



# RECORD YOUR LIFE STORIES

## *Giving Your Family the Gift of Connection*

**B**ill and Luan Zoellner of Park Ridge, Illinois, have a whirlwind love story. The couple met at a Chicago bar in 1969, where Bill was attending a bachelor party. When an obnoxious guy in the group started hitting on Luan, Bill intervened. Three months later, he asked Luan to marry him.

The Zoellners relived those early months of their courtship recently while making a video about their love story for their children and grandchildren.

“It was fun hearing my husband describe how we met and what he was thinking at the time,” says Luan, 72. “He said



Bill and Luan on their wedding day.

things I’d never heard before and talked about how he felt more than he ever had.”

Preserving those memories has never been more important to the couple, who will celebrate 50 years of marriage in June. With Bill now fighting a terminal illness, the couple didn’t want to wait for their golden anniversary to reflect on their lives together.

Sharing stories from your life with your loved ones is one of the most precious gifts you can give them. Hearing your stories can help your children and grandchildren know you better and may lead them to discover new things about themselves—from quirky inherited traits to events that shaped who they are today.

Today’s technology makes it easy to capture your stories and preserve them in your own voice. You can record your narrative on a handheld voice recorder or on your smartphone’s video camera. If

you have computer skills, you can use audio or video apps to edit your tales before sharing with family or friends.

Not a technology whiz? A younger member of your family



Bill and Luan  
Zoellner

may be able to help you get started. You can also hire a video biographer to weave together clips of you telling your life story with family photos, memorabilia and music.

### ***Bringing the Past to Life***

Video storytelling is powerful because it allows loved ones to hear your voice, see your expressions and feel the emotional impact of your stories, says Susan Saunders, owner of Family Line Video, which produces video biographies in the Chicago area.

“They can hear you laugh or see you smile as you recount certain events,” Saunders says. “Younger generations today are used to looking at screens, so they like having those visual references.”

Saunders was inspired to start her business after interviewing older adults for a graduate school project and seeing how the experience touched them and their family members who received the audio transcripts.

“I wanted to put the family in the interviewer’s chair, so they could feel like their parent or grandparent was talking directly to them,” she says.

Many of the video biographies she does are for adults in their 70s who want to pass down family stories and history to the next generation.

*The Zoellners’ kids loved seeing pictures of their parents’ first cars and hearing how Luan bought her 1964 Ford Mustang on a whim.*

“They want others to know their parents and grandparents like they did: who they were, what made them special and what they meant to them,” Saunders says.

The Zoellners turned to Saunders for help making a video as a Christmas gift for their four children and three grandchildren. They had started writing their recollections for their kids—all of whom live in different states—but realized they really wanted to give them something more visual.

“I would love to hear my parents’ voices again, so I thought it would be something they would appreciate having one day,” Luan says.

Saunders interviewed the couple separately and together, asking questions that sparked stories neither one had thought about for years, from what it was like growing up in the 1950s to early memories of their parents.

“My dad was 6’5”, and I’d forgotten how much fun it was to ride on his shoulders,” Luan says. “It was nice to look back on moments like that.”

The couple also enjoyed digging up photos for Saunders to use to illustrate stories in the video. The Zoellners’ kids loved seeing pictures of their parents’ first cars and hearing how Luan bought her 1964 Ford Mustang on a whim.

“They knew I had a cute British racing green car, but they had never heard me talk about not knowing how to drive a stick shift when I bought it,” Luan says.

She and Bill also reminisced about the joy they felt when their children were born and the lessons they taught the kids about giving back.

“I hope the video will show them how much we loved and cared for them while they were growing up and how much we enjoyed our lives together as a family,” Luan says.

### ***Making Your Own Video Biography***

Hiring a video biographer can be expensive, which leads many people down the do-it-yourself path. If you want to give it a try, you can easily record yourself, or ask a friend or relative to interview you about family history and life experiences. Start with these topics:





## Collect Your Family HEALTH HISTORY

**Ever get tired** of answering those questions about your family health history on doctor's forms? Filling in those blanks may be more important than you think. Knowing your family health history can help you and your doctors reduce your health risks.

If your mother or sister has experienced breast, colon or ovarian cancer, for example, your doctor may recommend more frequent cancer screenings. If diabetes or heart disease run in your family, you may need to keep closer tabs on your blood pressure or cholesterol. Even conditions such as depression and migraines can have genetic links, says Justin Bartos, M.D., a physician at the Senior Health Clinic at Medical City North Hills Hospital in North Richland Hills, Texas.

"Sometimes a patient's family history will cause me to run additional tests to confirm or rule out a diagnosis, and sometimes it's the key to diagnosing them," Dr. Bartos says.

When he discovered that a stroke patient in her 50s lost her father and uncle to heart attacks in their 40s, Dr. Bartos was able to provide the interventions to prevent more cardiovascular problems.

If you don't know much about your family health history, start collecting it. Ask your parents and siblings about their health history first. Then talk to aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and half-siblings. Use these questions as conversation starters:

- Do you have any chronic diseases, such as heart disease or diabetes?
- Do you have any health conditions, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol?
- Have you had any other serious diseases, such as cancer or stroke?
- How old were you when this disease or condition was diagnosed?

Ask about the age and cause of death of your grandparents, and others in your extended family. Compile what you learn and share with your doctor. If you have a strong family history of a disease, ask what steps you can take to lower your risk.

Share any diagnosis or genetic test results you receive with family members as well. Your kids and grandkids will thank you! ■



Visit [H2U.com/magazine](https://www.h2u.com/magazine) for a downloadable form and tips to help you compile your family health history.

→ **What do you remember about your parents and grandparents?** Describe their personalities and what they did for a living. What did you enjoy doing together? What was the best advice they gave you? What stories did they tell about your family history or ancestry?

→ **How did you spend your free time as a youngster?** What did you do for fun after school or on the weekends? What were your friends like? What was the best family vacation you ever took?

→ **How did you meet your spouse?** Share how your love story unfolded. What were your first impressions of your sweetheart? What do you remember about your first date? When did you know you were in love?

→ **What were your biggest challenges?** You may be hesitant to talk about your struggles, but research shows that hearing about your tough times and how you overcame them can help young family members develop confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

If you have trouble recalling details from the past, look through a box of family photos, listen to old tunes, drive around your former neighborhood or pull out a board game from another era, Saunders suggests. Sensory reminders can trigger memories that "take you back to that time and place," she says.

Record your stories over several sessions, breaking them up by topic. Sit less than a foot from your recorder in a quiet area away from traffic, clocks, phones, TVs and people. Film videos in a space with lots of natural light, usually with the window behind the camera. If you don't have a tripod, prop the camera up against a book or heavy object a few feet away to hold it steady. Position the screen horizontally so it shows your face, hands and upper body.

### Sharing More Than Personal Stories

Searching for more ways to preserve family tales and history? Try these ideas.

→ **Start a journal.** Write stories that are told by others during holidays, birthdays or visits with grandkids. Keep your recollections in a notebook for your family to read one day.



→ **Write heirloom letters.** Document the stories behind your heirloom furniture, jewelry and tools. When were these items used? Who were they important to? How were they acquired? What makes them valuable?

→ **Make a family cookbook.** Gather favorite family recipes and ask relatives to share memories about each dish. Compile the recipes and memories into a cookbook to share at holiday gatherings or family reunions. ■