



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.

Memoirs Productions Produces Gifts that Keep on Giving

by Libby J. Atwater

Memoirs Productions founder Iris Wagner discovered her life’s calling through volunteer work. “I was attending the Wexner Heritage Foundation (leadership) Program, where I was introduced to ethical wills. I suddenly had an ‘aha’ moment, realizing that this was a way to give something back to the community. The idea of preserving values, beliefs, life’s lessons, reflections, and blessings to future generations really appealed to me.”

A few years earlier, Iris had earned a graduate degree in film and communications in her native Montreal. While establishing herself in the film industry, she had become a volunteer with the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS). Her hard work and dedication eventually led her to be elected president of the board. As president, she re-branded the 50-year-old nonprofit agency and established herself as a leader.

Because of this success, Iris was nominated to attend the Wexner Heritage Foundation Program, which is considered the Rhodes

Scholarship of leadership development. Although the program called for a considerable investment of time and energy, Iris accepted the challenge.

Prior to her volunteer involvement and leadership training, Iris had spent several years in the corporate world as a banker, a financial adviser to high-technology startups, and a realtor. She was quite successful in these positions, but she felt that her creative needs were unmet. That’s when she decided to return to Concordia University, where she’d earned an undergraduate degree in finance, to pursue an advanced degree in film and communications.

While volunteering with JVS, Iris began working in the film industry, successfully launching new films with her marketing, communications, and public relations skills. Being an entrepreneur, she decided it was time to form her own film company, Memoirs Productions, to capture life stories on video. About the same time, she began attending the leadership development program where she was introduced to



Iris Wagner

the concept of ethical wills. She viewed them as the vehicles to propel her life’s work forward.

Being a person who believes that preparation is paramount, Iris sought more education on ethical wills. She took a teleclass with Rachel Freed, author of *Women’s Legacies*, *Women’s Lives*, and read *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron and *Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper* by our own Barry Baines. She then joined The Legacy Center, a nonprofit organization founded by Dr. Baines.

Armed with education, Iris used her contacts from business and volunteer work to acquire clients. “Most of my clients are referred to me,” notes Iris. “People I worked with as a volunteer have recommended me to friends who became clients. When I completed their projects, these clients referred me to others whom they thought might be interested in filming their life story or ethical will. I’ll often propose an ethical will to a prospective client, and eventually the project becomes a complete life story.”

Each production is individually priced, based upon what the client wants. This is determined by having the client fill out extensive questionnaires on his/her life and state his/her preferences regarding who will perform the interview. Each project is considered a full production, employing lighting and sound

specialists, a hairdresser, a makeup artist, a set designer, and using broadcast quality digital video cameras. “The average shoot takes 20-25 hours, and the average final edited piece is about 80 minutes. This format appeals to the next generation, who prefer to view rather than read, and are the recipients of the life story or ethical will.” In addition to the DVD, clients receive a written transcript of the final edited piece, all delivered in a carved wood box along with the unedited film footage.

“When I complete a project, we hold a premier screening in a local theater, usually between 5 and 7 p.m. The client’s entire family and close friends are invited to attend. Through this process we transfer the life story to the next generation.” Iris admits it gives her pleasure to see the family’s reaction, which has

always been positive and often leads to new referrals.

In the future Iris hopes to continue producing family histories and corporate ethical wills. “I’d like to preserve family business stories and continue to develop awareness of ethical wills as legacies of values.”

When asked what advice she’d give other personal historians who produce video memoirs and ethical wills, Iris responds, “Do your homework, and learn all aspects of your profession. Plan your business, and follow your plan. Price your products competitively, but make sure you don’t undervalue your skills and expertise. Remember that clients are buying you as much as your product; work with them, person-to-person. Above all, remember, you’ll never land on the moon if you don’t shoot for the stars.” ♦