

Recording Project Preserves Stories of People with Memory Loss

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"Listening is an act of love." That's the motto of StoryCorps, a nationwide oral history project, whose mission is to encourage Americans "to record one another's stories in sound." Over the past year, StoryCorps has made a special effort to include a group of Americans whose stories are at particular risk of being forgotten.

In 2003, award-winning radio producer David Isay founded the StoryCorps project, with the goal of helping ordinary Americans record each other's stories. Participants come to StoryCorps' recording booth in New York, or to one of the mobile booths that travel around the country. People can interview anyone they want (usually a close friend, or family member). A trained facilitator takes care of the technical aspects of the recording.

At the end of the session, the participants get to keep a CD of the interview, while a second copy is archived at the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC.

The project was an immediate success.

Then, in June of 2006, the StoryCorps team saw an opportunity to reach out to one specific group of Americans, whose stories are particularly vulnerable. They launched the "Memory Loss Initiative," to support the stories of people with memory loss, such as Alzheimer's patients.



Geriatric social worker Dina Zempsky is the senior outreach coordinator for the StoryCorps Memory Loss Initiative

Dina Zempsky is the senior outreach coordinator for the Memory Loss Initiative. As a geriatric social worker, she spends a lot of time with people whom she describes as "aging in a very isolated and often very sad way."

She says that she was very excited to find out about the Memory Loss Initiative, which she feels can "empower people as they age, [...] and give them joy back and a reflective way to look at their lives."

In the first year of the Memory Loss Initiative, Dina says StoryCorps recorded more than 150 interviews of people with early memory loss. As she puts it, "the response has been absolutely overwhelmingly positive, both from our participants, and also from their caregivers and their family members." Dina stresses the joy involved in giving people

with memory loss a means to evoke their special long-term memories, and to record and archive them. And, she adds, "it's been a wonderful gift to give their families as well, who are losing so much at this time."

For the relatives of people with memory loss, the desire to preserve family stories is often what draws them to StoryCorps. Maria Greenberg is 60. She interviewed her 89 year-old mother, Ilona Gabor, who is a Holocaust survivor. She thought the project was a great idea: "My mom's got so much to tell, and I really don't want that to be forgotten."

Maria admits that at first, it was a little awkward to be recorded asking her mom questions, but says that she became much more comfortable with the process over the course of the interview. And afterwards, she was "just so glad" to have participated, and to have the recording to share with her family.



Photo credit -- Maria Greenberg (2005)

Ilona Gabor (right) is a Holocaust survivor, who lived out the Nazi occupation of Hungary in hiding, in Budapest. Her daughter, Maria Greenberg (left), interviewed her for the Memory Loss Initiative



Photo credit -- Maria Greenberg (2005)

Maria Greenberg and her mother, Ilona Gabor, taken at Maria's childhood home in Fehergyarmat, Hungary

Ilona Gabor has eight great-grandchildren, Maria explains, "and they know her, so even ten years from now I can say, 'you know what this is, this is your great-grandmother, and this is her voice, and these are her stories.' I think is so incredible."

Anne Basting worked with David Isay to develop the Memory Loss Initiative. As director of the Center on Age & Community at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, she emphasizes the emotional significance of the interview process: "It's really much more about the exchange that happens in the booth, the relationship that develops, that special bonding that can happen, through really intensely listening to someone."

The Morgansterns are a perfect example. Their strong family ties are evident in the interview they recorded at the StoryCorps booth in New York City. Here, the two sisters, Priya Morganstern and Bhavani Jaroff, talk with their father, Ken Morganstern, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's five years ago.



Photo credit -- StoryCorps

Priya Morganstern and Bhavani Jaroff interviewed their father, Ken Morganstern, who has Alzheimer's disease

Priya: "Dad was there anything that you wished you had gotten in life, that you didn't get?"

Ken: "I, I'm sitting here thinking, I've no regrets on anything. The important thing is, I have a family that I love, and they are loving people. That's the biggest thing you can leave as a, as a..."

Bhavani: "Legacy." Ken: "Legacy, yeah."

Bhavani: "I want to tell you Dad, that I've always considered you my guru, and teacher."

Priya: "You've been a role model for all of your family, people are constantly saying to us how lucky you are to have all of us, and I turn to them and say, we are because of him. You've created such love around you, and we want to be with you."

StoryCorps has received funding to continue the Memory Loss Initiative for a second year, with the goal of conducting more than 400 interviews across the country.

Anne Basting believes that the project is making a real difference, not just for the participants, but for all people with memory loss: "I think that internationally, and particularly in the United States, which is such a hyper-individualist country, that there's an incredible stigma and fear of the erosion of memory being equated with the erosion of self." She says that by highlighting the dignity and humanity of people who are experiencing memory loss, the StoryCorps project is taking a crucial step in reducing that stigma.

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