



Blueprints for Success:

Business Opportunities for Personal Historians

The work we do as personal historians is rewarding from a personal standpoint, but many of us also must make it rewarding on a financial level. One way to achieve this is to consider different avenues for generating income. This feature explores success stories of APH members who have ventured “outside the box” or stepped outside their comfort zones to explore new business opportunities.

Anita Hecht, of Life History Services, LLC, Focuses on Skills

by Libby J. Atwater

Three has always been considered a magical number. In show business a performer who can sing, dance, and act is known as a “triple threat.”

Since personal historians perform work that is anything but threatening, we consider those proficient in three media to be triple talented. Anita Hecht, owner of Life History Services, LLC, is one such person. This gifted storyteller is proficient in three media: video, audio, and print. She is also fluent in three languages: English, Spanish, and German. At one time she operated her business from three locations: Mexico City, San Francisco, and Madison, Wisconsin. She also served three terms on the APH Board of Directors: two as Membership Director and one as Director-at-Large.

Anita became a personal historian in 1995, when she began doing oral histories as a volunteer for the Shoah Foundation, a nonprofit organization established by director Steven Spielberg to capture the stories of Holocaust survivors on videotape. As the daughter of German-born Jews whose families fled to Mexico when Hitler rose to power in Germany, Anita learned a great deal from this experience.

Anita's parents met and married after their families were settled in Mexico, and Anita was born in south Texas, where her parents located after they married. “I grew up



in an American cultural vacuum,” says Anita. “My parents were Latinos and like many children of survivors, grew up disconnected from their family history. They spoke German to their parents, Spanish to each other, and English to their children. Needless to say, I grew up rather confused! I wanted to crack the code and thus studied Spanish in school and later German and history.”

This knowledge of German was helpful to Anita when she became a Fulbright Scholar in 1988 and lived in Germany for three years, teaching English and American studies in German schools. “I was very interested in education, and in Germany I focused on comparative public education. I studied how history—specifically National Socialism (Nazism)—was taught in the German public school system.”

Anita's training and work experience have formed the basis for her success as a personal historian. She earned a bachelor's degree in history and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and later a master's degree in social work. When she starting working for

the Shoah Foundation in 1995, Anita had already worked for numerous years as a licensed social worker and psychotherapist. In doing oral histories for the foundation, Anita found her calling. "I've always been drawn to people's stories. I believe that telling stories, even those that are traumatic, can help give meaning to our experience and be positive, healing endeavors, if done with respect, skill, and sensitivity.

"I was trained to do broadcast quality video working as a volunteer. I did some interviews in the states and over thirty in Mexico City, where a number of Holocaust survivors immigrated. My first paid personal history project was in 1996—to produce the oral and written history of a ninety-year-old man who lived in Mexico City. This project was my epiphany; it felt like such a positive way to use my skills," notes Anita.

Anita has built her business and enhanced her skills with each new project. "My business is divided between audio and videotaped oral histories and printed memoirs and archives. I believe in creating primary sources and often leave the questions in my videos, since they are an integral part of the narrator's response to the process."

Anita does all of her own pre-production, planning, contracting, interviewing, and recording work. She sub-contracts areas where others may have stronger skills, specifically transcription, audio and video editing, graphic design, printing, and binding. "I'm more involved in content development, which is my area of expertise," she says, "but I use high-quality equipment and rely on local technophiles to keep up with the latest technology."

This multitasking personal historian also teaches people how to write their memoirs in a summer school program held at the University of Wisconsin. "I guide people to write about significant life events and themes. Most of my students are in their mid-seventies and are good writers. Over and over again, I am struck by the meaning they gain from engaging with their past, their creativity, and each other."

Some of the most important networking and conversations at the conference happened during mealtimes.

When asked her advice for newcomers to the field of personal history, Anita says, "Know yourself and your motivations well, get lots of training, and do what you love. It is such a privilege to look inside a person's life, an honorable endeavor. I have love and respect for people who engage in the process." She also reminds colleagues, "Listen to what people want and personalize each project."

Anita averages ten to fifteen projects per year, ranging from small to large. She usually gives herself a year to complete a project, and she has many repeat customers. In some cases after she's completed the story of one family member, another will ask to tell his or her story.

Presently Anita has also established a part-time psychotherapy practice where she uses her personal history and psychotherapeutic skills to do life review and reminiscence work with seniors and those facing life-limiting illnesses. She feels this work is essential to the mental health of our aging society. When asked about the future, she adds, "I'd like to train newer personal historians and clinicians and write and speak more about the personal history field."

An APH member since 1998, Anita has donated a great deal of time to the organization. She has worked on several projects, including the potential development of an APH Speakers' Bureau and a list of recommended skill sets for personal historians. "My hope is that APH focuses on how we can all become extremely well-trained personal historians," she emphasizes. ♦

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