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Take a stroll down memoir lane with the family

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Loren Stephens

Somewhere between the frenzied search for that perfect gift, entertaining out-of-town guests and feasting on latkes and soufganiot, perhaps this year we might slow down just long enough to blissfully watch the glow of the chanukiah candles reflected on our children's faces.

Amid this seasonally induced excitement, if we are lucky, we'll be spending more time with our families -- both nuclear and extended. But since we don't get to choose our relatives, we not only see a great deal of our nearest and dearest, we also see crazy Uncle Sy, boorish Uncle Boris and, of course, supremely dull Cousin Celia.

According to Loren Stephens, a writer, editor and documentary filmmaker, these get-togethers are a golden opportunity to mine our family's rich past. Stephens is the president of Write Wisdom, Inc., the company she founded to both guide and assist people in writing memoirs.

"Everyone has some extraordinary experiences and stories to tell," says Stephens, who believes there is great value in both the telling and the hearing of these stories. She speaks from both

professional and personal experience.

Her documentary films have centered on the interplay of history -- both specific events and long-standing traditions -- and individual lives. Her film "Legacy of the Blacklist," produced for PBS, described the impact of the Hollywood blacklist on families who survived what Stephens refers to as "that horrific experience." Another documentary, "Los Pastores: The Shepherd's Play," explored Hispanic folk traditions in the Rio Grande Valley and showed "the importance of family, tradition and faith."

In 1996, Stephens' experience documenting and contextualizing lives melded with her interest in her own family's history, when she approached her mother about writing her memoirs. Born in 1915, Stephens' mother graduated from Smith College and studied to be an opera singer. Her life was, in many ways, "emblematic of the changing role of women during the 20th century," according to Stephens. Although initially resistant to Stephens' pleas, her mother eventually relented. For two years, Stephens traveled back and forth to New York to conduct interviews. She researched relevant historical periods in order to add accurate background and detail, and in 2000 she published her mother's life story through her own imprint, Provenance Press.

"It was an incredibly fulfilling experience," Stephens says.

The process of working on the memoir deepened her relationship with her mother, and after its publication her mother enjoyed being "a star once again." When her mother died in February, Stephens delivered the eulogy.

"I took passages from the book, so I was able to give her her voice one more time," she said. "It was such a beautiful closure to her life."

Forming Write Wisdom, Inc. seemed a natural next step for Stephens -- an outgrowth of her filmmaking, her long-standing interest in personal history and her experience writing her mother's memoir. Stephens' company provides a wide array of services, from teaching skills for eliciting and writing memoirs (one's own or others'), to performing all of the interviews, then writing and publishing the book for a client.

Since completing her mother's memoir, Stephens has researched, written and published three others, including one for a Holocaust survivor who was in his late 70s. Believing that "each ethnic community has an emblematic story to be told, and that for the Jews it is the Holocaust," Stephens says her subject was motivated by a number of factors.

He saw his own story as "a cautionary tale, as well as a way of trying to make sense of something that was so completely senseless," Stephens says. And "the fact that he is alive, that he survived when so many others didn't, was a very strong motivation for him to tell his story."

Thankfully, not everyone's life includes such trauma. Nevertheless, nearly everyone has interesting stories in their family. But how and where do you begin, especially if you're not a writer, an editor, or a filmmaker -- much less all three? According to Stephens, family gatherings are a natural place to start: "We often hear the same fabulous family stories, over and

over again, especially during holiday gatherings."

Some families already have an unofficial keeper of family lore, but many don't. "Anyone can bring up the idea," says Stephens, but "expect to be rebuffed at first."

As flattering as it is to be asked to recount the details of one's life, people are often reluctant to open up. Stephens suggests returning to the topic at another time, gently insisting, reminding the person how much everyone enjoys their stories or how important their life experiences are in helping others appreciate the family.

When people protest that they have nothing unique to tell -- which they often will -- Stephens suggests reminding them that "no one else sees the world quite the way they do."

Ultimately, what wins many people over is hearing that "the lessons of their lives can affect someone in a positive way, a way that they may not be able to anticipate or to ever even know," Stephens says.

Stephens recommends using a simple audio tape recorder, rather than a video camera. "A camera makes most people too self-conscious," while a tape recorder is less obtrusive and takes virtually no skill to operate. The tapes can then either be kept as final documents, or used as a springboard for writing the memoir.

Once your subject has agreed to tell their story, Stephens says, the biggest hurdle is over. After that, "you simply start with 'tell me where you were born.'" But she suggests not trying to force a chronological telling, since "people's minds don't really work that way."

Stephens is "amazed at the way memory works: The experiences that are the most emotionally charged are the ones that we remember in the greatest detail."

They may not be recalled in a linear sequence, but they "are so firmly imprinted on our brain that it takes very little effort for them to be recalled."

Yet even with more ordinary events, she says "it takes very little to prompt someone. The most typical thing I say is, 'And then what happened?' and they're off and running."

Inevitably, however, you'll be faced with some "emotional land mines," Stephens says.

Again, she speaks from experience: When she was interviewing her mother "there were some things she absolutely refused to let me include; but there were others that I was able to convince her wouldn't hurt anyone to reveal."

As challenging as it can be at times, Stephens recommends that "you maintain as much neutrality as possible. As a listener you can guide the individual along, but don't push beyond your subject's personal boundaries."

Not only do you need to "honor that person's sense of propriety and privacy; you also must remember that it's their story, not yours," Stephens warns.

On the other hand, people are often surprised at how much someone will reveal. "Family secrets will come out, either because the emotional weight of them has dissipated over time, or because near the end of someone's life they see value in revealing them, or just because the incident might not be considered such a 'shanda' in this day and age."

Nevertheless, Stephens says, "I try not to be a psychologist when I'm working with people; I try to stay in the moment."

As a listener, she says, you are most effective when you remain as objective and non-judgmental as possible.

"Around the holidays," Stephens points out, "the materialism of our society can be especially overwhelming."

It's easy to lose sight of one simple fact: You can't take it with you. Memoirs are one way of creating a lasting legacy, and Stephens believes it can be "a wonderful gift to help someone tell their life story."

So this year, why not eat your fill of latkes, dance with the kids, then grab hold of your curiosity and cozy up to crazy Uncle Sy. You just might be surprised by what you'll learn.

For more information, visit www.writewisdom.com, or call (310) 820-2052.

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