

# Lifestyle

## Filmmaker records family histories



Arts Scene  
By HEATHER SOLOMON

Iris E. Wagner's films may not make it to the movie theatres, but they become instant classics, treasured through the generations. Just how they achieve such importance is evident from a phone call she received from Gil Troy and Linda

Adams-Troy the morning Grandma Suzy Weltman Cohen passed away.

They tearfully informed her of the death and told her that when preparing eulogy material, they had sat down to peruse the film Wagner had made. Then they thanked Wagner for "still having Grandma Suzy alive with the video."

In it, the 99-year-old matriarch speaks compellingly of her life's voyage from Braita, Romania, to Israel and thence to Canada. More than biography, the film touches the intangible of the soul. At its close, when Grandma Suzy opens her arms and says, "I love you all," even someone who's never met her can feel the warmth and light that defined this special woman.

Since 2000, when Wagner founded her ethical will and video biography company Memoirs Productions, she's been making films for families who want to preserve their ethical wills for posterity.

"Ethical wills have nothing to do with your financial assets. They set out your values, beliefs, lessons you learned in life, things that are important to you, and blessings and wishes for loved ones that you want to pass along," says the filmmaker. "It's important to leave a legacy of who you are and how you accomplished what you did in life. That's an inspiration to everyone."

She first heard of ethical wills when she was asked to write one herself while on a retreat organized by the Wexner Heritage Foundation, which had chosen her as one of their leadership scholarship recipients.

"We were mostly in our 30s at the time and asked each other, 'What are we writing a will for?' Then they gave us an article by rabbi Jack Reiner and Nathaniel Stamper explaining the concept. I don't have children and I'm not married, so I wrote it to my nieces and nephews and was totally transformed."

It affected her so much that she decided to take the graduate degree in communications she'd earned at Concordia University in the late '90s and point her creativity in the direction of this very personal and meaningful form of filmmaking.

Wagner has developed a pre-production process for her Legacy



Iris E. Wagner preserves family memories and the personalities of beloved relatives with her *Memoirs Productions*.  
[Heather Solomon photo]

of Values-Spiritual Ethical Wills films: about eight note-taking interviews are done with the subject to establish the stories that will be told to the camera.

She then crafts a script that establishes the sequence, and brings in a broadcast crew to film four hours of footage that will be condensed and edited to 30 to 40 minutes. It's akin to the A&E *Biography* TV program except that the narrator is not a disembodied voice, but the subject of the film.

In post-production, family photos, graphics and music are integrated into the whole, while a photo album and family tree are collated as feature add-ons.

An Heirloom Edition is an expanded documentary version, following the subjects to their place of work, home(s) and favourite leisure activities. Then there's the Corporate Archival Edition that focuses on a business story, such as the film Alvin Segal commissioned to document the development of Peerless Clothing Inc. and the values and strategies that brought about its success.

Communicating with CEOs is not at all daunting for Wagner whose father was a gold jewelry importer and distributor. Around the dinner table, he would talk economics, business and the price of gold.

"It gave me a sense of what's important to entrepreneurs, which allows me to engage them in conversations about how they did it," she says.

Her career history includes a finance degree that led to the Royal Bank of Canada head office, a stint in real estate and a dozen years with Jewish Vocational Services where she discovered her love of communications and decided to pursue it in a master's degree.

A film on the illustrious life of champion Canadian figure skater Louis Rubenstein was snapped up by the National Film Board of Canada for world-wide distribution, and one of her more unusual films, *Legends of the Gaspé*, will be screened the evening of Sept. 4 at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Shalom Sisterhood/Brotherhood's annual general meeting.

Dr. Robert Levine, retired general surgeon at the Jewish General Hospital, has given permission to show this story of his family's 100 years in the Gaspé from 1840 to 1940, showing why Jews settled there and how they not only survived but flourished.

"It's a lovely reflection of the family and the lore as he was told [it] by his great-uncle and mother," says Wagner. "We researched material from museums, the government, and were very fortunate that filmmaker Ina Fichman agreed to provide us with B-rolls from her film *Towards a Promised Land* that had footage of the Hyman-Levine stores and homesteads in the Gaspé."

Excerpts from her films may be seen on her website at [www.memoirs.ca](http://www.memoirs.ca).