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## Saving history, one person at a time

BY NANETTE RANDALL

Most of us have warm memories of stories we heard when we were young. Spun by the voices of our special loved ones—father, mother, grandparent—we often took them for granted. We thought we would hear the voice, the story, and the tempo forever. Such is the case when we think of a loved one's face, smile and scent, so clearly etched in our minds.

Suddenly 20, 30 or 50 years pass. Ever so quietly and without warning, we realize that we are no longer able to hear or remember the details of who said what. Time has stolen the memory and clarity of the voice and the stories.

How might we recall treasured stories and family history as in the days of our youth? The answer—document the story before it is gone.

Every day, the voices of loved ones are silenced by disease, illness and death. Sometimes the silence is premature; other times, the silence seems as if it has been that way for decades. Voices, once vibrant and alive, quickly morph into lost life statistics. Even with today's technology, unrecorded stories are buried stories.

Think of life as an open treasure chest. Suddenly, without warning, the chest closes, locked and keyless. It gives us just a small sense of losing a family's legacy. We can change the course of history, preserving family stories and memories, when one individual—an adult child, a grandchild, a friend—realizes the power of the storytelling process and begins the process. When a generous storyteller leaves his memoirs, then the history, the knowledge and experiences remain.

Before deciding to write your story, consider signing up for a memoir writing class or ask a fam-

ily member to help you, especially if you have worries about time or ability. Decide whether to write in chronology or short story chapters. Find old letters and recipes and write what you recall. Think of old stories passed down and write what you recall. Extract pictures and memorabilia from scrapbooks. Most important, work on your project with humor and love.

If genealogy interests you, do some basic research by visiting the Web site: [www.cdc.gov/nchs](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs) (National Center for Health Statistics) or [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org). Dig up old photos and use them as memory prompts at family gatherings. Record what you hear and what everyone says. Typically, when one person reminisces, others join them. Hire someone to videotape the recordings.

When a finished book is what you seek, hire a professional interviewer and writer to do it with and for you. A memoirist has expertise in developing the perfect questions and specializes in story sharing and recording. Look for someone who makes the interviews comfortably conversational. Expect to devote a few hours or longer working together. Build trust. Keep the timeframe open for sharing. Seek expert help in transcribing, story writing, edit-

ing and printing. Find and include old photographs. Realize that an individual's story is like leaving a bit of inheritance ahead of time. See it as a family heirloom that, once organized and transcribed, will become an unbelievable story treasure.

Like every life, each person's spin on life is uniquely different and wonderful. Not surprisingly, the stories and testimonies from Catholic men and women provide captivating inspiration to their families. Life memoirs give families insight about how a loved one overcame hardship or loss. They speak about perseverance and joy. They speak to the ways that challenges, grace, and learning develop strength and courage. They speak to our humanity. In some stories, there are detours. In others, faith never wavers. Faith carries people through storms, trials, and tribulations. Family members are often emotional after reading a life memoir, but are grateful to have such a treasure.

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