

# WRITING MY LIFE STORY

with a little help from my friends

## Story Haiku

Such a good story,  
wish we had tape recorded –  
Let's write it down soon.

My words on the page,  
a little help from my friends –  
Do you see me now?

My life in stories,  
some of me for all of you –  
Can you hear my voice?

© Ellen B. Ryan, 2005

**N**o matter how we remember or what exactly triggers those memories, our snapshots of the past are crucial in giving shape to our own lives and the lives of our families. As older family and community members face various challenges to their health, it can be especially important for them — and for us — to share and save these stories for their historical significance, for family and community identity, and for the life lessons. With the aging process claiming many of these memories and a population that is becoming increasingly older, we are in danger of forever losing these stories — stories that define not only our loved ones' lives but also provide first-class accounts of major historical events.

Over the past year, Shalom Village Nursing Home in Hamilton, Ontario launched a life story writing project. Sarah Clark worked individually with residents to help them write their life stories. During one-hour sessions, she met with the voluntary storytellers. Stories were captured

by **Ellen B. Ryan, Sarah Clark & Pat Spadafora**

Ellen Ryan and Sarah Clark are in gerontology at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Pat Spadafora is at Sheridan College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning in Oakville, Ontario. Readers may contact Ellen Ryan at (905) 525-9140, ext. 24995 or by e-mail at ryaneb@mcmaster.ca.

through dictation and question-based conversation, then typed onto a computer for editing. After several months, each storyteller had created, with help, a written life story booklet that included scanned family photographs. This project was so rewarding for the storytellers, Sarah and others who read the stories that plans have been made for her and the residents to give a presentation to the staff to share the benefits of this process and encourage further storytelling.

## Story Writing: Beyond Reminiscing

Life storytelling and writing is important. Reminiscence groups, a frequent activity in long term care homes, help residents to recall experiences and events from their lives and to share them within a supportive setting. Story writing goes beyond the typical reminiscence activities by creating an organized narrative (or collection of small stories) that is shared beyond the here and now.

Each of us has led a life with many stories ready to be written down. People often just need encouragement and validation that their life is one worth hearing about. Each of the participants already had the stories inside them ready to be written, as evident by the flow of their words, ready-picked titles and finishing quotes. One woman participating in the story writing process captured it best when she exclaimed, "I have always wanted to write this and now I won't look crazy!" So often, it is the fear that writing one's life story or memoirs is *not normal* that holds back so much storytelling. However, through the storytelling activity, individuals can be reminded that though they are unique, at the same time they share common themes of living life that make them very *normal* indeed. While later reflecting on this project, the same storyteller said, "It made me feel alive again! I haven't felt that in a long time."

## Helping Residents Write Their Stories

### WHAT

- **Sharing** one's life story with loved ones and strangers or acquaintances
- **Writing** one's life story either through memoirs or co-construction
- **A Finished Product** created for the individual to keep and share with others and leave as a legacy for future generations

### WHO

- **Everyone!**
- **Mentally healthy/well-educated older adults**
- **Individuals with poor English writing skills:** Older adults with less education can benefit from additional

writing assistance. Individuals whose grandchildren do not read their mother tongue and who do not write in English can benefit from a bilingual facilitator or a translator so that the story can be written in two languages.

- **Individuals with hearing, vision, mobility and dexterity problems:** Though these disabilities do present barriers during the process, they can be overcome by adapting interview styles and settings during the storytelling and by using adaptive software for editing.
- **Individuals who have dementia:** With this group there are significant barriers in remembering details, focusing and communicating thoughts. This does not exclude them from the benefits of this project. Instead, with an understanding facilitator, coherent stories can often be built up over several sessions and the glimpses into the life story become all the more precious. Recollection of life experiences from the past can often be vivid, in spite of the variability of access to these memories and orientation to daily life.

### What Storytelling Did For Me

**Maeve: "Neither of us had been treated so warmly by a group of people [the congregation] and it touched us very deeply."**

**Abe: "I didn't think it was fair to these women left behind during the war to have men come home crippled or not come home at all."**

**Harry: "This made things easy for me to be a loner. I did an awful lot of reading including the book of knowledge from cover to cover."**



### WHERE

- Senior centres
- Long term care homes
- Retirement homes
- Adult day programs
- At home prior to admission

### HOW

#### 1. Who Can Facilitate

- Activity/recreation staff
- Volunteers supervised by staff
- Family in collaboration with staff
- Ideally, ALL

#### 2. Steps in Life Story Writing

- Voluntary participation
- Share memories and write the story
- Edit (at the end or a continuous process)
- Add photos/poems
- Create cover, format text and photos, print and bind the story booklet

#### 3. How to Structure Storytelling

- Dictation
- Group reminiscence: By encouraging residents to use the personal memories elicited in the group to trigger further storytelling and subsequent writing, the stories are not lost
- Question-based conversation
- Photo storytelling
- Refer to family collages/writings from significant events such as anniversaries and birthdays
- Memory boxes/books

#### 4. Role of the Family

- Provide photos
- Clarify details
- Provide their perspective on family stories to be added to the finished product
- Support: show interest in their loved one's emerging story and provide encouragement during the process

#### 5. Keys to Effective Facilitation

- Comfortable environment: Make the storytelling environment an inviting one by meeting in a place where the resident is comfortable (their room, the lounge) and at a time that is good for them and, most importantly, being warm and friendly
- Enabling attitude: Do not take over too much of the process but also do not leave it entirely up to the storyteller. Make suggestions to direct some of the process, but allow the resident to produce this/her story in a



- way that empowers him/her. Let the storyteller decide how much facilitation is needed
- Work together: Talk out a plan of action; talk out feelings related to the process; make your ideas known
  - Understanding: Make sure the storyteller understands the point of the project and that you as the facilitator understand how the resident wishes the story to be told; recognize that some memories may be painful to share and be sensitive to this
  - Focus on the storyteller: Remind participating family members that the story is to be about their loved one specifically. This empowers the storyteller by demonstrating to them that their story is valuable and worthy of documentation. It is the process that is important and how the storyteller remembers his/her life — even if the details are not accurate from a family member's point of view
  - Timing: Recognize that the storytelling may not happen quickly or on a set time schedule
  - Communication with family: Communicate clearly with family members about their roles in the process, and be open to new creative opportunities that promote the storyteller's personhood
  - Encouragement: Encourage the storyteller during the process and continue to validate the importance of the storyteller's life
  - Adaptation: Recognize barriers and work to overcome these by identifying what works best for the storyteller (for example, if a resident gets flustered when unable to remember details or has trouble thinking of things to share, encourage him/her to jot down memories at another time to share later)

## 6. Role of Technology

- Computer: The computer can be helpful for dictation, editing, checking the Internet to clarify information and obtain pictures, and email communication with family to share memories and retrieve additional information. All these options can be done by the storyteller or facilitated

- if needed. In addition, formatting the story with graphics, fonts and picture captions can be fun for the storyteller
- Tape recorder: This enables the story to be transcribed later and preserved as a way of remembering a family member's voice and manner of speech
- Video camera: This method provides a visual memory of the resident in addition to the story itself

## Storytelling: Long-Lasting Impact

The benefits of life story writing projects are multiple and long-lasting. The most tangible and immediate benefit is the finished copy produced for the storyteller. This not only demonstrates to the older adult that his/her life is worthy of documentation, but also provides evidence of the storytelling process in which he/she has just participated. The printed document also allows people beyond those directly involved in the writing process to read and understand more deeply the defining moments in an individual's life.

Long term care staff can use residents' stories as a way to learn more about their residents and to provide even greater person-centred care. This focus on personhood consequently enhances the quality of life within the long term care setting by providing individualized care based on the uniqueness of each resident. The stories allow staff to see the residents beyond presenting impairments by providing staff with evidence that residents can still make valuable contributions.

During the storytelling project, storytellers will want to meet other residents involved in the project. This gives residents an opportunity to learn more about each other and to develop new friendships. It also helps them to see themselves as much more than the stereotype of "sick old people." Family members get to know their loved ones as they were in roles beyond that of grandmother/grandfather or mother/father. Finally, by leaving this life story to be passed down within the family, a legacy is created to allow younger generations a glimpse into the lives of relatives they may not have otherwise known..

Apart from the benefits of the story itself, life story writing has positive outcomes on the cognitive and social functioning of the storyteller. Personal projects such as this help older adults retrieve and preserve their memories. The printed document then allows them to re-visit and re-evaluate the importance of these memories in their lives, and gives visitors the opportunity to use these memories as conversation starters. In this way, life story telling enhances the social lives of the older adult. By working on this type of story project, storytellers can gain confidence in sharing their experiences in casual settings with others, creating a larger

social circle that is focused around meaningful conversation. Participating in a life story writing process contributes to the older adult's level of self-esteem. The process of facilitating creates for them an enabling environment where they not only have control, but also have someone taking an active and genuine interest in their life.

### End Note

Each of us has a story inside to tell. As we age, that story only becomes more complex and more important within the tapestry of each family history. As the old saying goes: "When we lose an elder, we lose a library." Helping seniors in long term care to record their life stories is one strategy to share in the library now and in the future. It also affirms that these individuals are valued and respected, regardless of their age, status, disabilities or cognitive state. LTC

## From Inheritance to Legacy

**A grandparent,  
Linking you back two generations;  
A grandchild,  
Connecting you forward two generations;  
Five beloved generations!  
Arms and heart open wide as the world.**

© Ellen B. Ryan, 2005

---

### Suggested Reading

- Greene, B. & Fulford, D.G. (1993). *To Our Children's Children: Preserving Family Histories for Generations to Come*. New York: Doubleday.
- John, M.T. (Ed). (1992). *Story Writing in a Nursing Home: A Patchwork of Memories*. Haworth Press (also *Activities, Adaptation and Aging*, 1991, 16(1). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Ryan, E.B., Pearce, K., Anas, A.P. & Norris, J.E. (2004). Writing a connection: Intergenerational communication through stories. In M.W. Pratt & B.E. Fiese (Eds.), *Family Stories and the Lifecourse: Across Time and Generations* (pp. 375-398). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schuster, E. (1998). A community bound by words: Reflections on a nursing home writing group. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 12, 137-147.
- Spence, L. (1997). *Legacy: A Step-By-Step Guide to Writing Personal History*. Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press.

# Poetry in Long Term Care

## The Poet

**I first started writing when I was 22,  
And now I'm 92,  
So that was a long, long time ago.**

**I used to write poetry,  
But now I forget how.  
It's been oh so long now.**

**I first wrote because I had a reaction to something.  
I felt I needed to write it down.  
It felt so good that I just kept doing it.**

**excerpt, by a resident at The Meadows**

As anyone working with older adults knows, every person has a story. Every resident we work with has memories, experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings that are as individual as they are.

But how do we capture these stories? How do we help residents with mild to moderate dementia form a "coherent" story? How do we help residents share memories in a way that validates their stories, encourages social interaction and calls attention to their abundance of wisdom and life experiences? And what if we could capture the heart of their story? What if we could capture their past, present and future stories in a written record for everyone to appreciate? Well we can — and it's not as hard as you might think.

Poetry has been a form of art and storytelling for thousands of years. Poems can communicate the simple and the difficult, the ordinary and the extraordinary, in both a short and sweet, and deep and profound way. Fostering poetry among older adults residing in long term care may seem a daunting task. Yet, Assisted Poetry as an activity can be surprisingly successful in the long term care environment. Assisted Poetry takes reminiscence beyond spoken recollections into a more tangible format that can be shared across time.

We have worked with group poetry and also facilitating poetry with a single person, sometimes with additional assistance from a fellow resident. Indeed, the author of the two individual poems in this article was successful despite

**by Andrea  
Cosentino,  
Ellen B.  
Ryan &  
Paula  
Papky**

Andrea Cosentino and Paula Papky are at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Ellen Ryan is a Professor in gerontology in McMaster University's McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies. She can be reached at (905) 525-9140, ext. 24995 or by e-mail at ryaneb@mcmaster.ca.

## Recommended Materials

### *During a Session*

**paper (either flip chart or regular)**

**easel pad (for flip chart)**

**pens or markers**

**pictures and mementoes (visual)**

**a poem read aloud (song lyrics also work well)**

**a tape or CD player and music (audio)**

**potpourri, home fragrance oils, scented bath products (sensual)**

**favourite or theme foods (taste)**

**pass around any of these items (tactile)**

### *After a Session*

**computer with basic word processing program**

**coloured or decorative paper**

**printer or photocopier**

**protective sheets, frames or bulletin boards for displaying completed poems**

being unable to recognize her helpers or to recall any of the numerous poetry sessions until she was again deep in the midst of a creative interaction.

## Who Can Participate?

Poetry programs allow residents to participate according to their various abilities. In every session, poetry facilitators adapt the creative process and goals of the session according to the physical and cognitive needs and abilities of the participating residents.

## Who Benefits?

Residents experience:

- a positive outlet for personal expression and creativity
- individualized programming that makes use of mental abilities
- communicating and working with others
- sense of meaning and belonging
- pride in accomplishment
- the potential to form new friendships
- increased understanding, knowledge and respect from those who read their poems

Staff facilitators experience:

- a personal connection and understanding of those residents who participate
- the privilege of eliciting, organizing, and arranging the stories of adults who lived long, interesting lives

- the satisfaction of knowing that their facilitation has enabled the participating residents to expand their sense of personhood

Staff, family and friends who are not present in the actual sessions but read the completed poems experience:

- new knowledge and respect for the resident(s) who created the poems
- a better understanding and appreciation of older adults in long term care
- the opportunity to use information from the poems for better understanding and to enjoy more meaningful interactions

Members of the residents' council benefit from having a poetry program offered in the home by working with activity/recreation staff to advocate and promote the stories and abilities of their residents through the compilation of selected poems into a bound booklet. The council can also distribute and sell the booklets in the home and local community to generate funds for other council projects.

The home benefits from such a program as well. Through the distribution and reading of completed poems, more meaningful communication can take place between residents and others within the facility. Completed poems, and particularly a bound collection, provide something unique and tangible for managers, prospective residents/families, new staff and the wider community. The program can also be an encouragement for new volunteers, as this type of activity requires enthusiastic facilitators and assistants with specific creative interests and abilities.

## What a Group Session Might Look Like

The most important aspect of a successful poetry program is one or more committed facilitators who believe in the potential and importance of the program. An enthusiastic facilitator can help residents see the advantages and benefits of participating.

### **Before the Session**

- Prepare a potential theme and corresponding items.
- Arrange room so the participants are sitting in a semi-circle formation with residents facing the flip chart paper, or in a circular formation with the facilitator visible to everyone.
- Invite residents with similar cognitive abilities to the session.
- Aim for up to 12 residents with physical impairments and up to six residents with cognitive and/or dementia-related impairments.

## Common Objections from Residents & Potential Responses

Objection	Response
A) "I (physically) can't write."	A) Inform and reassure the resident that you will do all of the physical writing, while they provide the ideas.
B) "I'm not good at poetry."	B) Inform and reassure the resident that it is a collaborative process with yourself and other residents. Explain that the group creates the poem, and they can be an active or passive part of the process.
C) "I can't read/see the poems."	C) Inform and reassure the resident that seeing is not necessary for participating in the session, and that you will repeat and re-read all contributions from the group.
D) "I can't read/hear the poems."	D) Inform and reassure the resident that hearing is not necessary for participating in the session, and that you will record/write on paper all contributions from the group.
E) "I'm not interested."	E) Inform the resident of how the program works, the benefits of participating, and who will be attending. Explain the different ways they could participate (active, passive), and how they could get involved.

### During the Session

- Introduce the sessions' theme and help elicit participants' thoughts, ideas, memories and creativity by using the items that trigger at least two of the five senses.
- Record on paper and re-read back to the group all thoughts and ideas generated.
- Encourage residents to participate actively and share in the session, as everyone's ideas are valuable for development of the poems.
- Once a significant number of ideas have been generated, and depending on the ability and cooperation of the participants, organize the words into a poem with the participants' assistance.
- Thank residents for attending and inform them that they will receive the completed poem when it is typed.

### After the Session

- If you are unable to organize and arrange the group's words during the session, do this as soon after the session as possible.
- Type the completed poem in large print (try Arial 14) on the computer. Depending on the abilities of the group, the printed poem can be brought back to the group for editing and approval.
- Distribute the large print, completed poem to participants. Displaying it in their rooms — on the wall or in a frame — is especially nice.
- Distribute the large print, completed poem throughout the

home. Bulletin boards, staff rooms, nursing stations and monthly newsletters are just a few places to consider.

## The Colour Red

**So much depends upon red;  
a hand-woven scarf  
a red rose and Emperor tulips  
a favourite lipstick  
Wine With Everything**

**So much depends upon red;  
a good Bordeaux  
a little red wagon  
a red sunset  
a little red schoolhouse  
on fire,  
put out by  
a little red fire truck.**

**So much depends upon red;  
burning bush, maple leaves, sumach,  
cardinals and red robin breast.**

**So much depends upon red;  
blushing cheeks  
my love is like a red, red rose  
like red sails in the sunset  
like the red, red robin  
comes a bob, bob, bobbin' along.**

**Written by The Meadows Writing Group**

## Common Objections from Staff & Potential Responses

Objection	Response
A) "I'm not good at poetry."	A) Your role is to help facilitate the stories of residents and arrange them into a poetry format. Being 'good' at poetry is therefore not required.
B) "I don't know how to start and/or what to write about."	B) Have a theme and relevant items chosen before the session, and use them as an introduction to the topic. Potential themes include holidays, seasons, colours, weather, life events, family, places and leisure activities.
C) "I don't know what to say."	C) Ask open ended and sense-specific questions. Try questions like: What does/did/would X remind you of? Make you think of? Look like? Smell like? Taste like? Feel like? Sound like? How does/did/would X make you feel? Look? Smell? Taste? Sound? Where did/do/would you see, taste, feel, hear, smell, touch X? When did/do/would you see, taste, feel, hear, smell, touch X?
D) "Our residents can't do poetry. It's too hard."	D) Every resident has a story to tell, and poetry can be the most effective and efficient means of sharing it with others. Be sure to adapt the goals and process of the session according to the abilities of the residents.

### When and Where

A poetry session can take place at any time of the day, according to the ability of the residents. Behaviours that may help determine the best time for your participants include their ability to be focused and alert to derive the maximum benefits from the program at a particular time. Some residents will benefit from participating in the program during the late morning; others may benefit from an early evening session. You and your staff are the best evaluators of your residents' optimum times, so plan your sessions accordingly. One interesting option, especially with a volunteer facilitator, is a Saturday evening poetry café.

The location of the poetry sessions will depend on the ability and comfort of the residents. Group size and ability of the participants to ignore distractions can dictate where a session will take place. For example, holding a session in a high traffic area with windows and no doors may not work for residents with dementia. Yet, an open area may attract cognitively able residents who would not join otherwise.

### Conclusion

Individuals residing in long term care homes can benefit in multiple ways from the process and outcome of a poetry program. Completed poems call attention to the abundance of wisdom and life experiences available for sharing by individuals residing in long term care homes. Through the distribution of completed poems, staff, family, friends

and other residents are better able to understand, appreciate and communicate with the resident poet in a way that validates their stories — and ensures that they are heard. **LTC**

### Suggested Reading

- Hagens, C. (1995). Reminiscence and write: A creative writing program for the nursing home. *Long Term Care Journal*, 5(2), 9-10.
- Hagens, C., Beaman, A. & Ryan, E.B. (2003). Reminiscing, poetry writing, and remembering boxes: Personhood-centered communication with cognitively impaired older adults. *Activities, Adaptation, and Aging*, 27(3/4), 97-112.
- Killick, J. (1999). 'What are we like here?' Eliciting experiences of people with dementia. *Generations*, 23(3), 46-49.
- Koch, K. (1977). *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Koch, K. (1978). Teaching poetry writing to the old and the ill. *Millbank Memorial Fund Quarterly/Health and Society*, 56, 113-126.