girl at the time," Honeycutt, 85, said.

Pat Miller and Christine Sowders attended the event together.

"We're both just fascinated with World War II," Miller said, and hearing someone's experiences firsthand is "better than the history books."

Sowders appreciated hearing the perspective of someone who lived through the war as a child, as opposed to an adult.

"I thought it was interesting that she still reacted to the noises," Sowders said.

Andrew Yeater, one of the few under-50 attendees, also found that surprising.

"I didn't expect her to remember that," he said.

Kathy Oliver attended the event to support her friend, Curtis.

"It helped me understand her more," Oliver said. "She's a character."

"I didn't have any idea there'd be as much emotion."

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