

TELL THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE

It's easier than ever to preserve your legacy for kids and grandkids in a video, a book or a digital archive



Cara Tollefson prepares Catharine Johnson for a video for the Blom family in Minneapolis.



BY MAISY FERNANDEZ



HIRE A VIDEOGRAPHER

How much do your loved ones know about your life? Beyond the broad strokes of career and interests, do they understand what milestones shaped you? Or know about the times you persevered through personal struggle? Or experienced smiles, tears or laughs?

Preserving your life story is easier than ever today, and the benefits are plentiful—for everyone. “The really profound value comes in children and future generations,” says Steve Pender, president of Arizona-based Family Legacy Video Inc. “When someone passes away without passing on the family stories and life stories, it’s like a library burning down.”

Luckily, there are many services to record your life journey, saving you from a standoff with a blank page and no idea where to begin.

In creating a half-hour documentary in the 1990s on his grandmother—who was the primary keeper of her family history—Pender realized the power of video memoirs. “People now can hear these stories firsthand, instead of in part or thirdhand,” he says. “Years later, we’ve got the young adults who were the kids back then, who are getting acquainted with her through this video.”

Pender created Family Legacy Video to offer this service to others, completing his first video production in 2004. Other small production companies that do similar work can be found across the United States.

Shooting the subject while telling his or her story takes a day or more, with a camera crew, gear and lighting, and sometimes even a makeup artist. The crew may shoot other

footage, too, such as at a former workplace or showing the subject engaged in a hobby.

Often, it’s not the elder storyteller who

seeks the service but rather that person’s child. “The more we get into the process and they reflect on their lives and see what they’ve accomplished, it validates that they have lived a meaningful life and have stories worth passing on,” Pender says.

A professionally produced video can take as long as a month to complete, while making a full documentary-style film might take closer to four months.

Cost: It varies by company, but expect to pay from around \$2,000 into the tens of thousands, depending on the level of production.

Service providers: familylegacyvideo.com, verissima.com, memoirsproductions.com, legacymultimedia.com



HIRE A BIOGRAPHER

For the past six years, former journalist Sarah Merrill has been writing memoirs about nonfamous but fascinating people—such as a couple who had been married for 75 years. The wife was 100 years old, and the husband was 99. “Some of the banter between the two of them was priceless,” says Merrill, who is a personal historian based in Connecticut.

A typical biography project for Merrill requires eight to 12 hours of interviews. From there, the author crafts a narrative, and the

client family reviews drafts as they also work together to choose photos and a book design.

“Sometimes they come away with a more organized sense of the meaning of their life,” Merrill says of her clients. “Or they will evaluate a relationship that had bothered them and come to some sort of resolution about it.”

Cost: Expect to pay \$2,000 or more, depending on the biographer you hire and the level of service. Some writers will create short memoirs for less.

Service providers: memoirsbymerrill.com, realifestories.com, modernmemoirs.com



WRITE YOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

With a lifetime of memories, it's hard to home in on things that truly inform your life perspective. Guided Autobiography offers courses that help you write your story, two pages at a time, focusing on themes such as health, money, family and spiritual identity. “No matter where you are or what your background is, there are life themes you go through,” says Cheryl Svensson, director of the Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies, which operates Guided Autobiography.

Each topic has a set of questions, designed to coax details from the writer. Participants come to class, taught by instructors across the country, and break into groups where they share their stories. “It's not the boring chronological story; it's the stories that maybe nobody has heard before,” Svensson says. “Do my kids know what I feel about being a woman or about death and dying? Is money important to me or not?”

Cost: Varies by instructor.

Service providers: To find an instructor near you, go to guidedautobiography.com. Some also offer online classes.

Do It Yourself

Want to tell your story without hiring a professional? Here are tips from Sunny Jane Morton, author of *Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy*.

► **Focus on memories you're passionate about.** “Your life story is not a tell-all confessional,” Morton says. Outline your life separately by childhood memories, high school memories, professional-life memories and memories of your family.

► **Photos or music can stimulate your memory.** “The pro-

cess of remembering really has a snowball effect,” Morton says. When in doubt, friends and family can help you remember, too.

► **Try capturing your life through symbols.** “If you could fill a bag with objects that represent your story, do it,” Morton advises. Then write down the significance of each object.

—CHELSEA CIRRUZZO



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USE TECHNOLOGY

For the tech savvy, your memories can be preserved and shared on your smartphone. The Familybox free app provides an organized storage space for photos, videos and more. "Now we inherit hard drives full of stuff with no context," says Familybox founder and CEO Scott Garen. The app features categories such as early childhood, college life, parenting and travel. Each includes questions for the user. Samples: What are your best childhood memories from summer vacation or camp? If you didn't have the career you wanted, describe what stopped you. Describe a difficult choice you made that led to and now defines your character today. Users capture their memories by writing or recording audio or video. "It's not just about legacy and capturing it before it's gone," Garen says. "It's about meaningful conversation now."

Cost: Subscription plans for a forthcoming website will be \$5 or \$10 per month, depending on storage needs.

Similar service provider: FamilySearch Memories, a free app

One Woman's Story Takes New Twists and Turns



Gloria Hunt (center) with (clockwise) half sister Patt MacDonald-Christie, Pam Pacelli Cooper, cousin Virginia Mizera and half brother Malcolm MacDonald

When Pam Pacelli Cooper took a Guided Autobiography course to write about her life, she didn't expect to acquire more family as a result.

"I wrote a little piece called 'The Last One Standing,'"

says Pacelli Cooper of Cambridge, Mass., who is in her 60s. "I am an only child, and it got me thinking about these supposed half brothers and sisters that my mother had that I never met."

Her mother, Gloria Hunt, also grew up as an only child, only hearing whispers about possible half siblings, who were born after Hunt's parents had divorced.

With a bit of work, Pacelli Cooper ended up locating two distant relatives online.

Months later, "I was able to connect my mother with her half brother and half sister for her 88th birthday," Pacelli Cooper says. "They are now a part of our family." They met in Chicago in 2014.

"We couldn't call it a re-union. We called it a union," Pacelli Cooper says. She discovered her own connections with her mother's half brother. "The whole time I grew up in Chicago, he lived five blocks from my mother and me," she says.

"We went to the same church. He was a member of the same choir I was a member of, 10 years apart. So we probably walked right by each other and didn't even know it." —MF

COURTESY PACELLI COOPER

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