



Historian for hire

Recording our family stories for the next generation.

JOHN URBAN

BY BRENNAN NARDI

Thirty-something Anita Hecht peers out the window of her second-story home/office on Madison's East Side and wonders what her life would be like if the budding oral history business she started five years ago took a giant leap forward, like everyone is telling her it could.

"He thinks there's a huge market for it," she says of a business-savvy friend who started a successful engineering company out of his living room. National experts agree. According to a recent article in *The Washington Post*, the market is booming with how-to guidebooks and magazines for genealogy buffs, memoirists and family history writers.

While her projects vary in nature, scope and length, Hecht is in the business of recording and preserving individual, family, business and congregational histories and archives in video, audio and multimedia formats.

"Maybe because of the millennium or maybe because people are feeling their

lives speed up," Hecht supposes are reasons for this cottage industry trend. But even with the recent publicity, the oral history profession is still a fledgling one.

Hecht, president of Life History Services, is a personal historian; at least that's the current job title people like her are using. The profession is so new, there really isn't a name for it yet, except that she and about 330 others belong to the National Association of Personal Historians. Not bad, considering there were only 70 registered members in 1998.

While the competition is minimal – Hecht finds work locally, statewide and around the country – and business stays steady with very little marketing, hiring someone to produce a life history, your own or that of someone you love, isn't exactly at the top of a person's "things to do before I die" list. "People aren't going to go to the phone book and look for somebody like they do for a plumber," but that's exactly what they should do, says Hecht, who has become more philosophical about her work, why it's

important and why it might take a professional to do it. "Preserving one's personal and family history is at least, if not more, important as writing a will."

In addition to the technological considerations of operating a videocamera, binding a book or burning a CD, creating a quality oral history often takes an objective third party to help condense a lifetime into a single document. If a member of the narrator's family conducts the interview, both basic (family tree, career) and more in-depth questions might not be asked because he or she knows the answers or feels uncomfortable probing into family dynamics. Hecht not only includes the "facts," but also invokes reflections on those significant events in a person's life. "I've heard oral histories where the interviewers haven't deepened a conversation, asked for clarification, allowed a memory-triggering moment to continue or expanded the topic to include a wider historical context or personal worldview," all of which enrich the storytelling for future listeners, Hecht says. "The facts aren't the most interesting thing, it's what meaning people attribute to them."

Before she even sits down with the narrator to begin the storytelling, she assesses what makes the narrator tick, the kind of person they consider themselves to be and what experiences have impacted them. "It's about meeting them inside their stories," Hecht says, "not inside your own idea of what stories they should tell."

And recording an elderly loved one's life reminiscence isn't just about the final product – the CD, the videotape or the photo album. Hecht says it's about the process of self-discovery and life affirmation that even experts say contribute to quality of life and longevity in the later years. An increase in self-esteem and a decrease in depression are two health benefits that aging and mental health specialists have pointed to in recent years. In fact, a career in family therapy and social work is what drew Hecht into the oral history business in the first place – that and a fascinating family history of her own.

"I really loved doing social histories and family histories, which is part of a typical assessment when I'm working in social services," she says. Hecht spent two years as a family therapist for Lutheran Social Services and a year as a hospice social worker and counselor. About that time, she also joined Steven Spielberg's Visual History of the Survivors of the Shoah

Foundation, which he established in 1994 after filming "Schindler's List." Shoah, the largest undertaking of its kind with more than 50,000 testimonies, chronicles the Holocaust through interviews with survivors, rescuers and other eyewitnesses. For her part, Hecht, a descendant of German Jews, traveled to Mexico, where her parents and grandparents had fled, and interviewed more than 30 survivors (including her own relatives) in English, Spanish and German.

Hecht, who has expanded her business from personal and family histories to communities, organizations and corporate histories, says people often need help producing a life history to determine the scope so that the project isn't so overwhelming. "Some people are more comfortable with the idea of doing smaller vignettes rather than a complete life history or a complete organizational history," she says. "They may want to pay tribute to someone who's died, or they may want to celebrate an anniversary or a birth or some event that's a turning point in their life." One client only wanted to record his professional history; another focused on her experience with cancer.

Alice Schacht, 82, hired Hecht to transform two old black-and-white photo albums, letters and other cherished family documents into a living history for her children and grandchildren. After years of wear and tear, they were beginning to disintegrate. So her son Dick asked his mother to "just get something down in writing so we can see what we're looking at." Schacht began the process on her own, but soon realized that the task was much too big. "I never typed worth a darn in the first place," she says.

That's when she contacted Hecht, who studied the documents and came up with the idea of a recorded conversation – a real, live trip down memory lane. Hecht led Schacht through the photographs and other mementos, weaving her stories into a written transcript and audio recording to accompany the photo albums. From start to finish, the project took several months. This summer, Schacht plans to distribute the 20 audiotapes and transcripts along with 25 copies of the photo albums to relatives at a family gathering. "It's a good feeling to know your roots," Schacht says.

Hecht, who has helped her own family capture special moments for posterity, agrees: "It is the greatest inheritance we can give our children and future generations of loved ones." ■

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