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Tree of Life Legacies Doing more for families than just telling stories

By Sophie Braccini



April Bell interviews Dennis Erokan in her studio. Photo Sophie Braccini

father of Richard Carlson, the best-selling author of "Don't Sweat The Small Stuff" who died at age 45, adds it is not necessary to share the most painful memories. "You have to be selective about what you choose."

Coming from the publishing industry, Bell wanted to reinvent herself and decided that becoming a personal historian and creating videos captured all the elements she wanted in her professional life. "I love people and their stories; I am creative and technical at the same time," she says. "Starting Tree of Life Legacies encompasses it all."

Her style and skills are very much appreciated by her clients. "The process was easy," remembers Cliff Dochterman of Moraga, who worked with Bell five years ago. "We sat down in my living room and talked for four hours; she is a very personable interviewer and puts people at ease. Then she did a terrific job of editing our conversation, producing a 35-minute documentary that captured the essence of what we wanted to do." The movie was commissioned by one of his fellow Rotarians to document Dochterman's experience as president of Rotary International at the peak of the worldwide campaign to eradicate polio. The video has now been seen by Rotarians all over the world.

"I do projects for families, for companies, for groups like the Walnut Creek Historical Society," says Bell. "Sometimes I am hired by children who want me to interview their parents, or by individuals who want to share a legacy." She sets a pre-interview appointment where she determines the scope and purpose of the video, then prepares a set of questions before starting the actual taping.

Editing the video is "an involved process that can become a bit costly," says Bell, "and since I believe it is so important for generations to share their stories, I looked for a way to make it more affordable." And she did. With partner Urs Brauchli she developed a \$2.99 iPhone app called StoryCatcher that was released in 2013.

"I used the app on my phone and created this little narrative about how I met my wife," says longtime Lafayette resident Dennis Erokan, founder of BAM Magazine who met Bell at a Lafayette Chamber of Commerce meeting. "Then I shared the story with one of my daughters." He said that his daughter was so moved that she started to cry; she had never heard the whole story.

The app allows people to record a video approximately two minutes long; users can access templates, if they want, to add pictures and subtitles, and create a very nice and professional looking product that can be shared with others.

"The app allows you to string together many of these shorts," says Bell. "My recommendation would be to take one question at a time, like: Who was the most influential person you met? Or, where were you born? What was the best trip you ever took? And construct a real portrait." Bell sees uses of the app for weddings, travel, great thoughts ... the list is endless and is only limited by people's imagination.

"Everyone has a legacy, everyone's life is interesting, whether they were presidents or had simpler lives," concluded Carlson. "Everyone should capture it before it's too late and pass it on to the next generation."

For information about Tree of Life Legacies, visit aprilbell.com or call (925) 465-5359.

A study by two psychologists, Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush, who worked with children of 9/11 victims, concluded that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, and the higher their self-esteem. Developing a strong narrative by documenting stories from the family is something Lafayette resident and businesswoman April Bell started to do six years ago, and with the help of a new app, she is making it even easier and more affordable.

One of Bell's clients is Orinda resident Don Carlson. "Only one of my grandmothers lived with us, but I didn't know much about my other grandparents and I regret it," Carlson says. "Now (in my 80s) I have great grandchildren and I want to pass my history on to them."

Bell interviewed Carlson and created two half-hour documentaries for him, one about his life and one about his company. "Most older people have experience and have learned a few things along the way," he adds. "It is important to share the good [memories] and the mistakes on the video; you never want to lie, especially about the mistakes you wished you never made." Carlson, who is the

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