

Safekeeping Family Stories:

Connect Your Children to Their Past, Provide Them With a Key to The Future

By Caroline Sarkozi

It all started with a box of newspaper clippings, letters, and photos that she received from her father. “It was the kind of stuff I couldn’t throw away, and approaching it felt overwhelming,” recalled Jill Purdy Sarkozi, founder of Safekeeping Stories and developer of Storykeeping, a modern and practical method for preserving family stories. “My parents had divorced and remarried when I was young. We didn’t talk about the past, so I didn’t know much about my father’s side of the family.”

A Surprise Discovery

Jill grew up in Tennessee, and was surprised to find a number of parallels to her life in Westchester as she went through the family materials. For starters, she learned that her grandparents had lived walking distance from her current house in Larchmont, and that the Purdy family had lived in Westchester for generations. “Until then, I had always thought I was a Southerner who was relatively new to the area,” Jill laughed. The Rye Historical Society told her about the Purdy family gravesite off Milton Road and she visited the graves of family members dating back to the 1700s. “Suddenly, I felt more connected to my roots. I saw a reflection of their lives in mine and it gave deeper meaning to my life choices.”

Jill was eager to make sure her four children wouldn’t have to search to find their family stories. “I felt a responsibility to share with them what I knew about who and where they came from, and hoped it would give them a deeper understanding of what it

means to be in our family.”

But while Jill had learned some interesting things from the box of memories, she realized she didn’t have all the facts when she tried to put the stories together— and there were no family members around anymore who knew the answers to her questions. She thought that the only way she could tell the story was by doing more research and working on her writing skills. She took up genealogy, worked on several local history projects, and took classes on memoir writing. But after a while she realized she would never find all the details she wanted in public records, and she didn’t need particular writing skills to tell these stories to her family. In fact, all of the additional work had made her feel further from her story. “I stopped looking for my story somewhere outside of me and decided it was time to take a look closer to home,” she explained.

She knew the process could be so much simpler. “I didn’t need to write a 50-page biography. I didn’t want to write it, and my kids wouldn’t want to read it. I wanted something short and full of meaning. I didn’t have all the history, but I had more than enough information to capture the essence of my family.” She began jotting lists in her notebook – sayings her parents had repeated, family keepsakes that were important to her, anecdotes that she remembered being

shared over and over again. Then, she gave herself a word limit. “I wrote what I knew and included my reflections, which I thought would be of value to my children. I realized that in a few weeks and 10 pages, I could leave a legacy.” Safekeeping Stories now teaches others the process for doing just that.

An Easy Path to Saving Family Stories

Most of Jill’s clients are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, which is the perfect vantage point for preserving a family’s personal history. Jill explained, “If you capture key events and experiences from your life and that of your parents, you’ve preserved two generations. If you know something about your grandparents, you’ve preserved three. Give what



you’ve written to your children, and you’ve put your future grandchildren in touch with 100 years of their family’s history!”

And as it turns out, one of the most import-

ant things you can do to create emotional wellness in your family is develop a strong family narrative. According to research from Emory University's Family Narratives Lab, children who have a multi-generational understanding of their family have lower anxiety, higher self-esteem, and greater well-being.

Finding Meaning and Connection Across the Generations

What distinguishes Storykeeping from memoir-writing classes is that you don't have to be a writer to get your stories down on paper for your children. Ellen Kaidanow of Harrison took the workshop in 2016. "I did some jotting in my notebook, and was guided to identify events and experiences to explore. From there, the writing came easier and was less time-consuming than I had thought it would be."

A fundamental goal of Storykeeping is to bring meaning to family experiences. Debby Ziering of Greenwich also took the workshop in 2016. "I had heard stories throughout my life, but didn't really know what they meant to me as an adult, and as a mother. I walked away from the workshop with a deeper understanding of myself and what it means to be a part of my family."

Jill seeks to make the workshop accessible to all. "You don't have to be a Rockefeller or a Kennedy to have a multi-generational understanding of who you are. That kind of emotional wealth is available to anyone, no matter what your circumstances have been."

Ellen and Debby were so taken by their experience in the workshop and Jill's passion and enthusiasm that they trained to become Safekeeping Stories facilitators. "I really enjoy guiding others to have the life-changing experience that I had," remarked Ellen.

Preserving History One Family Story at a Time: Safekeeping Stories of the Holocaust

Safekeeping Stories developed a special Storykeeping workshop for the Holocaust & Human Rights Education Center in White Plains that is designed specifically for family members of Holocaust survivors. To date, about 100 men and women who are family members of Holocaust survivors in Westchester and Connecticut have taken the workshop. Many have found the process to be healing. Through the Center's GenerationsForward Speakers Bureau, these family members of survivors are now sharing their family's story in educational and community settings. The project was particularly meaningful for Jill as her father-in-law is a Holocaust survivor. "Our goal is to help as many family members as possible preserve these important stories of history," Jill said. "We have three facilitators leading workshops this fall, including Ellen and Debby, who have preserved their family's Holocaust stories as well."

"It has been an honor and privilege to capture stories of families – sometimes entire branches of families – that were wiped out," reflected Ellen. "We guide family members to connect to their survivor's life before the war." Debby explains, "The family's pre-war life seems to have been lost and obliterated, but through the Safekeeping Stories of the Holocaust workshop, we restore dignity to the life that was. We write short descriptions of family life – the ways they had fun and laughed, the food that was enjoyed around the table – many survivors were children at the time. The smallest detail can recreate an entire world. I find it so rewarding to see the impact on those who've been able to rescue their past and

rebuild their future."

Ellen adds, "It's been particularly meaningful to me to not only show family members of survivors how to chronicle these painful stories of the past, but to also help them see and give voice to the hope, resilience, humor, and humanity that is alive and present in the family."

Jill sums it up by saying, "Anyone can create a legacy of meaning about their family. It doesn't take long to write, and it shouldn't take long to read. The people who take our workshops craft their stories in just a handful of pages, but those handful of pages provide a legacy and foundation that enrich generations to come."

If you capture key events and experiences from your life and that of your parents, then you've preserved two generations. If you know something about your grandparents, you've preserved three. Give what you've written to your children, and you've put your future grandchildren in touch with 100 years of their family's history!

Visit the website and subscribe to "Discover your Story" to receive free Storykeeping guidance and be the first to know when workshops open for registration. Workshops are small group experiences so spaces are limited – being on the email list is a good way to secure a spot.