

A Family Story is a Gift



**A GUIDE
TO SAVING
FAMILY STORIES**

“The stories that are passed down from one generation to the next, must be captured for posterity, not only so we may better understand and acknowledge the obstacles family members who have come before us have encountered in their lives, but also to truly appreciate and celebrate their accomplishments, which serve to inspire generations that follow.”

D. Antonio Cantu, executive director
Illinois Council for the Social Studies, Bradley University

Generations Serving Generations (GSG), it is a longtime public/private partnership with a history of connecting generations and organizations through civic engagement in service, learning and work. The leadership for Generations Serving Generations includes Dr. Jane Angelis, *Continuance Magazine*; Scott McFarland, executive director, *Serve Illinois Commission* and Dr. John Holton, *Concordia University Center for Gerontology*. Members include Peggy Luce, *Luce Consulting*; Louis Kosiba, *Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund*; Melinda LaBarre, *Illinois State Board of Education*; Pat Bearden, *American Family History Institute*; John Hosteny, *Corporation for National and Community Service*; Dr. Darlene Ruscitti, *DuPage Regional Office of Education*; Jacqui Moreno and Eduardo Brambila, *Illinois Student Assistance Commission*; Joyce Gallagher, *Chicago Area Agency on Aging*; Tony Pierce, *Heaven's View Christian Fellowship*; Jenne Meyers, *Chicago Cares*; Jonathan Lackland, *Illinois State University*; Jennifer Reif, *Illinois Department on Aging*, Fred Nettles, *Partner For Hope Program, Illinois Dept. of Human Services*; Doug Brauer, *Richland Community College*; Onie Riley, *African-American Heritage Center*; Brandon Bodor, *board member, Serve Illinois Foundation*; Matthew John Rodriguez, *P-20 Council and Illinois PTA*; Isabella Martinez and Jacqueline Martinez, *Netwings*; Natalie Furlett, *Illinois Campus Compact*; Nisan Chavkin, *Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago*; Rosie Drumgole, *Volunteer Connectors and Chicago Cares*; Arthur Sutton, *Illinois Board of Higher Education*; Susan Drone, *Illinois Community College Board*; Mark DePue, *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*; Bernie Wong, *Chinese American Service League*, and Kelia Beck and William Coussens, *Serve Illinois Commission*.

**When you write or record a family story and save it,
you give a priceless gift for generations to come.**

A Family Story is a Gift



A challenge to Gen Z and Gen Y:
Share your amazing talents for writing and
recording events and stories.

For all generations:
Leaf through the guide and then develop a
strategy to preserve your family stories.

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Gather Your Stories before It Is Too Late!

How often have you said to yourself, “I must take time to learn more about my great-grandparents,” or “I have been meaning to talk to my parents and grandparents about their lives when they were young. . . .” “One of these days I will. . . .”

All through our lives we hear and enjoy family stories, but too often we don’t make a record of the story. We look at photo albums and talk about the picture of great-grandmother on horseback and funny experiences with Thanksgiving dinner, but forget to label the photos or write the stories. The years pass by, and we find that the storytellers have gone.



Develop a plan or strategy for saving your family stories. Younger generations are experts at recording, taking photos, and storing information on their many devices. Develop a plan or strategy for collecting a story or two and watch it expand. Make a call to one of your family members and ask a question about their past. Start a family page on FaceBook and encourage members to share stories.

All generations can share their family stories and in the process, learn more about one another.

*A challenge to Gen Z and Gen Y:
Enrich your family history by sharing
your amazing talents for taking
photos, texting, and recording events.
Involve older generations by asking
questions and encouraging them to
tell their stories.*



What Is Your Generation?

Greatest Generation: Born before 1922

Silent Gen./Matures /GI: Born 1922-1945

Boomers: Born 1946-1964

Generation X: Born 1965-1980

Generation Y: Born 1981-2000

Generation Z: Born 2000 - present

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About Family Stories

As a nation, we value our family stories because they connect our history to the present and often give us direction for the future. Throughout the long history of our country, the role of family has been central to the strength and resourcefulness of the community. The stories of families and their contributions to one another are the threads that have woven the fabric of American democracy.

Today the family is defined in many ways and may have a variety of members. Family stories focus on life passages, victories and defeats, memories that are meaningful, and the ordinary day-to-day life.

Migration

Everyone Came from Someplace



Students and members of Gen Y examine a poster about the migration patterns to Illinois. “My ancestors came from Italy said Claudia. Her classmate responded, “My grandparents migrated from Mexico long before I was born.”

Every American is descended from ancestors who came from another country or continent. Even Native Americans, many of whom have lived in North American for 10,000 years, originally came across the Siberian peninsula.

“Over the past 200 years, nearly 50 million people have left their homelands to live in the U.S. This has been the greatest movement of people from one place to another in world history. Someone in your family was probably among them” (Do People Grow on Family Trees?).

Pat Bearden, a family historian, describes a photo that has been passed down from generation to generation. The photo has been patched and repaired. She said, "It is precious to me because it represents my past. On my father's 85th birthday I asked him about my family history. He was cantankerous and said, 'Why do you want to know that?' I said, 'Because it's about me!'



Bearden, co-author of *History Comes Home* tells about the migration of her family and her roots--African, Native American, and Irish. In her Chicago Public Schools classroom, she shared pictures of her great-grandmother Fredonia and other ancestors, some who were light skinned, some dark, some in-between.

When asked, "Aren't you afraid of what you might find?" Bearden said, "Yes, I was afraid." She continued, "No, I'm not afraid now. We all have skeletons in our family closets. We all have things in our past that we would rather not have happened. But here we are. This is a celebration! Wherever we are from and whatever we've been through, it's just who we are. The more we look back, the more we can say, 'Wasn't that something?'"

**"Remember your roots, your history, and the forebears'
shoulders on which you stand."**

Marion Wright Edelman

Volunteering and Service

Teach For America AmeriCorps members serve students and schools throughout the country. Their family histories often focus on stories about their service, particularly incidents that helped them understand the importance of volunteers to community life.



One of the characteristics of American democracy is the sense of community and neighbors helping neighbors. Volunteers are everywhere, in schools, communities, the workplace, giving something of themselves and often saying, “I get more out of this than I give.” Some of the most memorable family stories feature the spirit of service when neighbors helped neighbors with daily needs and in time of crisis.

The service of veterans is a story for many families. WWII was an extraordinary time when a nation came together to support the war effort. Although fewer than 1 percent of citizens serve in the military today, in WWII roughly 10 percent of all Americans served. The desire for more young people to have a national service experience has produced new momentum toward AmeriCorps and National Service.

The stories about Veterans from all wars continue to be touchstones for understanding American history and family history.

Learning and Work

Students from Lake County High Schools Technology Campus represent a variety of occupations that are at the heart of America's workforce. As part of the Career and Technical Education program, the students apply their classroom learning to real world settings that help people and solve problems.



Family stories provide interesting recollections about work. What was your first job? What were your responsibilities? Did you know what you wanted to do when you finished school? Did you have a part-time job as a teen? When younger generations reflect on the changes in the classroom and the workplace, the questions and answers help them understand work traditions. Teachers, professors and business leaders agree that communication skills such as interviewing, listening, writing, reading—the same skills used for gathering family stories—are important to success in school and preparation for a career.

When older family members talk about work, they also bring stories about work ethic that was often a strong motivator in their careers. Elders have many ideas that provide their view of success and failure that bring great stories. “I always got to work on time.” “Obstacles are opportunities in disguise.” “There is no failure except no longer trying.”

Family and Community Gatherings

Everyone loves a good story, particularly when it is about a family tradition or ancestor who might be memorable or tainted with scandal. So when families congregate, it is a golden opportunity to explore family roots, ask questions about memories of older members about their talents, work, ideas, and values. If the stories are written or recorded, they will be remembered from generation to generation.

Community organizations including faith groups, clubs, sports, and other entities also gather from time to time for socialization, sharing a pot luck, a victory or making plans. Many of these events are based on how communities work together, solve problems and create traditions. Many communities have history groups that record the progress and call attention to historic buildings, parks and local traditions often based on family and community stories.



As this family celebrates a birthday and anniversary, the cousins sitting on the fence ask their grandmother, "Why is your birthday and anniversary on the same day?" She replied, "We couldn't get married until I was 18, so when the day came, we celebrated my birthday by getting married."

Getting Started with Family Stories



A college student serves his community by creating a community mural. He asked older community members to recall stories about the early days and then transformed the story into art.

Five Ways to Get Started

1. Make a phone call or set a date

Today is a good day to plan your strategy with other family members. Think about a way to begin today, tomorrow, on Thanksgiving, or a coming holiday celebration--before the end of 2016.



2. Think about the questions

Send an email, text message, or make a phone call with a question or two to get started. Check out some of the ideas on the Internet.

3. Plan how you will write and record the story

Use your phone or other recording device with plans to produce written accounts of the stories.

4. Share with other family members

Start a family Facebook page, story blog, Twitter account or YouTube journal to record and share progress.

5. Ask and answer questions

Decide on the process for story gathering: asking questions, recording answers, and verifying the information. Older family members may need help with social media but the younger generations have that expertise. There are many ways to prepare

questions for collecting family stories. Your curiosity is a good way to begin the process. The time line on the following page can also provide a check list. No doubt other family members will have questions or stories they remember.



The Internet is a great resource. For example, [Story Arts](#) suggests five categories of questions: Places To Remember, People To Remember, Life Events, Objects, Important Transitions. [Family Tree Magazine](#) suggests 20 questions to begin developing your family stories

Other ideas: Use photos as a starting point (see pg. 18). Ask questions about how older members celebrated the birthdays of their children. How did early family gatherings compare with those today? What are some of the most important changes you have seen in your lifetime? What was your first job and what prepared you for your career? What buildings were familiar to you as a youngster? Are the buildings still there? Who were your national heroes when you were young?

When your family gathers for a celebration or other event, have your questions read and your recording devices too.

Linking Family History with World Events

What are the events that are important to you and your family? Make a list of these events with the dates. As you observe the public history on the adjacent page, you will understand how national and world events are part of your history.

Life Events

- Born
- School and leisure
- Teen years
- Relatives and friends
- Helping in the neighborhood
- First job and career
- Marriage
- Places lived: migration and moving experiences
- Children and grandchildren
- Historical events witnessed
- Memorable birthdays
- Aging and retirement
- Achievements and Failures
- Tragedies
- Family gatherings

A family time line is a graphic organizer: you can see the history on one page. The timeline can begin with the birth of your grandparents or great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents. Include happy times: births, marriages, family moves, travels or adventures, achievements (graduation, a job, first home), as well as sad times: (losing a job, illness, death, community disaster), and how your family members served by joining the military, participating in community action and volunteering.

Develop a time line with older relatives. Identify and reflect on the “stepping stones” of their lives. What are the dates for the big events, changes, tragedies, achievements, and key moments?

The best way to do a time line is to use a long rectangular paper, Draw a line down the middle and then start with your family events on one side and historical events on the other (*History Comes Home*).

These historical events begin in 1776 and continue to 2016. Your time line can begin and end with whatever dates you choose. Include public history that is meaningful to you and your family.



Families and communities have celebrated Independence Day since 1776.

Public History

- 1776 Declaration of Independence
- 1919 Influenza Pandemic ends
- 1920 Women can vote
- 1929 Stock market crashes
- 1935 Social Security Act
- 1941 Pearl Harbor: WWII
- 1946 Baby Boom begins
- 1950 Korean War
- 1955 Polio Vaccine
- 1964 Civil Rights Act
- 1965 Medicare and Medicaid
- 1969 First man on the moon
- 1974 President Nixon Resigns
- 1976 U.S. Bicentennial
- 1980 Mt. St. Helen's Erupts
- 1989 Berlin Wall Falls
- 1991 Dessert Storm
- 1992 Hurricane Andrew
- 2001 Nine Eleven
- 2003 Space Shuttle Columbia disaster
- 2003 Invasion of Iraq
- 2004 Facebook launched
- 2005 YouTube launched
- 2005 Hurricane Katrina
- 2007 iPhone debuts
- 2009 Obama sworn in as President
- 2014 Restoring relations with Cuba
- 2016 *What event would you list?*

Photos Are Stories

Photographs may be your key to getting started or to enriching your family history. As you look at the photos, label them with date, place, and the people in the photo. What are they doing? Where was the photo taken and under what circumstances? Who are the people and why are they together? How are they related to you?

This great-great-grandfather cuts into his 100th birthday cake and tells a story through the photograph. His great-great grandchildren might ask about the birthday celebration:

Who made the cake?
Who attended the party? What was the model of the car outside the window?
Who was driving the



car? Do you see the sign on the wall that could give a clue about where the party is being held? How many guests are attending? What other clues can you find in the photo?

Use photographs of events in your life and elaborate on who is in the picture, what they are doing, why they are there, and what was happening in your community, nation, and the world when the photo was taken.

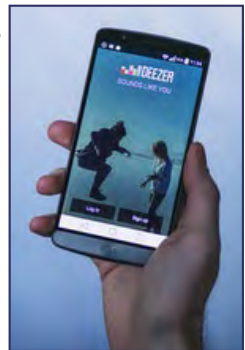
1. The photo weaves a story.

- Who took the picture?
- Is there anything written on the front or back?
- Where did you find the photo?
- What is happening in the photo?

2. Explaining the photo

- Why was the photo taken?
- Does the photograph illustrate a theme, a historical period, or event?
- Divide the photo into several parts and look at them carefully.
For example: Look at the painting on the wall, the curtains, the hair styles, the license plate (what year?), the style of clothing, books on the bookshelf, the furniture, the view through the window.

3. Suggest a title and a caption that describes the photo (Life Stories Preservation).



Storytelling and Healing



For thousands of years, storytelling has been a way to pass history from generation to generation. Through oral history and storytelling, cultures were described and preserved.

In the Native American culture, children and grandchildren learned the tribal stories from their elders and passed them on to their

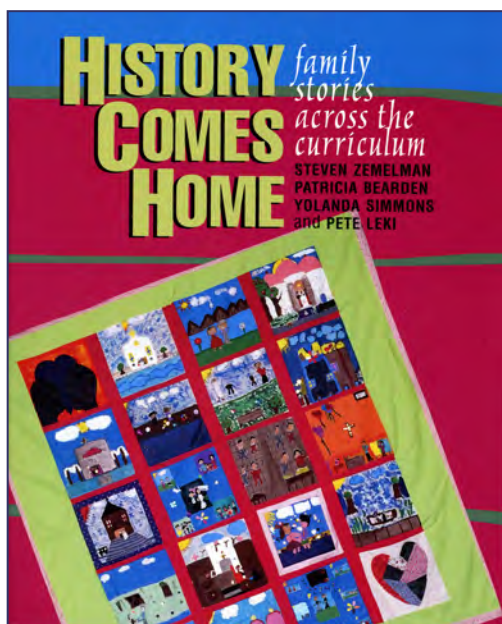
children and grandchildren. But in recent times there is greater emphasis on writing and recording the stories because the tribal languages are being lost.

Storytelling is considered one of the oldest healing arts according to research at the University of California: [The Importance of Telling \(and Listening\) to the Story](#). Storytelling has been used for centuries as a beneficial way for grieving people to cope with loss.

**“All writers of the story are still storytellers
sitting around the cave of the world.”**

Paul Darcy Boles

Family Stories in the Classroom



Opportunities for Learning and Service Learning

Teachers and professors say that family stories fit across the curriculum, in English, math, science, social studies, geography, and more—throughout the educational pipeline. Students of all ages, from preschool through college and including adult and older learners, can benefit from gathering and sharing their family stories.

In **geography** class, students find the places of origin of their ancestors on a world map. They find latitude and longitude, the continent, hemisphere and land regions of the given location. In **language arts**, after preparing questions for interviews with older family members, students practice interviewing with classmates. They collect the family stories and share written stories in a display and class scrapbook. In **math class** students produce a pie chart for analyzing and presenting the classroom profile. Students can calculate percentages, prepare graphs, make estimates, and prepare averages of information about the states or countries where their an-

College students compare their stories about the depression after interviewing elder members of their families. The students wrote about some of the ways people coped with the depression. For example, one family depended on a diet of popcorn and buttermilk. Others had two or three families together because homes were lost. A common theme was the humor that helped them survive.



A third-grade student tells about her display, including photos of ancestors and information about her ethnic profile. The teacher challenges students to reflect on their culture and ethnicity by asking questions of their parents, grandparents and older relatives.



cestors lived. During **history** class, students begin with the data from the classroom profile and begin investigating historical events – and the impact of a war, financial depression, or political upheaval on their family or the families of friends. In **science** students look at the migration patterns and modes of transportation.

These activities fit with middle school, high school, college and for older learners. In fact, one of the most successful classes for 50+ students is Genealogy and oral history.

The rap musical *Alexander Hamilton* demonstrates that stories can be songs, pictures, plays, newscasts and the contents of social media.

Conversations with Veterans

Veterans are living historians who effortlessly enrich classroom discussions. Yolanda Simmons, a teacher from Chicago Public Schools says, "On Veterans Day, a Korean War veteran came to class to talk about his experiences. The students eagerly asked questions and then one of the students started a lively discussion when he said,

"My grandfather fought in the Korean War and he didn't come back."



Simmons said that the comment brought an important teaching moment with a lively conversation about the Viet Nam War and the Iraq War, the geography of the wars and the public history as it related to family history. Simmons said, "The class was en-

ergized as the students related personal stories about their families, friends and neighbors."

Betsy Brown, a teacher at Lewis Elementary School in Carbondale teaches about WWII. The students plant a Victory Garden and then invite local veterans for a celebration. The students interview veterans and write scripts for plays about the experiences.

Did You Know?

The Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress provides lesson plans, Field Kits, and other assistance for schools, individuals or families interested in preserving the oral histories of veterans. Visit the [Library of Congress](https://www.loc.gov/veterans).

Service-Learning Projects

When students interview veterans and older community members as part of service learning projects, it is a win/win proposition. Students help elders preserve their history and the elders give students an opportunity to practice interviewing, writing, and to become historians and reporters.

Part of the service-learning experience is reflection and preparing a journal. One student reported that his great-great grandfather kept a journal for five years when he was a P.O.W. He said, "It helped him endure the experience and gave him hope. All of these documents, letters, and journals are part of our family history."

Students across the state participate in the Illinois Veterans and Community Classroom Project. They conduct video interviews with a Veteran and do a final reflection at the end of the documentary. In a recent interview Mandy Alms told about interviewing her grandfather before his death. She said that his stories "helped her understand what war is really like."





Serving Those Who Served celebrates a month of service created to thank service men and women, veterans, and their families through a partnership with the Illinois Dept. of Veterans Affairs, Serve Illinois and others. The program was initiated in November 2016 with the goal to engage Illinoisans in volunteer service projects focused on benefiting our American heroes. Erica Jeffries, Director of Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs said, "It's an honor to dedicate our time in community service to those men and women and families who have done so much to serve our great nation."



"Serving Those Who Served is an opportunity to embrace veterans in many ways: by visiting Veterans Homes, participating in projects for veterans, interviewing veterans who share their stories, and welcoming them into classrooms and meetings across Illinois," she said.

This is an ideal time to gather a story from a local veteran and join in a volunteer activity for veterans. For additional information visit [Serve Illinois](#) and find a [Toolkit](#) that is useful in November and throughout the year.

See Resources on pgs. 30-31 for additional information from the Library of Congress, the Illinois State Library and the Illinois Council for the Social Studies about interviewing veterans. You can also contact the [Illinois Veterans Volunteer Program](#) for information about visiting for the four Veterans Homes.

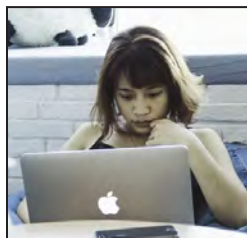
Becoming a Family Historian



A student is delighted when her research results expand information about the migration of her ancestors from Louisiana to Chicago. She consulted some primary sources to find the communities that comprised their migration path.

Research the Story

Every historian is a detective especially when establishing the accuracy and the original purpose of the documents about their family history. To be a good history detective you must look for clues to help put the record into its original context. (History Handbook for Student Research Projects). Some of the other suggestions for documenting family history:



1. Include details. Stories have more impact from a historical viewpoint when they contain names, dates, places, people and what happened. What was the name of the school; how old were the people in the photo; what were their names; who owned the store; what was the weather?
2. Relive the memory. What do you recall – colors, sounds, smells? Who was there at the time? What happened? Why? What were you thinking and feeling?
3. Preserving the history of an individual, a society, a culture to pass on life experiences and lessons through your stories. What was happening in the world and your community when the story was happening?
4. Include memorabilia: photographs, maps or drawings of the house, the ice box, the dress, or neighborhood; excerpts from letters, a diary, or journal; copies of newspaper clippings, awards, newsletters, cartoons, and so forth. (Life Stories Preservation)
5. Genealogy programs throughout Illinois have rich resources for learning more about your family history.

Starting a Journal

You may think that no one would be interested in your life, but think about your family in 50 or 100 years. They will wonder about your hobbies and work, special experiences, school events, your attitudes about the important things in life, and who you are. You can start a journal at any age--to prepare your history for generations yet to come.

When Mary Henderson turned 70, her granddaughter asked about her experiences when she was a teenager. That curiosity led Mary to write her family history. She started with her family's migration to Montana where they set up a homestead. Mary continued writing about school days, challenges as a teen, and stories that her relatives had told her. She continued to update the history every year until just before her death. She left a beautiful legacy for her family — one they will cherish and pass on to their children and grandchildren.



The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition provide an example of journaling with the precise historical information about the Corps of Discovery from 1803 to 1806. Their attention to detail from day to day is an example of writing, recording and saving family history. The mandate to keep their journals came from President Thomas Jefferson, who wrote they "are directed each to keep a separate journal from day to day of all passing accuracies..."

Resources



On History Day at the Illinois Capitol, students report on interviews with older family members, parents, relatives, neighbors and civic officials.

Your local public library is a treasure trove for historians of all ages. You will find vast resources about recording, writing and sharing your stories there and on the Internet. If you are interested in Genealogy, online resources are plentiful for tracking and recording family histories. The following websites may be of interest:

[Serve Illinois](#)

[Illinois Council for the Social Studies](#)

[Storytelling in the Classroom](#)

[Collecting Family Stories](#)

[Telling Family Stories](#)

[Learning Page for American History](#)

[National History Day](#)

[Illinois History Day](#)

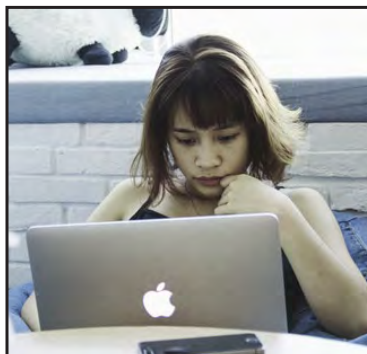
[Preserving Lifetime Memories](#)

[Oral History: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library](#)

[PBS Storytelling: Circle of Stories](#)

[Illinois State Historical Society](#)

[Benefits of Telling the Story, Journey of Hearts, University of California Extension](#)



The Library of Congress Veterans History Program

The Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress provides directions for interviewing older adults and veterans as well as lesson plans, Field Kits, and other assistance for schools, individuals or families interested in preserving the oral history.

You will also find others who are interested in saving family stories, particularly those of veterans. You can collaborate with your local high schools and universities, retirement communities, veteran service organizations, churches, area businesses, and other community groups.

Resources at the Library of Congress and their Partners in Illinois

[American Folk Life Center](#)

Veterans History Project Sites

[For Educators](#)

[Primary Source Sets](#)

[Veterans History Project Lesson Plans](#)

[Teaching and the Veterans History Project Instructional Webcast:](#)

[Lesson Plans from PBS](#)

Illinois Partners with the Library of Congress

Illinois State Library: Office of Secretary of State, Illinois State Library

[Illinois Veterans History Project](#)

[Illinois Veterans and Community Classroom Project](#)

Sponsored by WWII Veterans Memorial Board and Illinois Principals Association

[Reflections by students about their interviews with Veterans](#)

[Illinois Council for the Social Studies](#)

Books

Danzer, Gerald A. (1991) A History Handbook for Student Research Projects.

Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society

Wolfman, Ira. (1986) Do People Grow on Family Trees? Genealogy for Kids & Other Beginners, New York: Workman Publishing Co.

Zemelman, S., Bearden, P., and all. (1990). History Comes Home: Family Stories across the Curriculum, York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers

Acknowledgements

A Family Story is a Gift is based on a 2005 publication produced by a coalition of groups committed to family history. The goal then and now is to persuade, nudge, and challenge everyone to ask questions about the life experiences of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, veterans, and community elders and to record and preserve those memories and stories.

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