

Published June 3rd, 2015

Walking S.F. City Streets with an App

By Chris Lavin



Gloria Lenhart of Lafayette leads a walking tour in San Francisco of public art and space South of Market. Photo Chris Lavin

In a day when many people over the age of 50 fumble around with technology and try to hit the right buttons with their fingers to text their kids or a workmate, sometimes despairing at the results, there are people like Gloria Lenhart of Lafayette. She would have none of the despair. Bring it on, she seems to say.

Lenhart is a lifelong lover of history. What came before - people's lives, the stories, the buildings, the shape of the land - defines who we are now, she says, and she's become obsessed with it.

"I love history, especially San Francisco because this whole area is so connected," she said. "We wouldn't live here right now if it weren't for San Francisco. And more people would love the history, too, if it were more accessible."

Lenhart wracked her brain: Should she condense all her knowledge into a physical book? Do more tours? "People don't have time to take tours. Lots of people want to go at their own pace, on their own time," she said. "So I was thinking that if people could just get this wealth of information by using a phone or a tablet, they might use it more."

Voila: The idea for a smartphone app - City Explorer San Francisco - was born. She successfully completed a Kickstarter campaign. Then she turned her iPhone around and started recording herself.

"I really hated how I sounded at first," Lenhart said. But then she got better at using the technology. "Plus people don't have to listen to me," she said. "They can just read." She laughs.

Lenhart writes all of the historical material for her apps, and using her Kickstarter money, she was able to hire a company in New Zealand to do the programming. Now she has officially launched, both physically and virtually. Her tours cover specific areas of interest: Chinatown, the Victorians of Lafayette Park, North Beach, and more. Hit the City Explorer app and get the history and significance of the Chinatown Gate. Get off at the Montgomery Street BART station and take a tour of public art. Readers take the whole tour, or just look at particular intersections while they're waiting for the Metro - a place that might have been under water during the Gold Rush.

"Yes, Front Street was the front! The rest of downtown is all fill, and full of sunken ships. People love the sunken ships tour," she said.

On a recent free two-hour tour of the Urban Gardens South of Market, Lenhart winded her way through the POPOS (that's privately owned public open spaces). The tour focused on private art open to the public during business hours, but includes the niches of private open spaces to which one might bring a lunch or a laptop. Someone asked her how much it cost to download her tour of North Beach.

"It's free," she said flatly. The asker looked dumb-founded.

So Lenhart hasn't quite gotten that part yet. Anyone can download three of Lenhart's tours through the Apple store or Google Play, depending on the device, just by Googling City Explorer San Francisco. She is, however, charging \$1.99 for some of the tours, with half going to 826 Valencia, a nonprofit dedicated to closing students' academic achievement gaps.

"I should probably charge something for the physical tours, too," she said over lunch. "Like at least \$5." She still hasn't quite gotten that part, either.

Lenhart's free downloadable tours are available at www.cityexplorersf.com.

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