

Preserving Personal and Family Histories

By Barbara L. Sherf

You may have seen the ads locally for the Chestnut Hill-based Slife Productions with the headline: “There is no greater gift we can give our loved ones than the stories of our lives.” That is precisely what company owner Jason Fifield, 35, does – he preserves family histories on CD and DVD. The name Slife is short for ‘that’s life.’

Trained as a musician, photographer and writer, he holds a Bachelor of Arts (magna cum laude) in cultural anthropology and geography from the University of Southern Maine, not far from his hometown of Portland. He now resides with his wife, Daphne, a native of Wyndmoor, and sons, two-and-a-half-year-old son Harry, and one-month-old, Gus, in Chestnut Hill. The family can often be found going back to his roots by visiting their farmhouse in rural Maine.

Fifield says the idea for recording audio and DVD histories came from his own experiences.

"I was in my mid-twenties when both my grandfathers passed away and I deeply regretted not learning more about their lives. My grandmothers were glad to sit down with me and relate some of their own stories. I was studying cultural anthropology at the time and was inspired to interview my father's mother at her home, then distributed the CD recording of her story to the family. I continued with my mother's mother, only this time combined her oral history with scanned photos from the family archives to produce a short documentary on DVD. I realized that this was the work that I had been training for my whole life, combining my skills and training in anthropology, audio recording and photography and video to preserve personal and family histories for future generations."

After he produced both of his grandmother’s biographies, his family encouraged him to go in this direction. The company celebrated a one-year anniversary in October. The entrepreneur says that many people ‘fall in love with the idea’ but inviting a stranger into the home is often another story.

“I try to get another family member involved to actually ask the questions and chime in when necessary,” he admits while sitting behind the editing suite in his basement studio.

One day he hopes to move into a 1000-square-foot commercially zoned garage behind the couple’s home.

“We have received a \$10,000 grant from the Ben Franklin Technology Partners for the design of a sustainable multimedia studio, which will make use of green and recycled

materials and implement a solar heating system. During construction, Slife Productions will be producing an educational video on the green building process.”

While he enjoys conducting the fieldwork, eventually he would like to have teams in place doing the editing and graphics work.

While he occasionally does a wedding or party, he envisions a time when he can produce corporate portraits, college admission videos, high school athletes highlight reels, and even pet biographies.

As to the cost for his services, he has done unedited oral histories for \$350, to narrated photo montages on DVD for \$1250, and full-length documentary videos on DVD with budgets of over \$10000.

A video biography, for example, might include 4-5 hours of video interviews, editing, scanning and basic digital restoration of 100 photographs, background music, titles, menu creation and DVD authoring, delivered on photo printed discs in a full color case, for a total cost of around \$3500. A larger budget allows for a higher quality production with multiple HD cameras and studio lighting, licensing of favorite music, several hours of interviews with the subject, family and friends, and digital restoration of hundreds of old photographs.

“Typically the adult children in a family pull together their resources to give this as gift to their parents for the holidays or a special anniversary. In reality, it’s a gift to the entire family,” he adds.

He even produced a documentary on an old house in Long Island showing how it changed over the years. He interviewed owners and their family and ‘witnessed the emotions connected to that house.’

He notes that usually something unusual comes out once the subject gets comfortable with the camera in place, relaying the story of a Jewish bookseller, who freely admitted he had ties to the KGB and CIA. “The close family members never knew about those ties until that time,” he added.

Margaret Wallis of Ambler gives the following testimonial that is posted on the company web site. "...the perfect tool to convey one's thoughts, feelings and remembrances. I love my DVD and each time I play it, it makes me smile and feel how lucky I am!"

As for his personal history, Jason was a ski instructor working with small children in Aspen, Colorado, when mutual friends suggested he meet Daphne Lynch, a Springside School graduate and member of St. Martin’s in the Field Church in Chestnut Hill. Daphne, currently on leave

from her work as an environmental consultant, working in a health food store in Colorado. The couple married and moved to his hometown, where he bought and managed his mother's restaurant and four other locally based restaurants.

They then moved back to this area to be closer to her family, living in the area while he took on a position as Program Facilitator at Need in Deed, before purchasing their quaint Willow Grove Avenue home.

Fifield, who is trained as a classical and jazz musician, often composes the original scores for the stories. He went from playing the guitar to upright bass and is tapped into the local jazz scene. He has even embarked on a project to conduct interviews and videotape performances with a host of area jazz musicians including Trudy Pitts, Christian McBride, Odean Pope and "lesser known folks who live here and are under the radar." Excerpts from 26 interviews and performances can be seen at <http://phillyjazz.blip.tv>

His love of music was instilled in him at a young age. Growing up, his mother and father conducted 'Sock Hops' every Friday night.

"My mother would pick out the music, my dad would set up the record player and speakers and sometimes my sister and I would play our instruments. She played the piano and I played guitar." He added that he listened nearly every night to a Rhythm and Blues radio show that played on his college radio station and learned about the different genres of blues.

In addition to the jazz project, Fifield has found time to conduct fundraising and teacher recruitment videos for the Chestnut Hill non-profit Need in Deed, as well as Internet videos for CBS Radio Networks in New York, WOGL and WIP Radio in Philadelphia.

He has also volunteered his time to work with second graders in North Philadelphia to produce an anti-violence video.

"It's important for me to give back to the community. That's part of who I am and will always be."

Fifield jokes that his children's young lives have been carefully documented so far. "The cameras are rolling a lot of the time around here. It's what I do and I can't just turn it off in my down time."

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