

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 25/05/2007</p> <p><b>Earned wisdom: the library's role in encouraging inter-generational storytelling</b></p> <p><b>Liz Weir</b> Professional Storyteller, Cushendall, Northern Ireland, UK</p>
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## Abstract

*Storytelling can and does link the past, present and future. This paper will describe inter-generational projects carried out in Northern Ireland which aimed to preserve memories, promote self esteem, and value the contribution of older members of our community. Several practical and easily replicable examples will be given of programs linking the age-groups and giving voice to those whose stories are seldom heard.*

Since storytelling and oral narrative is at the heart of my talk I will start with a folktale.

Once, long ago in Ireland, there was a young man who lived with his widowed father. Their home was very bare, they had no curtains at the windows, their meals were poor, their house very untidy. Then the son met a lovely young woman whom he went on to marry and she came to live with them both in their little cottage. Within a few weeks the whole place had a different look to it. There were pretty curtains at the window, nice china on the table, and the girl brought with her a beautiful woollen blanket which she draped over the old sofa.

In the course of time the young couple had a beautiful healthy baby boy. As the child grew, the old grandfather was getting more and more feeble. He could no longer do any work on the farm and the young man was becoming worried that he would be unable to support his wife and child – there was scarcely enough food for three, let alone four. The baby was crawling and

starting to take his first few steps and the son was losing patience with the old man.

One bitterly cold evening while the child was lying cooing in his little bed in the corner the young man spoke to his wife, ignoring his old father sitting at the fireside.

“I’ve decided that we need to send my father to the workhouse. He’s too weak to be of any use here.”

His wife was stricken with grief.  
“You can’t turn your old father out of the house!”

“There’s nothing else for it, we don’t have enough food to keep him here. He’s for the road tonight.”

“He’ll freeze to death. If you’re set on it, at least let him take my good woollen blanket to keep out the cold.”

“It’s too good to give him it all. He can have half of it.”

As the young man lifted the lovely blanket to start tearing it in two, his little son sat up in the bed and spoke his first real sentence.

“That’s right, Daddy, keep the other half. You’ll need that when I put you out on to the road!”

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In every culture a simple story can often touch us in places where an academic treatise cannot. What I wanted to show with this story is the empathy that can exist between the generations. Storytelling can and does link the past, present and future. Librarians have long realised its power and I follow in the footsteps of pioneers like Ruth Sawyer, Alice Kane and the UK’s wonderful Eileen Colwell.

Libraries, whether they be public or school libraries, are ideally placed as venues where stories can be shared. Traditionally storytelling has taken place for young children but I would like you to consider how we can develop this well practised art, widening out the audiences and extending it to the whole community. I believe that library and information professionals have the skills to fully exploit the collections which we have at our disposal and to work with the communities we serve. In return we can assist community building and also gather valuable archive material.

In addition, the library can have a very positive role in promoting cross-community contact in a conflict situation such as I was working with in Northern Ireland and in the increasingly multicultural society which is now developing in my homeland.

I intend to describe inter-generational projects carried out in Northern Ireland which aimed to preserve memories, promote self esteem, and value the contribution of older members of our community. I will give several practical and easily replicable examples of programmes linking the age-groups and giving voice to those whose stories are seldom heard

Local history sections contain stories, stories of people who lived and breathed and whose tales deserve to be told. In a project called "*Sharing Tales*" we started with a group of older people mostly in their 70's and 80's who were invited along to a reminiscence session. On these occasions it is important to take time for introductions and in Ireland a cup of tea often eases things along! Discussion was prompted by books containing old photographs of the local area showing not only landmark buildings and street scenes from long ago but also places of employment. There were shots of old linen mills with people working the looms and also photographs of farming with old machinery such as horse ploughs since we knew some of the people grew up in the country.

The role of the librarian is to act as a facilitator trying to draw out stories. Asking the right question at the right time is always important and even a simple question such as "Do you remember the first job you had or the first wage you earned?" will result in lots of comments. Taking the time to listen to each other is very important at this initial session. It is important to document each stage of the process but on a cautionary note I need to say that many older people are very nervous about being recorded or filmed so I never do this without their permission and I personally would never record on a first visit – we need time to get to know each other. It is not difficult to have someone scribe the main points.

Having got to know the older members of the group we then organised a second session to which we invited along some young people (children aged 10 or 11) for a storytelling session. During this we used books such as "Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge" by Mem Fox (which is an Australian book about the relationship between a young boy and a group of old people), or the poem "Warning" by Jenny Joseph. This prompted discussion about old age and the facilitator then went on to draw them out, stimulating discussion about very old relatives or how life has changed over the years. It was interesting to hear the children's perceptions of old age and there were lots of stereotypes of old people sitting quietly doing nothing. Books from the local studies section were again used to show old pictures of where they lived and websites were also used to make the sessions more interactive. The young people then went off tasked to ask questions from older members of their family and neighbours on topics such

as work, holidays and pastimes, favourite food. They were also asked to write poems or stories based on what they gathered.

Having “warmed up” both groups it was time to bring them together. This was marvellous to see. Many older people do not spend time with children any more and may themselves have certain stereotypical ideas about the youth of today. It might be interesting to those from outside Northern Ireland to note that both Catholic and Protestant people were involved in this project so it was truly cross-community.

The interaction was remarkable as they swapped stories, talked about the way life used to be and the young people read some of their work. Once again the role of the librarian/facilitator is vital to keep conversation flowing. At this stage with full permissions having been given it was possible to video the session for archive purposes. A booklet of stories which was compiled as a result was not only a collection of memories but a strengthening of community. This project was inexpensive to organise but rich in value.

The second example I would like to give is one which yet again would be easily replicated. This project called “Homefront Recall” was part of a larger programme which saw events taking place all over the United Kingdom and libraries were at the centre of many of them. In the one which I will describe involved a storyteller working in collaboration with a visual artist and a filmmaker. My task was to work with elderly people who had lived through the Second World War and the aim was to encourage them to tell their stories, not stories about the battlefield but what was going on at home. I was based in two towns so naturally the local library provided valuable local history materials and photographs of the period. Many of the people involved were infirm so it was necessary to go out to visit them in day centres or care homes. Local school children came and joined in the sessions and the whole thing resulted in a DVD of the stories, prints and photographs plus a booklet containing many of the fragments of memory.

One of a storyteller’s greatest delights is to be able to sit and listen to other people’s stories. It is a privilege to share stories with those who grew up before television and to see how one story “borrows” another so that the listeners are reminded of their own tales and respond by themselves becoming storytellers.

During the sessions of this “Home Front Recall” project we met many gifted raconteurs who had the chance to share tales, which in some cases had not been recollected for many years. As objects were passed around – a ration book, a gas mask, an old photograph - memories were unlocked and the stories started to emerge. Sometimes the remembering caused laughter, at other times, tears. Sometimes voices were strong and proud, at other times, hesitant and fearful. Yet the shared experience was that these wonderful stories were being valued, that someone wanted to hear them, for any storyteller needs an interested listener.

It was important that the atmosphere created during the telling was one of respect; respect for those now gone who couldn't tell their own stories, and for those still left, whose pride and increasing confidence meant that these tales would never be forgotten.

What a rare treat to see the gleam in an eye, the effort of remembering, to share the vivid word pictures created of surviving bombing raids or the high jinks of a cross-border smuggling escapade.

What emerged was a picture of a shared past, the story of those left behind to keep the home fires burning and of those far from home enduring many hardships. They painted a varied landscape of city streets with their air raid wardens and shelters and of country life with sheets made of bleached flour bags and freshly churned butter.

Shy smiles emerged at the memory of dances with American GI's livening up the scene with their gifts of nylons and chewing gum.

While yellowed photographs and cuttings contained precious memories of relatives, it was the personal stories, the authentic voices, which breathed life into the tales.

Projects such as this require careful planning and preparation. Library staff should try to work with partner organisations within their local area, whether they are community groups, social services departments, schools or local history societies. The aims must be clear from the outset and careful planning is required. The following questions should be asked:

- Is there to be a tangible outcome such as a publication, dvd, or audio archive or is the process itself the main objective? Sometimes the very fact that people are given the chance to share their stories is enough.
- What budget is available in terms of bringing in outside facilitators or purchasing extra resources or equipment? This may entail seeking sponsorship from local business or bidding for funding from local or national initiatives. In some cases the partners must apply for this rather than the local authority.
- Do the staff who will work on such an initiative have sufficient experience or do they need top up training? Examples of this may be up-skilling them on a topic such as digital or audio recording or an alternative may be to buy in such expertise. Do the partners require any training? This may include care staff, relatives, teachers or members of local societies who may need to learn research skills and advice on exploiting source material. One example of this was training given to hospice staff caring for terminally ill patients – these were often the last people to listen to stories and the retelling is often a great comfort to families.

- The timescale must be clear – is it to be a short term project or one which spans a lengthy period? The timescale too has budget implications in terms of staff time.
- In terms of resources, once the aims are clear librarians must extract suitable materials such as appropriate photographs, local history books, folklore, old street games and songs.
- How will the project be evaluated? Funders often require a full and considered evaluation but in any case this is of course best practice. Often such inter-generational projects can be used as examples which can be replicated and used to stimulate future work.

In conclusion, the examples of projects given in this paper are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what can be done to preserve stories and memories. By bringing together the generations and encouraging the sharing of folklore, personal memories and family history we can strengthen community links. Libraries are ideally placed to encourage this work and to participate fully in it. The resources already available provide a springboard for reminiscing and the tales collected can be archived and displayed. The act of retelling respects those who have gone before and put a value on those we are lucky enough to still have with us. A rare treasure indeed.