



Lilja LifeStories vice president Linda Tedford, left, and founder Mary Lilja help families document and preserve their memories.



## Story Time

Lilja LifeStories captures precious family memories.

IT WAS THE STORY OF HER OWN UNCLE, John Relf, that became the inspiration for Edina resident Mary Lilja to help others find a way to pass along their own precious family stories.

"Several years ago, my uncle had written about our ancestors—in longhand—and wanted to find a way to share it with the family," says Lilja, president of the public relations firm Lilja Inc. "There was a little bit of urgency for us to put it together because my uncle was battling melanoma at the time."

Lilja transcribed Relf's notes and assembled them into a book, then added family photos and distributed it at a family reunion. She was struck not only by the impact her Uncle John's story had on the entire family—including his recollections of the family's St. Paul home—but also amazed by the rich conversations among family members prompted by the sharing of memories. That family reunion was especially poignant since Relf died not long afterward.

"I knew then that I wanted to help other families tell their stories," recalls Lilja.

Not long afterward, Lilja launched Lilja LifeStories, based at the Lilja office in Eden Prairie. She and Lilja LifeStories vice-president, and Edina resident, Linda Tedford, as well as other staff members including Kadee Crottier, offer writing, editing and

design services, and help clients print as many copies of the books as they desire via the Lilja Press imprint.

While many Lilja LifeStories begin with old letters or other family documents, Lilja and Tedford also spend time in conversation with clients to help determine the scope of the project, whether it entails editing a manuscript already written by the client or penning the stories themselves, and corresponding with the client at each stage.

"In the interviews, we have our laptops and record verbatim what they tell us," says Tedford, who adds that she feels honored to be trusted with her clients' stories and privileged to help tell them.

One Lilja Press book, *Dearest Darling*, is a collection of letters written by Raymond Newman to Ellen Omernik, the woman who would become his wife. Most pages feature the image of a letter; Ellen stored all of them in a shoebox for many years. Newman's children also worked with Lilja LifeStories on another book, *Home Is the Range: Growing Up in a Northern Minnesota Mining Town*, a compilation of Newman's stories about the Iron Range. His family published the tribute after Newman's death.

"Most of the projects we do are written and produced for family only," says Lilja, but some are produced for wider audiences and

distribution. "It's an opportunity for them to put a frame around many of the stories they heard while they were growing up."

Since the finished products are all professionally rendered, Tedford believes they offer the family "a piece of art that's very accessible" and something she feels can be easily handed down from one generation to the next. While the company works with digital files, both women wonder whether emails, unlike handwritten documents, will ultimately stand the test of time.

Many Lilja LifeStories clients are seniors, although others want to record stories for their family members, too. "We baby boomers are going to want to make sense of things and tie up our legacy," says Lilja.

Tedford says that many seniors just need encouragement from family members to record their stories: "I've heard some say they don't think their children will value their experiences. It's important for families to affirm that they do want those stories before they are gone forever." This is particularly true if the older family member is beginning to experience memory loss.

"Family stories can be so profound," says Lilja. "They focus on history, values and so many things that matter to people." //