

A Great Gift

BY ESTHER EHRLICH '83

So here's a story. For six years, I worked at one of the country's most prestigious university oral history programs. Although I didn't have my Ph.D. — a fact that distressed our very academically oriented director — I'd learned how to "contextualize" my interviews within "broader research agendas," to stud my speech, when necessary, with "paradigms" and "subjectivity." I'd even scored a competitive grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a coup for the university.

I loved the intellectual aspect of my work. I loved discovering, again and again, that almost anything becomes interesting when you look at it closely enough. I had, for example, recently completed an interview with an executive at a medical malpractice insurance company. In preparation I'd had to pore over stacks of documents filled with statistics — not the stuff that this woman, who still counts on her fingers when adding up her scrabble score, considered compelling. But over time, I was fascinated to see how the nitty-gritty details merged into a multilayered drama that is the history of organized medicine.

But even as my brain was engaged, I had a secret. Although I could talk academic theory with the best of them, my reason for doing the work was simple — and not at all cerebral. I believe in people's stories. I believe that people's stories matter, that it's in the telling of and listening to each other's stories that we discover in some vital way what it means to be human. And isn't this what life is about, exploring that richness and trying to make good choices about how we live?

Even more dastardly to admit, in an atmosphere of academic prowess — I loved my work because of love. By the end of every interview, I felt a deep sense of connection with my narrator. Touched. Moved. It didn't seem to make a difference who the narrator was or what subject we were focusing on. I might be interviewing an 84-year-old woman with a sixth-grade education about her role as a factory worker in California during World War II or a hip, thirty-something New York artist about his experiences as a disabled performer. Each interview had its own special alchemy, a mysterious process that reached inside and grabbed me. Something always happened to my heart simply through the act of asking thoughtful questions and listening carefully to the answers.

I noticed that I was not the only one experiencing this magic. With the camera off, narrators expressed how profound it was to tell their story. "I really didn't think I had anything worthwhile to say," one

elderly woman said, her typically dour face flushed with excitement by the end of our interview. A man — an artist with a serious neurological disease that made talking difficult — described our interview as "a great gift." Narrators often seemed hesitant for me to leave. A woman, who had cataracts and was unsteady on her feet, insisted on walking me to the door and waiting while I loaded up my video equip-

ment. "Now you buckle up," she called to me. As I drove away, I saw her clutching the doorframe with one hand and waving with the other. And the insurance executive asked gruffly, "Do you own your home yet?" and when I confessed that I rented, suggested that he give me ongoing financial guidance.

After completing my NEA-funded project, I was ready to leave the university. I no longer wanted to interview only people deemed "worthy" by university research standards. I was ready to "come clean" with my belief, a belief fueled, perhaps, by the fact that my mother, Shelley Stendig Ehrlich '53, died just a few years after I graduated from Vassar, and I still carry an empty space inside for her never-told stories: everyone has a story worth telling. We need to capture these stories and pass them on as legacies to future generations.

And now I'm doing my part. Recently, I launched Story Lines, a life histories company. We listen deeply and then craft heirloom-quality books and video portraits for individuals, families, and businesses.

Who is the "we" of Story Lines? At 45, I've finally met my true love. Neal just happens to be a gifted video producer, who, along with his two children, is showing me more than I ever could have imagined about what it means to love. But that, of course, is another story. 

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