Students touched by war stories

By Jim Gainsford

THE experience of war united the generations across the decades when Menai High School students launched their book War Stories earlier this month.

The book is a record of interviews by the students with senior residents from the Menai and Engadine areas who spoke about their experiences as children and young adults surviving World War II.

Menai High School teacher Lynne Kerr co-ordinated the project in connection with Menai Community Services.

"These seniors are people who experienced war when they were children," she said.

"They were all touched by war and their stories in turn touched the students who interviewed them. It was an intergenerational connection."

Anthony Yeung, 15, interviewed Stefania Syzman, 75, who was sent to a concentration camp in Poland as a five-year-old and was saved from the gas chamber at the last minute when it was discovered she was Catholic.

In the book Mrs Syzman tells of being packed into a cattle train and taken to a prison camp with her family.

"It was the gas chambers where they had people exterminated," she said. "Once they got there they told us we had to strip because we were going to be 'cleansed'."

"Getting ready to go into the 'showers', a German officer came in and said 'this lot of Polish are Catholics and are not Jews, so they are not to go to the showers but are here for work'."

Because her father was a carpenter the family was sent to a factory and Ms Syzman spent her childhood helping to make coffins for the German army.

The family survived the war and were eventually able to make a new life in Australia.

Ron Ashby, 83, of Bangor, lived through the Blitz when his house was bombed in south-east London.

Mr Ashby lived in Charlton, South London, and from the age of nine to 15 experienced his suburb being regularly bombed by German planes.

"We spent more time in the bomb shelter than in school," he said.

"Once I was walking out of school and a plane came over and machine gunned the children on the street."

"I don't know how many children were killed. But you didn't feel sorry for yourself — you just got on with it. I learned to look after myself."

During the Blitz, one of Mr Ashby's brothers was killed and his mother received critical facial injuries.

His father lost his sight and his family home was destroyed. Mr Ashby was interviewed by Angelina Cassaniti, 15.

"The things that Ron went through really taught me everything about life during the war," Angelina said.

"His house was bombed and he was homeless.

"Being so young, it would be a hard thing to go through."

"The information you learn from Ron you can't learn in a text book."

"We read about it at school but it is different hearing it from someone who lived it."

"It helps me to value what we have got here."

Six students took part in the project.