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# Creating an Oral History of Your Family: Step by Step

It isn't just about sticking a microphone in front of your family member. First, you have to learn some of the basics.



Kelly Navies of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture knows firsthand how valuable oral history can be in preserving a family's heritage.

PHOTO: TRUDY HUTCHERSON/SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE

*By Barbara Sadick*

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Many of us think about preserving a piece of family history by making a video or audio recording of precious stories told by a parent, grandparent or other relative.

But there's a lot more to it than just pointing the microphone or camera at a person. Trying to create an oral history without first learning some of the basics sells the process, and our families, short.

“Conducting an oral history requires the practice of deep listening, an art we are losing, and the essential skill needed for a good interview,” says Kelly Navies, museum specialist, oral historian at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture in Washington.

Here’s what you need to know to properly preserve a part of oral history as told by one of your family members.

## **Preliminary research**

Study the historical period during which your relative has lived. Ask other family members what they know. Look through pictures and artifacts about the interviewee. She is likely to speak more freely when she realizes you know more about her life than she expected.

Without research on multiple levels, you won’t know what questions to ask, says Ms. Navies, who has conducted oral histories with multiple members of her own family, which has deep roots in Asheville, N.C. Much of that research focused on how segregation and desegregation have directly affected her family. For example, after interviewing a family member who had attended Stephens-Lee High School, once the only public high school available for Black students in Asheville and the surrounding area, Ms. Navies began to look in more detail at the area’s history in terms of racial geography. That research led her in subsequent interviews to ask such questions as how did you travel to the school if you lived outside of Asheville, and what was it like to pass through white neighborhoods on your way to school.

“This kind of research is essential to developing probing questions that facilitate the telling of deeper stories,” Ms Navies says. “From interviews, I learned how important this school was to the community and the impact its closure and demolition had on the community, including some of my family members, for years afterward.”

## **Interview tools**

If your subject isn’t a practiced storyteller, an audio interview might be less distracting than video. On the other hand, using audio-only won’t capture nonverbal signals and reactions, which can be important, says Zaheer Ali, an

adjunct faculty member in Columbia University's oral-history master's program.

“What's most important is to be in a quiet room, hold the microphones close, be totally present, listen closely and think of it as a sacred act,” says David Isay, founder of Story Corps Inc., a nonprofit that has recorded more than 600,000 stories from everyday people, all over the country.

If you have to do the interview on a video app, Udi Maximov, an oral-history interviewer and coach in Israel, suggests making clear the context of the interview—for instance, this is a time of a pandemic—so that future generations will understand what was going on and why videoconferencing was used. That, too, is part of the historical record, he says.

To help you prepare, you can also find good oral histories and more tips about interviewing online at such sites as [StoryCorps.org](https://www.storycorps.org) or the [USC Shoah Foundation](https://www.uscshoah.org), a nonprofit housed at the University of Southern California that is dedicated to the stories of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides.

## **Prepping your relative**

Make it clear to your relative ahead of time what you hope to achieve and why. It's also crucial that the person know you will be recording the interview, how you will be recording, and that the recording will be shared.

A parent sometimes won't feel comfortable being interviewed by a son or daughter. Often, says Mr. Isay, that person may be more willing to discuss the past with a grandchild because the relationship is less fraught.

Stephen Smith, executive director of the [USC Shoah Foundation](https://www.uscshoah.org), recommends meeting at least once before an interview to discuss the parameters and to outline the kinds of questions that will be asked. It also may give both parties more time to think about some of what will be discussed.

## **The interview**

If possible, do the interview in your relative's home, where he or she is likely to

feel most comfortable. And you may need several sessions. An interview lasting more than 90 minutes can become tiring.

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For the historical record, start by stating your name, the date and place of the session, says Maggie Schreiner, manager of archives and special collections at the Brooklyn Historical Society in New York. Ask your relative to introduce himself or herself, too.

The first questions should be basic, such as when and where you were born, who you were named after, what your parents' names were. Then proceed with open-ended questions: Tell me about your early life? What are your early memories of your parents? The community you grew up in? What was life in high school like? And allow time for descriptive answers.

Sometimes you'll have to prompt your relative. If you're asking your grandfather about his childhood and you aren't getting descriptive answers, you might rephrase your question. Ask him to describe the house he grew up in.

Sensory-based questions—what did it look, feel and smell like—create opportunities to describe experiences instead of just facts, Mr. Ali says. Future generations want to know about experiences, hardships and victories.

Listen carefully, be comfortable with silences and let your relatives have their emotional moments, says Shanna Farrell, an interviewer for University of California, Berkeley, Oral History Center. Being fully present and curious, she adds, might elicit a deeper answer or a story you've never heard before.

End with reflective questions: How does it make you feel to look back on the family you raised? Can you tell me about your hopes for the future? How do you want to be remembered? "These are big life questions that remind us of our mortality and what's important to pass on," says Mr. Isay. "It can give a sense of closure to a relationship so that nothing is left unsaid."

## Preserving an interview

Whether you're doing an audio or video recording, you'll want to back it up to a cloud-based server or a hard drive and make several copies. Have a transcript made. You can do it yourself, which is a laborious task, or you can use one of many available online transcription apps. Mr. Ali suggests that for a few hundred dollars, having the audio professionally transcribed will get you the best quality. He says transcription apps often don't recognize accents or indicate when something isn't comprehensible.

StoryCorps makes it possible to record your interview and archive it at the Library of Congress with one click so it will be accessible for generations.

Be sure all recording and transcripts are labeled with your name, your relative's name, the dates and locations of the interviews and a short synopsis.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember: The easiest thing to do is delay. You'll get to it someday. But often you don't. Do it now.

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