

# Blueprints for Success



## Early APH Members Reflect on Their History with APH

By Amanda Kuhnert

*Fifteen years ago, Kitty Axelson-Berry and a handful of others got together to discuss her vision for creating a professional networking organization for those who help others preserve their life stories. By 1998 the handful had grown to 100, and by 1999 the group had doubled to 200 members. Today, APH boasts more than 600 members across the globe. Amanda Kuhnert spoke with several early APH members about how their businesses have evolved since their discovery of APH.*



**Libby Atwater**  
**Choose Your Words**  
**Ventura, California**  
**Member since 1998**  
• Libby specializes in written and oral histories, ethical wills, and workshops about life story writing.

### Starting Out

In 1997, Libby Atwater, a former English teacher and professional journalist, was writing profile stories for her community newspaper. One day while she was getting her nails done, her professional horizons suddenly expanded. “It was a serendipitous occurrence,” she says. Through her stylist, she learned about a neighbor who wanted to write a book for her grandchildren. She wrote up a proposal, which the family accepted, and her career as a personal historian was off and running.

### Why APH?

“Around that time, I saw an article in the *Los Angeles Times* about a group of people who were doing life story writing,” she recalls. She called Bob Joyce (then president of APH), who was listed as the contact in the paper, and then attended the Santa Ana conference in 1998. “I was really excited when I came back from that conference,” she says.

Since attending her first conference, Atwater has

been very involved in APH, serving on the board as both director of print communications and secretary. Today, she remains committed to APH because of the camaraderie, the benefits of collaboration with other members, and the knowledge she’s gained by sharing with others engaged in the same profession. “I’ve met some really interesting people from all over the world and have learned about different business models,” she says. “I’ve never been in an organization this supportive.”

### Getting the Word Out

“I’ve done thirty to forty speaking engagements, taught classes, taken out an ad—and the bottom line for me is that it’s word-of-mouth,” Atwater says. “I’m also a member of the Museum of Ventura County and am chairing the oral history committee on a volunteer basis. But it will give me some exposure.”

Atwater is also training hospice volunteers to elicit life stories from their patients. Through that experience, she met a potential client; that meeting may result in a book collaboration. “We’re planting seeds, and you never know when they’re going to take root,” she says.

Sometimes, it’s the simplest things that open doors. “I’ll be carrying around a bag with the APH logo on the side, and people will stop and ask me about it,” she says.

### Interesting Clients

One gentleman, whom Atwater interviewed for his eventual book, *My Life’s Journey with Special People*, left her with a motto she’ll never forget: “If you don’t ask, you don’t get.”

Currently, she's working with a family to whom she feels particularly close. "They're really genuine people," she says. "We have this really wonderful rapport." But in the same breath, Atwater adds, "The saddest thing about this work is that several of my clients have passed on."

### What It Takes

Atwater feels that having the requisite skills, education, and background are a good starting point, but she emphasizes the importance of focusing on strengths. "I know that I'm a writer, so I always subcontract out my graphic work," she explains. "It's the old adage: 'Do what you do and do it well.'"

"The key to being successful in this business is being adaptable," she says. "You need to be able to change." Atwater also attributes her success—and a number of referrals—to becoming involved with APH. "In 2005, they needed a newsletter editor," she recalls. "So I applied and was chosen."

You also need discipline and business sense.

Atwater advises future personal historians to take some business courses before getting started. "And you need to have good people skills—to really enjoy what you do and have it come through," she adds.

### The Future of the Field

"I think that [the personal history field] is going to thrive and grow, especially as the boomers age and Gen X and Y realize the importance [of preserving their histories]," she says. "With new technology, I've already seen it grow." Atwater sees the social networking rage as a sign that people are eager to connect and learn about others. "And I think that the APH will continue to be the premier organization for personal historians," she adds.



### Lettice Stuart

Portraits in Words  
New York, New York  
Member since 1997

- Lettice produces heirloom books and videos.

### Starting Out

After a twenty-two-year career in journalism, Lettice Stuart had a life-changing experience. Just three years after the death of her father in 1993, Stuart's mother died suddenly. "The page turned black," she says. "I just wasn't interested in what I was doing. It didn't hold any meaning for me anymore."

Stuart had always intended to record her parents' stories, but life got in the way. Now that they were both gone, she was overwhelmed by a deep sense of regret and loss. Her personal grief eventually gave birth to an idea. "I wonder if people will pay me to do what they're not going to do themselves?" she recalls asking herself.


Stuart printed some business cards that read "Personal History Writer" and then hit the road with a dual plan: promote her new book about housing for the elderly and spread the word about her new business venture.

### Why APH?

It was at a promotional event for her book in West Virginia that Stuart met Rae Jean Sielen. "Rae Jean came up to me afterwards and asked if I knew about [APH]," she recalls. "I was about nine months into my business, and I thought, 'These people stole my idea!'"

But Stuart eagerly jumped on board, attending the conference in Santa Ana, California. "It saved my life," she says. "I wouldn't be in business today if I hadn't gone out to California." Since then, Stuart has been an active member of APH, including four years as president of the organization.

"[APH] provides me a sense of community with like-minded souls," she says. "I don't know anyone else [around me] who's doing what I'm doing. I've made really great friends." Stuart also feels that the Listserv is a tremendous benefit of the organization, keeping her informed about new technology and ideas.



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## Getting the Word Out

“The first thing I did was start speaking at breakfast clubs about the importance of saving family stories,” Stuart says. “I had a handout with do-it-yourself tips.” She also attended Toastmasters to conquer her fear of public speaking.

“You have to get out there,” she says. “It’s not going to happen if I just sit in my house.” Stuart points out that even a seemingly boring dinner party can generate business leads. “You just have to go out and meet people and be prepared with a clear explanation of what you do.”

Over the years, Stuart’s business has grown organically through word-of-mouth referrals. “My husband is my best marketing tool,” she adds. “He tells everyone what I do.”

## What It Takes

Stuart rattles off a list of key attributes of a successful personal historian, including the appreciation of story, love of people, ability to listen, and a personality that engenders immediate trust. She points out that technical skills are important, as well. “You need to know equipment and know how to write,” she says. “But it starts with a passion about the work. And you have to be able to market yourself.”

Stuart also credits her leadership role in APH as a boon for her business. “It gave me increased credibility, stature, and professionalism,” she says. “Getting involved in the APH will ultimately enhance someone’s business.”

## Interesting Clients

“I’ve fallen in love with every client,” says Stuart. “It’s such an intimate process to spend ten hours with someone during the end years of their life. When they get into it, it’s the most validating process for them. They begin to see the value of their life. It’s just so rewarding.”

## The Future of the Field

Stuart feels optimistic about the future of the personal history business. “When I started, I always had to explain what a personal historian was,” she says. “Since then, there has been the tremendous memoir movement. People get it now.” She also believes that an increasing number of people are interested in reconnecting with their pasts, both physically and from a values perspective, but she points out that the challenge to financial success in this business is finding clients who are willing to pay for the services they desire.

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**Rae Jean Sielen**  
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## Getting Started

Rae Jean Sielen moved to Morgantown from Seattle to get married, and she wanted to create a business niche in her new community. “My husband is a professor, and personal history was really his idea,” she says. “It combines my interest in graphics, words, language, and people.”

“I got started in this business after we published a couple of anthologies,” Sielen explains. “I wanted to record the stories of ordinary people. That’s how we got going, and it really took off from there.”

## Why APH?

In 1997, Sielen had a vendor booth at the National Genealogy Conference near Philadelphia. “When I was there, a man gave me a contact name and number for someone in the APH,” she recalls. Soon thereafter, she attended the 1997 APH conference near Atlanta (with about thirty-five in attendance), and later served on the board for three years. “I made some great contacts that way,” she says, “some whom I’m collaborating with today.”

Even after so many years in the field, Sielen finds the information that comes across the Listserv to be a noteworthy benefit of the organization. “And the conference is great,” she says. “I love going and getting

the latest information, but the keynote speakers are really inspirational and thought-provoking. Year after year, I come away with new ideas about what I should be doing with my business.” Sielen has also met other APHers at the conference with whom she now collaborates.

## Getting the Word Out

Sielen feels that her involvement in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at West Virginia University has helped spread the word about her business. “I’m on the curriculum committee,” she says. “If I advertise these two-hour classes, which meet just once, then I might get ten to fifteen people to sign up, plus the publicity.” She also feels that having a physical office space in town has helped support her business growth. “In the course of a week, I’ll have at least five to ten people come in to meet with me,” she says. “They love coming here. It’s an excursion.”

## What It Takes

To be successful in the personal history business, “you have to be a people person,” Sielen says. “You need to be a good writer and good thinker with a good general knowledge base.” But without some business sense, those skills alone might not get you very far, warns Sielen. “You need to be organized, disciplined, and detail oriented while still seeing the big picture,” she says. “Be diplomatic, listen well, and communicate well.”

Sielen adds, “You need to participate in your local community, as well as your professional community, to keep fresh, grow professionally, and develop contacts to help you out when you get stuck.” And rather than looking at other personal history businesses in your area as competitors, Sielen recommends seeing them as referral sources.

## Interesting Clients

“Right now, I’m working on a state grant-funded community history project, working closely with the book’s editor as an advisor,” she says. “Plus, Populore is handling the book’s production.” She’s also involved with West Virginia University’s Center for Excellence in Disabilities, which features a fine arts program that helps disabled persons develop skills in the fine arts. “We received a community grant to put their works together in a published volume entitled *Seasons of Change*,” she explains.

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References available from APH clients.

*Blueprints, continued on p. 18...*

## The Future of the Field

Sielen feels that the life-writing business, on a global scale, will continue to grow. But on an individual level, she emphasizes the importance of specializing. “You can’t do everything,” she says. “You need to be focused.”

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*Amanda Kuhnert is a professional copyeditor and writer in Stowe, Vermont. Her company, Fourfold Press (and its subsidiary, Fourfold Legacy Services), provides proofreading, copyediting, copywriting, and personal history services to individuals, families, businesses, and communities.*

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## ...Put Yourself in Your Life Story, continued from page 17

And yet, when we only write stories about *what we did*, our readers never learn *who we are*.

## Teaching Tactics

I often discover that my students have trouble putting their feelings in their stories because they haven’t thought very much about how their experiences affected them. I try to focus their thinking in this direction by helping them identify the turning points in their lives—those times when something occurred that changed their lives in some way. We talk about cause and effect, change and growth. I assign them to draw a timeline of their lives and chart the spots where turning points occurred. This can be an illuminating exercise for them on many levels.

During classroom critiques of student stories, I continually ask them to consider how various events influenced their lives if they have not included this kind of information in their stories. It’s easier for some students than for others to access feelings and put them into words. One man once told me, “I don’t have the vocabulary to describe what you want me to say.” From what I know of him, that seemed like an honest statement. Over time, however, he’s improving.

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Some of my students think they’re revealing their feelings when they write statements like “I felt scared” or “I was embarrassed.” It’s a start, of course, but putting a label on a feeling doesn’t communicate much. I encourage students to dig deeper; I ask them to try to remember what it felt like to be scared or embarrassed. How did they behave? Did they experience any physical or emotional sensations? What thoughts went through their heads? Describing behavior, thoughts, and body reactions demonstrates feelings more convincingly than merely labeling them. I use examples from literature and well-written memoirs to show my students how professionals reveal and dramatize feelings. And then, of course, it’s practice, practice, practice. I’ve taught long enough to see people improve as writers over time when they practice what I preach.

## Interviewing Tactics

Many of the same tools can be used when writing personal histories for clients. First, interviewers need to educate themselves about how to put feelings into a story by reading quality memoirs—and even fiction—and analyzing how the pros do it. There’s no better teacher.

Then it becomes the interviewer’s responsibility to shape questions to draw out this kind of information, perhaps educating clients in advance that openness and honesty will help them achieve their goals. Warn them that you’ll be inquiring about how their life experiences affected and shaped their lives, so it won’t seem like prying when you do.

Craft open-ended questions to elicit thoughtful responses: “Tell me about . . .”; “How did you feel when . . .”; “What did you do when you were scared?”; “Tell me more about how you felt when . . .” Let them think for a while. Don’t be afraid of silence. Try rephrasing questions to draw them out. Some people won’t give you what you want, of course, but some will surprise you if you prepare them in advance. You’ll find that as you acquire more experience and confidence, you’ll know more instinctively how to ask for the information you need.

It’s fairly easy to write an event-driven personal history (this happened, then this happened, etc.), and some clients are happy with products of this kind. Stories that reveal a subject’s inner core and resonate with readers are far more difficult to write and usually take more time. But they’re worth it.

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*Dawn Thurston is the co-author of Breathe Life into Your Life Story, published by Signature Books. She has degrees in English and communications and has taught personal history writing for fourteen years. Learn more about Dawn and her business at [www.MemoirMentor.com](http://www.MemoirMentor.com).*