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Everybody Has A Story

*Sara White, Memory Keeper,
& Founder of First Person
Productions, helps people preserve
the past by writing their memoir.*

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By Sharyn Alden

Hometown News Correspondent

Not every good story makes it into the news. You may have wonderful stories in your memory bank. They may not make the nightly news, but they should be told so others can learn what the world was like when you experienced it.

"The greatest gift you can give your loved ones is the story of your life," said Sarah White, who founded First Person Productions in Madison to help people share their life stories. "We all want to know about the people who came before us. I help you write by serving as your friendly coach, secretary and editor."

Did you know writing your memoir can also be good for your health? New research has shown that challenging leisure activities like recalling and writing down memories are good for the mind and body. Research also suggests that the process of bringing out memories tied to happy, fulfilling events in your life is beneficial to your overall health and well being.

You may have stories tucked away with elements of intrigue, heroics, possibly mystery, romance and humor. Wouldn't it be great if you wrote these down so others could benefit?

What if you could motivate yourself to write your memoir so that future generations could better know you and your roots? What an extraordinary gift that would be!

That's where White, current president (2012-2013) of the national group, Association of Personal Historians, comes in.

In addition to partnering with writers, she has taught classes on memoir writing at Wisconsin Union Mini-Courses, and area senior centers and libraries. She also teaches cookbook memoir classes at the Willy Street Co-Op and at other venues.

Publish your stories

White's presentations (she spoke to Sun Prairie Rotary in September) often begin by asking the audience if they wished they had a written story about someone they love. "Invariably everyone in the audience says yes," she noted.

Many people intend to tell their own story, but few ever get around to it. That's why personal historians like First Person Productions (www.firstpersonprod.com) help people write their own memoir.

One of White's authors wrote his memoir about the tale of his beloved car. The story circles around the drama and intrigue that ensued when the car was stolen and how, long after the original theft, the author once again reunited with his favorite auto.

How do you write a book when you've never written anything of length or been published? White gets those questions all the time. "Once you work with a writing partner, it is easier than you may think because no one knows your story like you do."

A family of writers

White's parents were well known journalists; her father wrote a column for Barron's among other endeavors. "One of my fond memories about my father was when he told me he was a ghostwriter. I thought that meant real ghosts. We enjoyed many laughs about how intriguing that sounded to me."

Her mother was a textbook editor and wrote for The Saturday Evening Post. "Mom would literally critique the letters I sent home to Carmel, Indiana, and send them back marked up for grammar and style," she said.

After college, White opened a Madison graphics design firm, White Space Design, before selling the business in 1996. A few years later, she returned to writing.

How memoir writing works

That memoir that has been churning in your head can see the light of day. When you have a coach you become accountable to someone other than yourself to write the story.

To join one of White's upcoming classes, here's a link:
<http://www.firstpersonprod.com/upcoming-workshops/>

She coaches writers by helping them utilize the various branching points in their lives. "When you look at your life, there are often 'branch-

(Continued on page 41)

Everybody Has A Story

(Continued from page 13)

es' where events took a turn like when your family moved to another city before your high school graduation," explained White. "These are the stories that show what you're made of."

White approaches memoir writing in two ways. She partners with individuals and helps them write or for those who don't want to do the writing, she takes a conversations approach.

"For non-writers I guide you to talk about your stories as I record our conversations," she said, "Then I transcribe and edit what you've told me and put them into compelling chapters for a book of your own, in your voice. With either approach, I'm there to get you started and help you stay motivated."

After the manuscript is written, she arranges for editing, layout, proof-reading—everything it takes to turn your memoir into a high-quality paperback or hardcover book.

Besides helping writers find their voice, she also helps them focus on an audience. "It may be children or grandchildren, but no matter who it is, when you visualize your audience the writing is easier," she said.

Another way to share your story

When the Boston Globe contacted White in August about the story they were writing, "Self-written obituaries give many the last word," it was a topic she knew well.

White teaches an obituary writing class locally and online. "Put a Little Life into Your Obituary" lets you take control of your own story. It's a task that may be given to someone by default at the time of a funeral and is often written quickly and during great grief.

But writing teacher White said, "Writing your obit may seem like a morbid way to share thoughts about your life, but if you can get beyond that reaction, it's really a very interesting way to preserve your story."

She realized the need for self-written obituaries when her elderly aunt died on a Friday and the hometown newspaper wanted the obituary by noon the following day. She said the stress to find relevant and meaningful information for the next day's obit was so stressful it prompted an asthma attack that sent her to the hospital.

The city of Madison honored her by including her book, "Madison Women Remember--Growing Up in Wisconsin's Capital," as one of 50 special objects placed in the city's time capsule during the Sesquicentennial.



Sarah White teaching at one of her area classes.

"People shouldn't have to go through that type of stress while grieving," she said. Still, writing your own obituary can be challenging. "My students say the hardest part is looking to family and friends for help. It's not easy to call someone and say 'by the way, I'm writing my obituary, will you tell me what you like about me?'"

Just think, if you had already written your memoir you would have great stories and memories to draw from.

Everybody has a story to tell. Isn't it time you preserved your own?

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