

TELL ME A STORY

Oral Storytelling Preserves History

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Storytelling has traditionally been a delightful way to engage children. Most of us remember curling up on the lap of a parent or older relative to hear their stories. But there are more stories, grown-up stories that are equally, and perhaps even more important. These are our own personal stories, the stories of our lives, of our parents' lives and our grandparents' lives.

Oral history is one of the hot topics right now and, considering the digital nature of our society, may be one of our most important legacies. Perhaps you are familiar with NPR's StoryCorp®, an oral history program whose "mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives." This national program has collected 30,000 stories since its founding in 2003 and while it is an important endeavor, we assume that this is national and has little to do with us.

Why are our own histories meaningful to our families? Our stories create a patchwork history of personal and family identity that gives our children, grandchildren and future generations a glimpse into their history; our stories give a strong sense of identity. When you consider that you may remember your own grandparents and can tell their stories, that history could reach back a hundred years or more. What a rich legacy. This type of history is not the stuff history books are made of, it is the stuff that real life is made of. Perhaps you grew up during The Great Depression, fought in World War II or the Korean Conflict, and if you are a Babyboomer, were involved in the Women's Movement, the Hippie movement, or the Vietnam War. If you farmed, worked in a factory, were a professional, what was that like? This is living history, what history books do not cover, the real story in history, the fabric of everyday people living everyday lives. Constructing a family history includes our immigrant stories, our struggles for education - or coping with the lack of it, the struggle for equality, or keeping our families together in tough times. Often we assume our families know our stories, but they don't and if we do not tell them, the story is lost. That was something discovered by student interviewers at UW-Milwaukee's Hmong Diaspora Studies Program. Children who heard their grandparents' stories of the Hmong emigration to the United States commented, "You never told me" to which their elders responded, "You never asked." This is an opportunity to open lines of communication between generations.

In 2008, Laurel Grove Assisted Living Center in Manitowoc began a project with the writing students in Laura Apfelbeck's UW-Manitowoc writing class. Her students were instructed to list the historic times in the past seventy-five years they would be interested in and the list was matched with the experiences of the Laurel Grove residents who participated. What the twogroups created, and continue to create, is a lasting gift to the community. Many students, when first given the assignment felt this was the worst task they would have in the semester but, when they finished found that they had learned much from the people they interviewed about history, about tough times, about wedding traditions and families, and about aging. At Wisconsin Oral History Day held at

UW-Milwaukee in March 2010, Professor Apfelbeck noted that “the best stories are not the ones we hear in the living room, they’re the stories we hear in the kitchen, the real stories.”

Getting started may be daunting but, with a little thought and organization, it is not complicated. Peggy Turnbull, librarian at UW-Manitowoc, commented at Oral History Day at UW-Milwaukee that what is important is getting started. Over-planning can weight a project down and slow the start. With the Laurel Grove/UW-Manitowoc project, students and faculty created an organic program that evolved as it went with hurdles being addressed as they occurred. The point is to begin collecting stories because living history is tenuous. As time goes on, commented Turnbull, the work becomes very precious.

Essentially, to launch your project you need two things: a list of questions and electronic equipment. The equipment does not need to be elaborate and could be any as simple as a tape or kind of audio player. Perhaps the most efficient method is using a small digital camera with a small table top tri-pod to fix the camera in place at the correct height to record and tape the interviewee. This is the easiest to use and is very accessible for transcription and copying. Digital movie cameras - from which you can down-load videos to your computer - can cost as little as \$100 and small tri-pods are under \$20.

Prepare a list of questions before the interview. StoryCorp’s web site (www.storycorps.org) contains a good set of basic questions. Some you may want to skip and some will give you ideas of where you can take an interview on a more personal or more important note. For example, if you or your interviewee had been on a submarine or worked at the Manitowoc Shipyards during WWII, that could evoke a set of specific questions.

A quiet place, such as the living room or the kitchen table are perfect settings. When you begin your interview, identify the interviewer, the interviewee, the date and the location including the state to frame the interview’s place in history. Ask the foundation questions first, where the person was born, their position in the family, the number of siblings, and background information on their family. It is important that the interviewer be almost invisible to the viewer, their role is to keep the interview on track, to evoke responses and to move the interview back to something that appears to have been important and needs filling out. Use open-ended questions that evoke a response, questions such as “how did rural electrification change your life?” or “What was it like for a kid from rural Wisconsin to land in Italy during the war?”

Once recorded, these family records can be burned to DVDs from your computer and make special family gifts. The stories of where we come from are important, sharing our stories is sharing our history. Tell them a story of riches beyond measure.

REFERENCES

<http://storycorps.org/> <http://www.manitowoc.uwc.edu/Library/eng101-oral-history.aspx>