

RETIREMENT LIVING

Leave a Legacy by Writing Your Memoirs

IN THE EARLY 1960s, Brooklyn-born Mary Webster, then in her early twenties, worked for two years as an emergency-room nurse on the night shift in rural Georgia while her husband was stationed at Robins Air Force Base. “The hospital was segregated, and there were times when I would receive a black male, dead on arrival,” she recalls. “The police would describe the circumstances of the death, which didn’t always match the body wounds.”

Webster, now 68, is including such recollections, as well as descriptions of discrimination she faced as a young Jewish woman living in the South, in a memoir that she’s writing. She wants to tell her story to her family—two grown children, two stepchildren and several grandchildren.

Now a psychotherapist in Ridgewood, N.J., Webster says memoir writing has forced her to dredge up painful memories. “I interviewed family and friends about the impact on my family when I lost my eye when I was four,” she says. “It traumatized me so much that I had major depressive episodes throughout my adult life.”

In the course of writing her memoir, Webster realized how that childhood tragedy gave her fortitude to overcome obstacles throughout her life. She pushed herself to graduate nursing school and raised two children as a single mother.

Webster has plenty of company among her contemporaries who are putting their lives on paper. Most of these memoirists are writing for children, grandchildren and future generations. The memoirs provide a valuable legacy. Family members may learn for the first time the details of Dad’s childhood and military service, and can get a better sense of how his experiences made him who he is—and who they are.

The surge in amateur memoirists is spawning a cottage industry. Community colleges and adult-education programs offer courses in memoir writing. Instruction is also available via online workshops, such as Gotham Writers’ Workshop (www.writingclasses.com; 877-974-8377) and Memories and Memoirs (www.memoriesandmemoirs.com; 877-363-6647).

Technology has been a boon for memoir writers. You can conduct research more easily, and scan photographs and other memorabilia into your books.

If you think your memoir has a wider audience



than your family, you can go to one of many self-publishing houses. They include iUniverse (www.iuniverse.com; 800-288-4677) and AuthorHouse (www.authorhouse.com; 888-519-5121), which edit, print, distribute and promote an author’s book.

Those who need help writing can hire a consultant who can do it for you. Mary O’Brien Tyrell, who runs Memoirs Inc. (www.memoirsinc.com; 651-698-1158), spends about ten hours interviewing a subject, writes several drafts for a client’s review and prints the memoir in a hardcover book. The memoirs are usually commissioned by adult children for their parents, who are 75 and older. The cost can run \$3,000.

An Exercise in Self-Discovery

While the memoirs can be eye-openers for family members, the process can be an illuminating, and often difficult, experience for the writers. Tyrell recalls one client whose mother had died when the client was a young child. Soon after, her father committed suicide, leaving her to care for four younger siblings. During the course of the interviews, Tyrell says, “She was finally able to forgive her father. She said, ‘I now understand that he was depressed, and he tried and he just couldn’t do it.’”

Memoir writing is often a time to pull together the disparate parts of your life so that they can make sense, Tyrell says. One man she interviewed recalled that his earliest memory was being sick with scarlet fever at the age of four. During his illness, he played with a crate of toys, which his family burned after he recovered. He became a toy manufacturer. Memoir

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writing helped him make the connection between the loss of those toys and the need to create new ones.

“He never realized that before,” Tyrell says.

Richard Barovick, 77, a Bethesda, Md., business writer, is writing several essays, including a section on his father, a physician. Barovick describes him as a sometimes angry and crude man. “Writing about my father let me feel better,” he says. “It flooded my memory with past events, yet it put distance between us. Now I feel he wasn’t such a bad guy. He just practiced bad judgment.”

Like many memoir writers, he has concerns about revealing too much. “I will handle it by balancing positives with negatives,” he says. “There’s no need to air all the dirty linen, but enough to capture my real experiences.” When the memoir is completed, he would like his family and a few friends to read it.

Self-discovery was not one of Louis Panesi’s goals in writing his memoir. He hoped his story would help others in a similar situation. His 212-page memoir covers his early life growing up in Pittsburgh, when he was verbally and physically abused by his father and grandfather. They threw him out of the house when he was 19.

Panesi’s book describes how he was helped by Dr. Robert Shoemaker, a psychoanalyst. He graduated from college, and for the past 21 years he’s been a commercial pilot. Panesi, 55, who lives in Pineville, N.C., wrote his book “to help others who have been abused, and to honor the doctor that saved my life.” He says, “Before Dr. Shoemaker died, he told me to pass on what he taught me.”

Although Panesi spent only three months on the actual writing, it took three years to get the memoir from concept to publication. Panesi wanted to reach a larger audience than his circle of family and friends. He hired Nancy Cleary, head of Deadwood, Ore.–based Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing (www.wymacpublishing.com). She helped him create his own publishing firm, designed the cover and the interior, edited the copy, sent it to a printer and arranged to have Amazon.com and other Internet book retailers list *A Father’s Abuse . . . A Doctor’s Love* (Pass It On Publishing, \$15).

Take a Course and Get Some Tips

If you want advice on writing a memoir, you can take a course. Check with your community college. Barovick’s first step was an eight-week workshop on memoir writing conducted by the Writer’s Center in

Bethesda. The cost was about \$300. He found comments and suggestions from other students helpful. The instructor pushed him to reveal more about himself when he wrote about his family.

Lisa Garrigues of Ridgewood, N.J., runs workshops on memoir writing, mostly for women ages 40 to 60. Based on her teaching experiences, she wrote *Writing Motherhood: Tapping Into Your Creativity As A Mother & A Writer* (Scribner, \$25). As part of the writing process, she asks students to spend 15 minutes a day writing in a notebook. She says this exercise will help memoirists develop the habit of writing, generate material and recapture memories.

Bessie Carrington, who’s in her mid seventies, teaches a course on memoir writing at Duke University’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. She suggests that students write about events that occurred frequently, such as family customs, which could trigger vivid memories. She also advises that writers should start a memoir with a savory personal incident and that writers use photos to jog their memories.

Carrington is planning to write her own memoir. “I’ve been keeping a lot of notes for the past ten years,” she says. To fill in the gaps, she’s consulted with her sister. “We don’t even agree on some facts, much less our feelings,” she says. Still, she notes, “My sister was able to describe family life with my grandparents, who I did not know very well.”

Mary Jo Freebody, 64, who retired nine years ago as an elementary school teacher in New Jersey, decided to write her memoir because of her mother’s dementia. “I want my two daughters and three grandchildren to be able to hold something in their hands that helps them to know me,” she says. “I have had a full life, and I want those memories intact for when I can’t remember.”

Freebody took Garrigues’s course and used the notes from the classes to help shape her book. She interviewed her father before he died a few years ago.

Once you complete your memoir, ask your local historical society, library and college if they would like a copy for their archives. A veteran can participate in the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project (www.loc.gov/vets; 888-371-5848), which collects personal stories of wartime service.

Also, check with the Association of Personal Historians (www.personalhistorians.org). You can search its membership directory for firms and individuals who conduct workshops, ghostwrite, design and print memoirs. **K** —ROBERT K. OTTERBOURG