



A Hallmark of Video Style

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From the time she was a little girl and could write, Iris Wagner would put together birthday card poems for family and friends recounting what they had done the previous year.

"My mother used to tell me: you should work for Hallmark [Cards] because your birthday poem cards are always so cute and sweet - and funny. Now I am doing that in my own way. I guess I've always been focused on documenting people's life stories."

Wagner, who was born and raised and continues to reside in Montreal, Canada, is founder and executive producer of Memoirs Productions. The company produces video biographies and ethical wills for individuals, corporations and family foundations in Canada and the US, intended to serve as a legacy for future generations. It was fully registered at the end of 2000, with its first production in February 2001.

An ethical will is a legacy tool where an individual expresses their own values and beliefs, lessons learned, things that are important to them and sometimes their

wishes for loved ones, explains Wagner.

"Very often ethical wills can include reflections on different aspects of their lives that helped them learn new things or acknowledge mentors that they may have had. It has nothing to do with your financial assets - it's only your spiritual assets. It can include asking for forgiveness, or perhaps imparting family secrets, it can also have to do with burial requests. At Memoirs, we don't focus on the end of life. We focus strictly on really reflecting on past life experiences and where you came from," she furthers, noting: "To be honest, a lot of people mix up the term ethical will - thinking it has something to do with you dying, or what should happen to your body if you are incapacitated and in the hospital, which is really a living will."

Wagner has had a couple of eureka moments on her path. One was a leadership retreat in Utah, sponsored by The Wexner Foundation. She had been selected to take part in the program in July 1998. One of the first exercises participants were required to do was to write their own ethical will, addressing it to loved ones. Serving as her first introduction to the term 'ethical will,' Wagner says she was quite taken with the experience.

"I said 'wow, I have values? I have things I stand up for? I have lessons I have learned from in my life and I can impart them to my family?'"

That was the first moment.

Around the same time, Wagner was wrapping up her graduate program at Concordia University where she was studying film and communications and had already mentally made the decision that she wanted to make movies that mattered.



During this period, Wagner decided to do the 12-week plan that corresponds to Julia Cameron's self help book, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, designed to unleash the creative spirit.

"One day I was doing something called Morning Pages - it's like journaling early in the morning. I was doodling very early and I wrote: 'memo to Iris.' My pen had skipped on the t and the second i and when I looked down on the page it read: 'Memoirs.'

This was the second.

Wagner's first client was a gentleman whom she had previously been acquainted with; an avid philanthropist who was just starting his own family office, having sold part of his business. Wagner pitched him her idea, viewing him as a man with a great story - someone who started with nothing - and she personally wanted to create a video for his children. Politely declining and with Wagner a few steps from the door, she inquired about his parents.

This was the true turning point for the business. The man, who was 51 at the time, suggested that she film his parents, keenly sizing this up as her business model.

"Don't go to a fifty year-old and ask them to produce their own memoirs, go to them about their parents - to preserve it for the next generation -- it's a no-brainer," he told her. Wagner adds: "And that's how I started - and have never looked back."

The videos Wagner and her team of producers, directors, broadcast journalists, directors of photography/camera persons, lighting and sound technicians, make up and hair stylists, editors, special effects editors, graphics and professional musicians have a sort of A&E style flair, particularly the Heirloom productions (as there are different types of services, including donor and legacy of value options). These involve months of research and incorporate an individual's history, a family business and family history, with those involved sifting through historical information. They are often shot in different

locations, perhaps in various homes, a place of business. It entails several shoot days with multiple family members recalling the fabric of their life. The result is a roughly 90-minute documentary video to be shared and passed along with family members.

Wagner speaks warmly about some of the people she has recorded, her own memories made in the process. Some stories are funny, others sad, secrets getting revealed in the process.

One favorite humorous memory, which actually helped Wagner refine her process, occurred after the premiere of the video (it's something that always ensues in the form of a rented private screening room and a family gathering). One of the stories in the video recalled how the grandfather - one of the main subjects - fell into a river near his home at the age of eight. After the lights turned back on, the video now finished, his eight year-old grandson innocently inquired why his friend didn't simply call his mother on his cell phone and ask for help. The story took place in 1933. After that incident, Wagner incorporated a "life and times" theme in all of her videos.

She says the process can be quite therapeutic for some of the participants as well.

During a standard pre-interview with a husband and wife, the wife spoke of one of their sons who committed suicide at the age of 19 and how her husband had never spoken of his since his death in 1971.

On camera, the wife told of the tragedy surrounding her son's death; how he had been kidnapped by a cult while backpacking with friends. During the time of his kidnapping, somehow he managed to get to a pay phone and on a couple of occasions begged for his parents to help get him out. They did, hiring detectives and had planned to bust into the compound where he was being held in - the father and those aiding him residing at a motel a mile away. The morning of the planned break-in, their son had killed himself.

When Wagner began interviewing the husband, the



cameras rolling, she threw out a few questions she asks of all of her male interviewees: what was it like to become a father for the first time? How many children do you have and what are their names?

"Within a minute he mentioned his two other children that are alive and then paused taking a deep breath, and said: and then there was Billy," she recounts.

The interview was raw; the husband talking about his life from the day he was born until his untimely death - and how he had failed to save him.

"Our crew was crying - it was so moving...he had this whole cathartic experience on camera. He had never mentioned his name, never talked about him until that day. It was very powerful," she adds.

And with the stories living on through these videos, their power to assist continuity within a family is magnified.

The deliverable is primarily a DVD, though now Memoirs Productions is set up to do anything -- even to provide a digital hard drive to every client.

The company is designing a proprietary website for one client at present. Each family member will have a private user name and password and will be site secure. That could be the way of the future, though nothing has been formalized.

When asked what her legacy would be, Wagner forthrightly points to Memoir Productions: "I don't find this work. It's really a calling for me."

She notes that she has already been approached by the Canadian National Archives, the Canadian equivalent to the US Library of Congress. They have requested her to give them all of the master videos of the productions she has done to store them in perpetuity as Wagner has worked with some very prominent Canadians. That will entail obtaining permission from clients, though she says no matter the decision, the National Archives will still want to preserve them "just to have them because they

really are valuable stories -- and it's personal history, which is everyone's own truth."

Wagner adds: "Every production I do is a gift of legacy that we have created for every family that has hired us. So they are hopefully going to pass down those legacies. That's where I feel really good about the work that we do."