

Questions to ask in a legacy interview

A guide for capturing your family's important stories

By Executor's Resource, Inc.

During a two-year period starting in 1972, Lettice Stuart lost a big part of herself.

It wasn't just her parents dying that caused it, but that she never got around to interviewing her parents and taking down their legacies: their stories, their thoughts and feelings about death, life and family.

An accomplished writer and reporter with the New York Times, Stuart certainly possessed the skills to record a little family history, but things just kept getting in the way and her parents died suddenly. Her chance was gone.

"They died and it just broke my heart," the New Orleans resident and native says. Part of her grief was losing the history and the family stories, things she wanted her kids to know, she says. "I remember the facts, but not the stories," she laments.

In 1996 she started her business, [Portraits in Words](#), to help people record what she did not. Portraits in Words produces both printed books and videos that capture family memories. Executor's Resource asked Stuart which questions to ask your parents during a legacy interview.

How to get the legacy interview started

Interviewing and recording your parents or relative sounds easier than it is. Many parents will tell you their story isn't important despite assurances that it is. Additionally, without a third party to do the interview, family baggage and judgment can get in the way.

If you want to do it yourself, start out with a few basics, according to Stuart.

- Holidays and family reunions are a good time to approach an elder about a legacy interview, but stay far away from any kind of group interview. Family members tend to talk over each other and transcribing the recording becomes difficult, Stuart warns. Better to insist on one interview subject at a time.
- It will take a little persuasion to get parents to open up; let them know they are doing you a favor. Preface with, "I want to get the stories of your life. This is important to me. I really want my children to know these things about our family."
- Try recording a series of ten-minute telephone conversations. In a couple months, you may have a collection of five stories.
- Fear of the tape recorder in direct interviews can be a hindrance. At first it might intimidate them, but gradually that fear will evaporate.

- Let them talk. Your silence is important. You're not recording your stories, but theirs. Some questions can be helpful in directing the interview subject, but let them say what they need to say. And remember that deep down, everyone wants someone to care about their story, even though they may say otherwise.

Stuart says that family historians have an “awesome responsibility” to use good judgment in presenting the stories, or editing out hurtful comments. “A lot of people say things in an interview that they don't want in print for eternity,” Stuart says. “I always go back and say, ‘You're sure you want to say this about your brother? Can we make this a little softer?’”

Which questions to ask

Start in the beginning. Ask which of their parents they knew the most about. “What do you know about your mother's/father's childhood?” Continue with childhood, college, dating, marriage proposal, work career, and time in the military questions. Don't worry about names or dates as you can always piece those back together later. It's more important to keep the interview rolling.

“The skill in interviewing is asking open-ended questions, as in, not ‘Where did you grow up?’ rather, ‘Tell me what it was like growing up in New Orleans in 40s and 50s.’ And the best follow-up question is always, ‘Why?’” Stuart says.

“Don't rush them. Silence is okay. Someone is really processing. You might ask them ‘How did your child die?’ and they tear up. You just sit and look at them. They are thinking of what they want to say. Just sit and relax and don't be nervous. Say, ‘that must have been so difficult.’”

“I always try to get some historical or social context during the interview, as in ‘Do you know the age of somebody important or tell me about the Depression. Do you remember Lindberg's flight across the Atlantic?’” There might be some local events that trigger memories.

Stuart always ends her interviews with thoughts on death. “I just look them in the eye and say, ‘You're eighty-five and you're not going to live forever. Tell me your thoughts about death.’ I just sit quiet. Elders want to talk about it, where they want to be buried, details of the funeral.”

“The spiritual and emotional aspects of death are a very important thing. Kids never want to talk about it but parents do. They just want their kids to know it's been a rich life. Talk about the afterlife or what they believe in. It's just a nice closure to the interview.”

The final questions are, “How would you like to be remembered? What life lessons would you like to be passed on to your grand children? Do you have any regrets? How would you hope your grandchildren make good use of this financial legacy you're passing down?”

Stuart calls her business “soul work.”

“People have a primal need to tell their story. I've had so many clients die within months of doing their book. There's something unfinished. They want to leave their stories behind.”

Links of Resources and Examples

Association for Personal Historians

<http://www.personalhistorians.org/>

Comedian George Carlin's legacy interview on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J05K-Fn7OSo>

"Effective Interviewing Techniques for Video Histories," by Stefani Twyford, Legacy Multimedia Blog.

<http://legacymultimedia.com/blog/2008/01/10/effective-interviewing-techniques-for-video-histories/>