



Luxury Living

Preserving Your Family History

Leverage technology to pass along your family legacy – the stories that define your family.

You likely take great care and devote significant planning to how you will transfer your wealth to family members and loved ones. Are you taking the same care to preserve your family legacy – the history, stories and beliefs that define your family and its members – for generations to come?

“The oldest generation has experienced extraordinary historical events that have tested their limits – and they learned to cope, survive and thrive. Often, they have come through life’s challenges happier than younger people,” says Karl Andrew Pillemer, professor at Cornell University, [gerontologist](#) and author of *30 Lessons for Living*. “What better source of advice for living for the rest of us?”



Rather than simply transferring their legacy face-to-face or by word of mouth, today many families leverage technology to capture stories that otherwise would be lost when the oldest generation dies.

Your Legacy in Lights

“Every person receives wisdom from his or her own life story. That’s why every person has a life story that’s worth preserving,” says Iris Wagner, who launched [Memoirs Productions](#) in 2000 to enable clients to pass along their legacy firsthand on camera.

Through Legacies of Values™ videos, which are ethical wills – not legal documents – clients reflect on their beliefs, lessons learned and important messages for loved ones. On the other hand, in video biographies, clients share their life stories and family origins.

“No matter how talented the writer or how well-written the book, you can’t see tears on a page and you can’t see the expression of someone as they talk about their mother or father with such love in their eyes,” Wagner says.

She encourages her clients to share their videos with children and age-appropriate grandchildren during life rather than after it. “The videos become a thread tying together multiple generations – strengthening communication and understanding,” she says.

For example, some of her clients have used video ethical wills to ask children for forgiveness for working long hours while trying to build a business and consequently missing out on baseball games and dance recitals.

One of Wagner’s youngest clients contacted her to produce a video ethical will after his best friend was killed in attacks on the World Trade Center. “This client had three young kids, and he worried that if that had happened to him, his kids would never have known who he was,” she says.

Perhaps the most moving video experience involved a philanthropic family whose foundation donates significant funds to fight juvenile diabetes every year without fail. “My client’s daughter told me, ‘My brothers and sisters and I sit on the family foundation board but have no idea why we give to juvenile diabetes.’ As far as they knew, no one in the family had been affected by the disease,” Wagner says.

On camera, Wagner asked the usually stoic and poised client about the annual donation, and his eyes immediately

welled up in tears as he recounted a story never before told to his children. The year the client was born, his older brother died of juvenile diabetes; his mother died a few years later. “My client’s aunts told him his mother never recovered from the loss of his brother. So from the time he started working at 18, he vowed to give part of his salary and business’ profits every year to juvenile diabetes,” Wagner says.

Family Stories on the Web

As a gerontologist, Pillemer focused much of his research over the past 25 years on the problems of aging – Alzheimer’s disease and elder abuse, for example. “I kept meeting older people who had lost loved ones, been through tremendous difficulties and had serious health problems – and still were happy, fulfilled and deeply enjoying life,” says Pillemer. “One day it hit me: Maybe older people know things that younger people don’t about living a happy, fulfilling life.”

He set out to pass along the practical wisdom of older generations to younger ones. In 2010, he launched the [Legacy Project](#) website, which houses advice from more than 1,500 older individuals on topics ranging from how to have a successful career to the secrets to a happy marriage. The Legacy Project also encompasses a [YouTube channel](#) on which Pillemer posts video testimonials from these individuals.

“As I was writing *30 Lessons for Living*, I realized how many great lessons I had that could not all fit in one book,” Pillemer says. “I worried that so much wisdom would wind up on the cutting room floor, so I introduced the website to make available all of these stories.”

In addition to videos, Memoirs Productions creates secure websites for families to share pictures and stories with one another. These websites make family stories accessible to all, not just a select few. “In the past, one person had that photo of great-great-grandma,” Wagner says. “But we all came from great-great-grandma, so why should only one person have the photo? Now, everyone can share it.”

Bringing Together the Generations

Whether through videos or websites, technology can link the oldest generation to the youngest one.

To share the video legacy with the next generations – especially the youngest family members who may be the most impressionable – Wagner hosts premiere nights for clients in private screening rooms, complete with popcorn, champagne and flowers.

“A typical teenaged grandchild will always remember the night he or she went to the special movie theater and saw grandma’s or grandpa’s movie,” she says. “Because it’s such a memorable event, the younger generations won’t soon forget the stories passed down in the videos.”

August 2014