

Historian takes children back to Blitz

Program gives look at what children in London underwent in 1940-41 attacks

BY RUSS BYNUM

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STATESBORO, Ga. — The children had fashioned blackout curtains for the windows and were tearing newspaper strips to use as toilet paper when the air-raid sirens began howling.

Women in green uniforms of the British Women's Voluntary Service hurried the elementary schoolers single-file into a makeshift bomb shelter. They sat on the floor listening to the sounds of thundering airplane engines and, finally, explosions.

"My heart stopped for a second," said 10-year-old Ian Weaver, who was seeing World War II from a perspective he'd never seen in the movies — that of a child his own age. "It would have been scary because you could've been killed."

In this living history lesson, props and playacting were more important than names, places and dates. But the date that history professor Annette Laing sought to recreate had an ominous familiarity: Sept. 11, 1940.

It was the first week of the Blitz, the relentless World War II bombing of London by Adolf Hitler's Germany that lasted until May 1941. And Laing wanted children attending her weekend program at Georgia Southern University to see, hear, taste and smell what it was like.

Even if they didn't like Marmite sandwiches, made with a yeast-extract spread that's loved and loathed in Britain, Laing hoped to whet young appetites for a subject that textbooks too often render dreadfully dull.

"It's almost calculated to create a disinterest in history," said Laing, who started the living history program, called TimeShop, in 2004. "I'd gotten very tired over the years having graduate students coming into my classes totally burned out on history."

Choosing wartime Britain as the setting for TimeShop was a natural for 41-year-old Laing, who grew up outside London with parents who were children during



Stephen Morton/Associated Press

Javarius Spaulding listens to a role player on Feb. 18 during the living history program 'TimeShop' while wearing a 1940s-era hat. The program recreates conditions in London during the first week of relentless German bombing in 1940.

the war. Her mother was born during an air raid.

Rather than recreating obvious World War II scenarios of battlefields and concentration camps, TimeShop puts elementary students in the shoes of children who evacuated London to escape the worst of the bombings.

Upon arriving on Georgia Southern's campus on a Saturday, each child was issued a cardboard box to wear on a string around his or her neck. British children used them to tote gas masks during the war.

"You have a bunch of kids in the Deep South, and they pretend to be refugees in World War II — I know it sounds crazy," Laing said. "We're trying to give them a sense that people in the past were real people, living real lives."

The daylong program had children shopping in a market for bread, canned pea soup and sausages using real shillings and other British coins as shopkeepers in period costume checked their reproduction ration books.

In an auditorium, they

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ble house, but I heard you London types are dirty with lice," Jacqueline Nunn, a college freshman dressed as a British housewife, bellowed at one group before ordering its members to hang blackout curtains and make toilet paper from a pile of newspapers.

Bob Lake, 74, of Bluffton, S.C., was an 8-year-old boy when he evacuated London during the Blitz in 1940, moving with his mother and two siblings to his grandparents' small house in southern Wales. He attended TimeShop this year to share his experience with the elementary schoolers.

Lake told of how his mother would wake him in the night when the air-raid sirens sounded so they could move to the underground bomb shelter in the yard. Food also was a constant concern — they had potatoes and vegetables at every meal, but meat only once a week.

"It's very difficult to illustrate what it is to be without a lot of food, to have rationing and stand in cues and wait for bread every day," Lake said.

Though it's hard to recreate the fear and hardship of his wartime childhood in one weekend, Lake said Laing comes close.

"They capture it very well," he said. "The children know there is no fear, but it gives them an idea of what it was really like."

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