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## NPR'S STORYCORPS INITIATIVE HELPS PRESERVE FADING MEMORIES

By ANNE BASTING

If you listen to National Public Radio (NPR) on Friday mornings, you might have heard about StoryCorps, a national effort to gather and share the stories of everyday Americans. What you may not know is that StoryCorps has expanded to include the Memory Loss Initiative, which aims to ensure that the StoryCorps experience is accessible to people with cognitive impairments.

Listeners to NPR's *Morning Edition* commonly hear people describing memorable moments in their lives, often while sobbing or laughing out loud. In these intimate moments, the smooth editing and perfect sound quality seem to transform the stories of ordinary people ("Remember when you wore your pajamas to church?" "Remember the first time you saw Mom?") into timeless tales.

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### 10,000 STORIES

For people who reserve time with StoryCorps, the crew helps them tell a story or interview a family member or friend at one of its permanent locations—such as Grand Central Station in New York City or Milwaukee Central Library—or with its two mobile units and its door-to-door recording setups, which move to communities across the United States. Visitors receive help from a staff facilitator and leave with a professional-quality CD recording of their 40-minute interview.

Participants can also choose to weave their stories into the fabric of American history by consenting to send their interview to the Library of Congress. Since 2003, StoryCorps facilitators have recorded more than 10,000 stories; samples of these interviews are available to everyone at [www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net). StoryCorps participants frequently mention how much they learn about each other and talk about leaving a legacy to their children and grandchildren.

StoryCorps launched the Memory Loss Initiative (MLI) in 2006. I am proud to be one of five gerontologists on the MLI advisory board. With our assistance, StoryCorps developed helpful hints for family or friends who wish to interview someone with memory loss. Goals of MLI included adjusting the StoryCorps process to make it accessible to people with memory loss, promoting the experience to people with memory loss, recording at least 40 story sessions by people with memory loss, and evaluating the experience for both interviewers and those interviewed.

The MLI has far exceeded its goals, according to project coordinator Dina Zempsky, a New York-based, licensed geriatric social worker. She explained that facilitators crossed the country to bring the StoryCorps experience to people who otherwise might never reach one of the booths. In its first year, MLI recorded more than 100 interviews with people who have memory loss, far surpassing the initial goal of 40.

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### THE BEST LEGACY

Two of the first 100 MLI interviews were nationally broadcast on *Morning Edition*. In the first of these interviews—which marked the MLI launch on Nov. 17, 2006—Ken Morganstern is interviewed by two

of his daughters. Memory loss is certainly present: Morganstern stumbles over his age and his children's names. But rather than getting caught in the net of loss, his daughters spin around it with patience and laughter, rephrasing questions that at first stump their father. At interview's end, one daughter asks, "Do you have any regrets?" Morganstern answers: "I'm sitting here thinking I have no regrets at all. I have a loving family and they are loving people, and that's the best [pause] legacy anyone can have."

The second MLI interview played shortly before Valentine's Day, 2007. When a mobile StoryCorps booth passed through Arkansas, Bob Chew interviewed his wife, JoAnn, who had been recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Her effervescent voice turns somber when he asks her if she feels sorry for herself. "A li'l bit. Li'l bit. A big bit," she admits. Ten years older than her husband, she is haunted by thinking he could have "a cute little chick . . . 10 years younger" and not be burdened by "an ugly lady who's out of her head." Bob assures her, "You'll never be an ugly lady, sweetie. You know I still love you—more than ever." JoAnn answers, "I know."

The interviews reveal life inside the experience of memory loss. These stories manifest loss and sorrow filtered through unique, vivid personalities. They also show people's clear, passionate desire for loving relationships and legacy. Too often, the professional field of aging becomes disconnected from the meaningful moments of people's present lives as it spreads the important message that dementia is a growing challenge for an aging society, one that needs to be met with significant policy changes and financial support. StoryCorps' MLI stories can keep those of us involved in aging at the policy and process level in touch with the poignant human experience of memory loss.

Evaluations of StoryCorps' MLI will be complete by this coming fall. Preliminary results suggest that special training helped StoryCorps facilitators feel more comfortable working with people who have memory loss and their interviewers. In addition, facilitators noted that participants enjoyed the experience. "I think it captures the person at a certain time in their life which will shortly disappear," said one facilitator. "Every participant was extremely grateful at the end of the interview," said another. Follow-up phone calls with the participants themselves are suggesting similar themes.

Guidelines for facilitators and those who might try these interviews at home are fairly simple. Among the list of tips on the StoryCorps website, the recommendations emphasize that when interviewing people with memory loss, interviewers should focus on feelings, not facts. For example, the site suggests that, instead of asking someone to remember a particular moment in his or her childhood (names and dates), question how a particular situation made the person feel. StoryCorps says it helps to think of several ways to rephrase any given question, in case the person being interviewed has a hard time understanding it. The core elements underlying the guidelines are patience, flexibility and the realization that facts aren't as important as emotional exchange.

StoryCorps recently received funding from philanthropists Joseph and Carol Reich to continue the Memory Loss Initiative for another three years, with a goal of facilitating more than 400 interviews each year.

Those experiencing memory loss—or those who know someone experiencing it—who would like to participate in StoryCorps can simply visit [www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net) to make a reservation at a booth near them. The booth at the Milwaukee Central Library is open through Oct. 31. Those wishing to arrange a door-to-door StoryCorps visit through the Memory Loss Initiative can contact Dina Zempsky at (646) 723-2030, ext. 68.

In general, StoryCorps asks for a minimum \$10 donation for the interviews, although MLI interviews are free. ❖

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