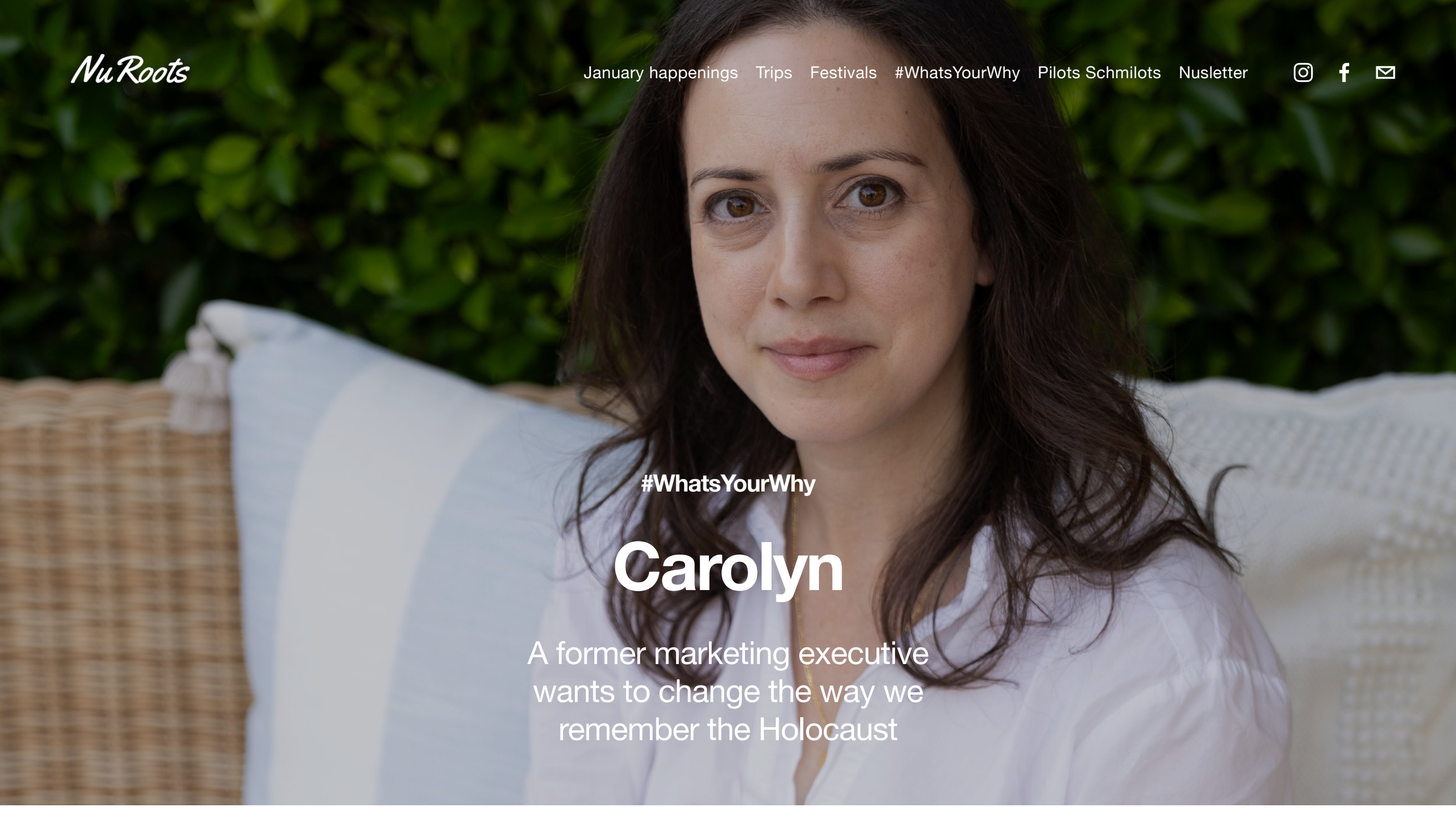

#WhatsYourWhy

Carolyn

A former marketing executive wants to change the way we remember the Holocaust

> “I never thought in a million years I’d be running a nonprofit. I went to school for fashion — which it turns out is really all about storytelling. How do you convey a message and get it to stick?”

[If You Heard What I Heard](), which L.A. native Carolyn Siegel launched in 2021, interviews 3Gs — third generation descendants of survivors — to capture their grandparents’ legacies in their own words

One of the things I’m interested in is how these interviews are taking place — your outreach, how you’re bringing people into the project, how people are reaching out to you. What’s your process of establishing the conversation, the environment, the questions? How are you framing the opportunity to tell their story?

As the granddaughter of two Holocaust survivors, coming up with questions I wanted to ask interviewees was really rooted in a conversation I had with my grandfather when I was 8 years old. And then looking at that and asking how this is relevant today, and to our generation.

Yes, there is testimony. Yes, there are videos. We’re here in real time. We are the bridge between the past and the future. We can say I heard this at 8 years old, at 12 years old, at 20. I saw and witnessed what this did to our family, sitting at a Passover table, or a Shabbat table, seeing all the family members who were missing. The memories that were brought up. Playing at my grandparents’ house and having them just, like, stare at me for hours, because it was a miracle to them that I existed. We are the last generation to have ever heard these stories firsthand. And if we don’t share it, no one will. So how are we going to be the torchbearers?

I want to always establish a certain comfort level with our interviewees. I want to make sure they know I have their back. There’s trust there. We spend a lot of time together prepping ahead of their interviews to establish that. And I always give them the latitude to do research and map out the story. They always get questions from me ahead of time so they can really think about how they want to tell the story for themselves. It’s not about sharing the story as their grandparents shared it — it’s about taking what they heard and making it theirs.

Right. While firsthand experience and voices are incredibly valuable, the third and successive generations are actually the ones who have to continue to process it. So adding that voice to the oral history to make it — to use your word — relevant is compelling, I think, because it’s not just about passing it on but actually remaking it. Remembering it in a way that’s really in the present and not in the past.

Exactly. As an interviewer, it’s not just tell me your grandparents’ story. It’s tell me how how it impacts you. How old you were when you first heard these stories. I was 8 years old when I heard it. Doing this work, I’ve been pretty surprised at just how many heard the story at 6 years old, at 8 years old, at very young ages. When you hear a story that young, your family’s story, it really becomes ingrained as a part of you. So I ask interviewees to share what it was like to hear the story. For them.

That’s something that must be so powerful to find commonality in, to hear other people relating to.

It is. And it can be hard. You’re hearing about the separation of family. The destruction of community. The level of brutality. Those were things that I heard, too. And so for me personally, it can be very challenging and very emotional to hear that.

I don’t really want to get into notions of therapy. But it does seem like a means — to a point you’ve made about resilience — through which one can become stronger in the processing of memory. I’m really curious what the experiences have been for the people you’ve interviewed as they’ve encountered other interviews in the project. And I’m curious whether you’ve ever convened them to have conversations with each other.

So that’s a great question. When the interviewees are going through their prep, that’s a very individual process. But before every release of interviews, I always do an interviewee Zoom so they can meet each other before their interviews launch. It’s been really interesting. I think it’s a nice way to connect with others who have gone through this process, too.

We have an extremely wonderful and engaged community of 3Gs. Every time we do events, it’s always so heartwarming to see how many of them show up and are excited to meet each other, to have that conversation. We have that shared history. That shared trauma. There’s something really nice about connecting with others who share that.

When I’m conducting the interviews, there’s so much there that I’m able to recognize. Certain behaviors. Things they say about their grandparents. Like, oh, my grandmother didn’t talk about it — I can relate to that. That was my experience, too. And being the grandchildren of survivors doing this, being interviewed, there’s a relatability I think a lot of the interviewees appreciate.

Carolyn and her grandfather, Moses Locker

You do such a great job of being sensitive to all of these storytellers, and to the central question of the project, which is to ask how this impacts them. So I want to ask you, as someone who heard these stories as a child, and as someone building this body of work — how does your family story impact your life?

I’m the granddaughter of survivors who made their home here in L.A. after losing everything, and I grew up really hearing my grandfather’s story — my grandmother, I would get bits and pieces. She never liked to talk about it. And about a year before she passed away, she finally opened up about what she went through, and I could understand, for the first time in my life, why she didn’t really want to talk about it.

In May of 2020, there was a synagogue near the Grove that was graffitied. I remember thinking, why is this happening? This is like the fifth or sixth antisemitic incident I’m hearing about this year. I remember seeing that report on the news and saying, you know, I’m just going to turn off the news for a bit. I’m going to look through some family photos, go back to happier times, because we’re in the middle of the pandemic and I just want to forget about all of this. And I came across a photo of my great grandparents who were killed in the Holocaust.

And I remembered the first time I heard my grandfather’s story. I was 8 years old. And the only reason he told me his story at that age is because I found that exact photo of his parents who were killed, and I asked him about it. So we had this pretty lengthy, intense conversation about what he went through and how he survived and what happened to his family. And he definitely spared a lot of the really brutal details. But he was visibly upset and emotional. I had never seen him upset like that before. I had never seen him affected by anything before. This strong, happy, wonderful person in my life became vulnerable, sad, grief stricken.

Seeing that change in him, I think, showed me the gravity of what he went through and really drove home for me the importance of remembering. The importance of knowing what happened. At the end of that conversation, he said, you know, Carolyn, it’s going to be the job of your generation to make sure the world doesn’t forget. And I really didn’t understand it at 8 years old — you know, Steven Spielberg, the Shoah Foundation, Papa, don’t worry, the world’s not going to forget. And he was, like, no, the world is going to forget unless you talk about it. You have to speak up. You have to pay attention.

I had a friend recently who said to me, I feel like this is your calling. This work lights you up. This work is your passion. And I said, no. I’m passionate about it from an obligation perspective. I’m living proof of my grandparents’ resilience. And with that comes incredible responsibility to make sure that what they went through, and the lessons of their resilience, doesn’t die.

How do you balance this? How do you take care of yourself and have a life that isn’t completely overwhelmed, while still giving the project what it needs?

I will say that in this process my saving grace has been that I’m telling the story of survivors. These are people who made it through the worst of the worst and rebuilt. And when I look at what we face today as a Jewish people, that gives me a lot of strength and a lot of hope.

I noticed a pattern recently. When every interviewee gets to the part where they talk about how their grandparent met their spouse, I get this big smile on my face. I realized I do this in every interview. You’ve just heard this horrific story of everything they’ve lived through. And then you hear that they fell in love, and they rebuilt their life — and you’re just so happy for them. How could you not be? It’s my saving grace. Absolutely.

It’s really the way the interviews are set up, and I did this on purpose — they all have a happy ending. They got married and had a great life after all of this. And so you know that’s coming. It doesn’t make okay what our grandparents went through. But it’s going to be okay.

In my personal life, I have a really strong support system. I have a great family. I have wonderful friends. There are many times where I call and vent — I just did this interview, and this was really hard. I have an amazing board of directors. An amazing board of advisors. And they’re also very supportive. And they’ve been by my side 100%.

> “We place a very large emphasis on resilience. It’s a big hallmark for our organization. How our grandparents picked up and rebuilt, and how they had the fortitude to do that after losing everything. It really speaks to our strength as a people.”

There’s a power to the scale of the collection of interviews — the sheer number of them, stories on top of stories — even just as the sum of its parts. I’m wondering whether you have some kind of historical coverage goal for the project to make sure that aspects of history are represented in the interviews. And of course hearing you redraw focus on the third generation, I’m curious whether there are other kinds of angles you’re hoping to capture. Are you trying to create structure as you add more of these to the project? How do you work your way through your waitlist?

It’s interesting when you grow up with people who lived through a moment of history. Their stories are obviously inherently going to have those elements. I’ve had interviewees talk about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. My own grandfather was at the siege of Leningrad. These are actual big moments in history, and our grandparents lived through it. For them, it wasn’t just history — it was life.

There are a number of resources that exist for someone to learn about the actual facts and the actual history. Our goal is never to replace or take away from hearing from an actual survivor, from visiting a museum, from learning about it in school, or taking a class. We are about storytelling. The goal of our work is to humanize the history and to be a gateway. Come sit down with me, grab a cup of coffee, hear my story. And by the end of it, we’re going to be friends, because you’ve just listened to my family’s story.

We have a very extensive waitlist, and it grows by the day. It’s really hard. We don’t have the resources to get to everyone as quickly as I’d like. It breaks my heart when I see someone say, “my grandmother is 95, can you please tell my story?” I want to prioritize that person. I want them to be able to share their story while their grandparent can respond to it. That time is running out.

I wish I could film all of them immediately. I’m one person doing this right now. We’ve been raising money and we have some editing help. And I’m looking to scale that in the next year so that we can scale the amount of interviews that we do. I’m grateful for every person on the waitlist and I want every person to have the opportunity to every person to have the opportunity to share their story with us. I'm honored that they've reached out.

Hearing you talk about your process — how hands on you are, how many conversations you're having before you sit down to film, how thoughtful that process is — clearly you also want to create consistency in how these stories are shared and the work that goes into them, rather than, say, giving someone a self upload option with some template questions.

Yes. That technology exists and we've actually looked into it, but you really lose a lot with that. The biggest element for us filming these is not wanting to lose the humanity and the emotional element.

The work that the Shoah Foundation did was incredible. Incredible. But you do have some interviewers who maybe didn't have that prep time with their interviewees, with survivors. When I watch some of these Shoah Foundation interviews, it's not that humanity is missing. But there is sometimes an element of connection that's missing. I will say that we try to go a bit further in our interviews. I've had that prep time with our interviewees. There is a connection there. I can't speak for them. But on my part, I have a comfort level with our interviewees that I hope they also have with me.

I'm curious how the project is evolving for you. You're now several years into this. What are you learning? What are you doing differently?

I'm really thinking about how we address antisemitism in ways that we maybe haven't before. I never want what happened to my grandparents and their family to ever happen again — to Jewish people, or to any group of people. The stories, I don't think those are ever going to change. But some of the questions that we ask have evolved over time.

I've started asking interviewees, "if you could say something to the family that was lost, what would you say?" That's a really emotionally charged question. And the answers have really blown me away. I think they've been some of the most impactful and important answers for our Jewish future. Because the answers usually consist of something like, "I'd want them to know that we're keeping our tradition" — you can tell I'm getting emotional talking about this. "I want them to know that we're not going to let Judaism die."

I think that's one really strong way the project has evolved. How are we letting the survivors who are still alive know that we've got it. You can rest in peace. We're not gonna let this die.

Carolyn grew up in Century City, attending Temple Emanuel Day School, Milken Community High School, Camp Alonim, and the Brandeis Collegiate Institute

[Learn more about the project]

Portraits by Zusha Goldin

For young adults across Los Angeles

From L.A.'s Jewish Federation

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