

Give Your Family And Yourself The Gift Of Reminiscence

Throughout human history a community or culture's older people have been the repositories of its collective life story. Whether through grandparents telling grandchildren of how they survived through tragedy or through more formal oral tradition, humans have an innate need to hear their history from those who have lived it.

Bedford's seniors have seen two World Wars, a Depression, and the growth of Bedford from a small rural village to the populous, industrial town it is today. Bedford's elders hold in their memories not only experience of life when it was significantly different from now, but also community and family history that, if not captured, could be lost forever.

If you are a Bedford senior, why not give yourself and your family the gift of your memories this holiday season? If you are a younger relative of a Bedford elder, give the gift of listening to and valuing the memories of your family member.

Preserving a Personal History

Over the past ten years the importance of reminiscing for both the older person and their communities and families has been well documented. Studies have shown that older people who spend time remembering their lives, putting events into perspective and bringing new light to things that happened decades ago, are happier and healthier than those who try to "put the past behind them." It is an essential task of older age to review both the important and what may seem to be unimportant events and decisions and discover how they may reveal a life's work or mission, to use the greater understanding of older age to forgive those who may have caused pain in the past, and to look where you have been in order to better determine where you need to go during your older years.

Oral history projects, in which younger people question older people about their lives and record the information as history, have been successfully conducted with those who live in their own homes as well as those who reside in nursing homes. Even elders who may have trouble remembering recent events frequently have a very detailed recall of the past. Here are some hints to help you and your family make the most of your time reminiscing:

* Remember that when you reminisce you are interpreting what you have lived through, not trying to recall exact historical facts. If you get a year or a name wrong, it doesn't matter. A reminiscence is a blend of historical fact and the personality of the person remembering. Each person perceives each experience through their own life and memories become shaded as the years pass. This adds meaning beyond the purely objective facts. A history book can tell you what happened. Only a participant can tell you what it meant for those who experienced the event, and then only by expressing their memory through their own eyes.

* When reminiscing, enjoy and explore the sidetracks. If your memories of your Aunt's earrings that you wore at your wedding lead into memories of the wonderfully loud ties worn by your uncle, have a good laugh and then capture some memories of his

perpetually mismatched socks before going back to the matrimonial solemnities. Our memories are built in such a way that one memory naturally leads to another. However, the paths are not straight and trying to keep strictly to a line of thought will inhibit the flow of memories.

* Reminiscing can be done alone, but it is more fun if done with someone, especially someone younger who will show immediately that what may be a commonplace, uninteresting memory for the rememberer is a fascinating insight into the past for others. Recording has been done successfully by simply writing what the rememberer says word for word, tape recording, or videotaping.

* Whoever records the memory, most formal reminiscence projects have found that it is best to start with a list of questions. You may wish to follow this outline, adapted from "Reminiscence: Finding Meaning in Memories," published by the AARP:

- What is your name?
- What is your birth date?
- How long have you lived in Bedford/did you live in Bedford?
- If you were not born here, how did you come to move here?
- What was your childhood home like? Describe the street you lived on.
- What were your neighbors like when you were growing up?
- What is your earliest memory?
- What are some of your favorite memories as a child?
- What are some of your memories -- good and bad -- of school?
- How did you meet your spouse? What was your courtship like?
- How did you get married?
- What role has religion played in your life?
- Did you spend time in the service? Where? What did you do?
- What is your most vivid memory of your time in the service?
- What are some of the things your neighborhood did together when you were a young adult?
- What are some of the community events or efforts you participated in?
- What was your first Town Meeting like?
- What kinds of things did you and your spouse face together?
- What was the most interesting period of history you lived through?
- What is the most difficult thing you have lived through? How did you live through it?
- What is your proudest professional accomplishment?
- What one event would you say has changed Bedford the most from when you first lived here?
- What would you like those who live in Bedford in the future to know?

* Once you have compiled your or your family member's memories, why not put them into a book, audio tape, or video tape and distribute them to other family members as a holiday gift?