Preserving a family's history
by Alexis Dobranowski

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When Jennifer Campbell's father died, she realized she knew very little about his life. "He was a very reticent man," she says. "He didn't talk a lot about himself."

Jennifer, an Uxbridge writer and editor, turned to her mother, "the storyteller of the family," in hopes of collecting some stories of her father's life. Jennifer conducted several interviews with her mother, but her mother soon developed dementia.

"Those stories just got locked inside of her and there was no key," Jennifer recalls. "I managed to capture a few of the stories, but mainly they are just lost."

Her experience with her own parents and a series of "serendipitous" events led Jennifer to start Twin Willows, a company that creates personal histories for its clients. Personal history resembles memoir, but can be in many forms, including audio, video, and print. Through a series of interviews, a personal historian, like Jennifer, gathers stories, anecdotes, and life lessons from the client. Afterwards, the stories are compiled and a transcript or book is made for the client to document his or her life.

It was in the local gym that the idea for the business came to Jennifer. While running on the treadmill, she began reading an old magazine. "It fell open to a story that described a woman in Texas who was helping people write their memoirs," she recalls. "I thought, 'Wow, what a fabulous idea for a business.'"

As she began digesting the idea of writing personal histories, she ran into an old colleague who put her in touch with an executive who wanted to write his memoirs.

"I got my tape recorder—a big old clunker—and sat down and interviewed him and that was the start of it," she says.

Jennifer says she loves listening to the stories of "everyday heroes."

"One client I had, a very elderly man, had led a wonderful long life. I asked him to talk about his years in the war and he said, 'Which war would you like, dear?' It was astonishing to realize he had lived through two world wars." Beginning with WWI, the man began to tell his stories—of bombs blowing up houses a few doors down from their house in London, of serving in India as an army medic, of falling in love with his wife through years of letter writing.

"People are carrying around not only their own stories but the stories of their families and the stories of history," Jennifer says. "There's an African proverb, 'When a person dies, a whole library is lost.' And it's true."

She said while technology is allowing people to capture their lives like never before, through video cameras and digital recording, it's actually distancing families.

"We have technology at our fingertips that occupies all our time—text messaging, e-mails, websites and large-screen TVs...it has put a distance between the elders of a family and the young ones," Jennifer explains. Family lore and stories aren't passed on around the dinner table like they used to, she adds. But as people watch their parents grow older, they are often faced with their own morality. A personal history, she says, offers the client and their families a preserved account of their lives.

"The people who hire me are almost always the children of the narrators," she says. "These are their stories, too."

When Shelley Macbeth's mother was diagnosed with cancer in 2004, Mrs. Macbeth and her sister turned to Twin Willows. They thought a personal history would be a perfect Christmas gift for their mother and themselves.

"It's not like we didn't know our mom was sick," she recalls. "But, by the time we got organized...she was in so much pain and on so much morphine, some of the stories are mixed up."

Mrs. Macbeth's mother died November 30, 2004. While not enough information was recorded to complete the process, Jennifer transcribed the interviews and made audiotapes.

"I couldn't listen to it for a long time," Mrs. Macbeth says. "I can hear the pain in (my mother's) voice."

She adds that while Jennifer began by asking facts, more poignantly, she asked about life lessons, decisions, and accomplishments.

"We are more than the sum of the parts, our jobs or the number of kids we have," Mrs. Macbeth says. "A personal history creates a lasting record. These people were here. They interacted. They had funny stories."

It's those funny stories that Mrs. Macbeth wishes she had on tape. "When your parents are alive and they are telling you a story over and over, you think, 'If I hear that story again, I'll scream,'" she says. "But when they are gone, you try to tell someone and can't remember."

For Jennifer, preserving these stories for her clients is "soul-satisfying" work. She currently works at TVOntario as a writer and editor, but hopes to eventually make Twin Willows a full-time job. She'll usually conduct 10 to 12 hours of interviews, followed by 15 to 20 hours of transcribing, editing, writing, and revising for each hour of interview. While time-consuming, the end result is always positive.

"It's satisfying when you see the look on people's faces, when they get their book or their manuscript and they know that this is now preserved forever," Jennifer explains. "It's not

something that people sit down and think about on a daily basis, you know, ‘This is the story of my life.’”