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CONTACT:

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Michelle Duell, Director

mduell@sals.edu/518-664-4646

CHARLIE’S HEROES: Mechanicville District Public Library Launching Fundraising Campaign to Preserve Large Collection of Photos of Local WWII & Korea Veterans

MECHANICVILLE, N.Y. – The Mechanicville District Public Library today announced that it will launch a fundraising campaign to preserve 600-plus photographs of local World War II and Korean War veterans whose photos in uniform were snapped by the owner of a popular tavern in the 1940s and early ‘50s.

The Charles Siciliano Sr. WWII and Korean War Veterans Photo Collection has had a home for more than a quarter century in the Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth Local History Room in the library located at 190 North Main Street. While the collection has been digitized on the library’s website and the library owns the negatives, the original black-and-white photos taken by Siciliano require preservation work after being mounted in handmade frames for more than 40 years.

While the collection was digitized on the library’s website (<https://meclib.sals.edu/>) 25 years ago during a community effort led by the late Michael Sullivan of Mechanicville, the original 3-inch-by-3-inch prints require professional restoration to prevent further deterioration.

"Our first priority is the physical integrity of these rare 600-plus portraits," says Michelle Duell, Director of the Mechanicville District Public Library. "We will be working with archival experts to move from an initial awareness phase into a professional conservation plan. This systematic process allows us to protect the collection’s future while staying responsive to the tremendous enthusiasm we’re seeing from the community."

In conjunction with the fundraising effort, Mechanicville native and retired Associated Press reporter Chris Carola is presenting a series of free presentations on the collection, focusing on its history, the wartime service of more than a dozen of the veterans whose photos are in the collection, and the need to properly preserve such a vital and unique artifact.

Carola's first talk will be held at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 7 at The Arts Center on The Hudson at 2 South Main Street in Mechanicville. Registration is recommended to reserve a seat:

<https://forms.gle/8BAPY3J5dgo3Nwzx9>.

The next presentation will be held at 7 p.m. Thursday, June 18 at the Saratoga County History Center (Brookside Museum) at 21 Fairground Avenue in Ballston Spa. Another talk will be held at noon Thursday, Sept. 10 at the Saratoga Springs Public Library.

The presentation on May 7 marks the official launch of a multi-phased initiative to conserve these artifacts. Following this kickoff, a dedicated steering committee will oversee a professional assessment to ensure every portrait receives the gold-standard care it deserves. A detailed schedule of future events and project milestones will be released as the conservation effort progresses.

Starting soon after the United States entered WWII following the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Charlie Siciliano Sr. began taking photographs of local servicemembers in uniform when they stopped by his Italian restaurant and bar, opened by his immigrant father Eugene in the early 1900s.

As the war progressed and word got around that Charlie was taking photos of anyone who showed up in uniform, local soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines home on leave made their way to his popular spot at 30 Warsaw Avenue, where the same corner of the bar provided the setting for virtually every photo taken.

Though WWII formally ended with Japan's surrender on Sept. 2, 1945, Siciliano continued taking the photos into 1946 as servicemembers returned home from overseas duty. By then, he had more than 600 individual photos, all with names attached, arranged in framed groups of 25 that were hung on the walls throughout his tavern. He resumed his hobby when the Korean War started in 1950, pushing the total number of photographs to approximately 700.

About half of the veterans in the collection have Italian American last names, a reflection of the influx of Italian immigrants who settled in Mechanicville and nearby communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There are four women veterans in the collection. At least three men in the collection were killed during WWII, including Army Pvt. Henry A. "Rocky" Marcelle of Mechanicville, whose brother Louis and sister-in-law Lucille Ennello Marcelle are also in the collection.

"We are building a permanent legacy dedicated to our city's Greatest Generation," said Marilyn Erano, President of the library's Board of Trustees. "To honor these men and women properly, we are taking a methodical approach that ensures this collection is preserved not just for today, but for a century from now. By establishing a dedicated steering committee and a rigorous governance framework, we are ensuring that every dollar donated is managed with total accountability to our community and our veterans."

"The faces of the men and women of Mechanicville and nearby towns and cities who went to war is a touching reminder of the service and sacrifice of all our New York communities," said Richard Goldenberg, Director of Military History for the New York State Division of Military & Naval Affairs, which operates the state military museum in Saratoga Springs. "As the Second World War and Korean War pass into written history with fewer and fewer living voices, these images give us context and perspective of the many young faces of service. They are personal individual portraits, to be cherished by families for generations, but also reflect the faces of all New Yorkers who wore our nation's uniform, defeated fascism and held off communism in far distant lands."

Information on how to donate to the photo collection preservation campaign will be posted on the library's website at a later date.

For more information on the Siciliano collection, Chris Carola's upcoming talks or to request a presentation for your organization, contact him at ccarola@nycap.rr.com.