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SECTION



Personal historians in Tucson can create a DVD or book about you that can be passed down to future generations

By Erin White
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Rosella Bonham, who is 83, never told her children that she sang and danced on Broadway in her youth or supported her family as a young girl by singing in Jewish weddings. They didn't know that her grandmother, glaring at the men who came to search her home, hid her mother under a long, full skirt to protect her from persecution. Bonham never told her children how their grandmother and great-grandmother hiked across Russia, fleeing anti-Semites, after two uncles were dragged from their home and killed.

But Bonham understands she won't be around forever. She's aging, and her health is failing.

She felt compelled to share these stories, so she hired It's Time to Tell Your Story Studios to make a personal video biography this summer.

"It was the most wonderful thing," she says, her voice thickening with swallowed tears, "to let my heart come out."

The studio creates customized videos using a standard process. After completing a pre-interview and an extensive questionnaire, the client sits down with an experienced

interviewer for a two-hour session, which is filmed and put on DVD.

Bonham says that she was nervous but that when she sat down the stories flowed.

She told how she was born prematurely after her mother took a tumble down a flight of stairs.

"They wrapped me in newspaper and put me in a box under the bed. They thought I was dead until they heard me crying," she says. "It wasn't funny then, but it's kind of funny now."

Pictures alone, she says, would never have told that story.

Allowing her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to see her explaining where they came from is one of the most important things she's ever done, she says.

Another personal historian is Steve Pender, owner of Family Legacy Video. He began creating custom biographies after 27 years of making corporate videos by crafting one for his grandmother. The grateful reaction of his family persuaded him to shift from the corporate world to personal histories.

He acknowledges that his work isn't cheap, ranging from \$400 to several thousand dollars, but, citing his own family, he says the return is great for those who have the money to invest in the project.

Pender tries to keep the videos to about an hour so families will watch more than once.

Carol Zuckert, owner of Remember and Record, creates a more extensive chronicle, as does historian Amy Miller Gray. When these women finish their work, clients have a memoir of a loved-one's life complete with pages of pictures.

Zuckert's volumes are longer; Gray's are more artistic.

Repeated interviews, Zuckert says, allow her to develop relationships and pull out details.

As she flips through the volumes she has created, she talks about the personalities. "They were so in love," she says of one couple. "I don't think she's really been able to let him go."

Both women start with basic information, then move on to

more random questions, trying to dig as deeply as client comfort will allow.

"I might ask if someone's parents had a pet name for them before they were born," Gray says.

Most of the people who want the histories, the recorders say, are middle-age children who want to know about and preserve their parents' stories.

The historians say people often find it easier to talk to the interviewer than to their families. Discoveries are made during the process.

Bonham says she'd likely not have told her children about how a poster of Uncle Sam inspired their grandfather, fresh off the boat from Germany, to join the American Army though he spoke hardly a word of English, if she hadn't hired someone to take down her history.

"My kids said, 'We didn't know. You didn't tell us,'" Bonham says. "I told them, 'You didn't ask.'"

One of Bonham's sons, whom she doesn't often see, scheduled a trip to Tucson after she sent him the video. He and his wife still have questions, and they want to make sure she answers them.

"I needed to tell them what my forefathers did," Bonham says. "You have to leave something behind for them to know."

An even better part, she adds, is that they want to know right now.

FAMILY LEGACY VIDEO

• **Process:** Steve Pender pre-interviews clients. He then sets up cameras and lights and interviews the subject for one to two hours. During the editing process, he constructs a story arc, rearranging and sometimes going back for second interviews to add audio. He also smooths out pauses during conversation to create a professional look. Video purchases include raw footage and a transcript of the interview.

• **Contact:** Call Pender at 743-4090 or log on to www.familylegacyvideo.com online. The Web site also has links to sites on writing memoirs, journaling, tracking down ancestors and more for do-it-yourselfers.



Rosella Bonham