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JAA program uses ethical wills as blueprints for a lifetime

by [Toby Tabachnick, Staff Writer](#)

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What makes up the story of someone's life?

Facts can be recorded, important dates, careers, hobbies, awards. All of those things matter, of course, and can certainly describe what a person did.

But what if you wanted to know whom a person really was, what was meaningful to them, their regrets, what made their life worth living?

Volunteers with the Jewish Association on Aging, through its new Lessons of a Lifetime program, are now being trained and matched up with senior citizens to conduct interviews that will culminate in ethical wills, aiming to document the essence of our elders.

Ethical wills are not legal documents, but rather personal accounts created for the benefit of current and future generations. And they go a step further than mere oral histories, said Beverly Brinn, director of community engagement at the JAA.

"The questions go even deeper, to get at their values and their feelings," Brinn said. "It's about their lives and what they want to pass on to the next generation."

The concept of an ethical will is not new, but has existed for 3,000 years, described in the Torah when Jacob gives his final blessing to his children and grandchildren at the end of his life. (Genesis 48:15-16)

The Lessons of a Lifetime program was initiated in Pittsburgh last year, underwritten by a grant from the Jewish Women's Foundation. Last year, volunteers were from the Hillel Jewish University Center, but now volunteers are being drawn from the wider community, and will include high school students. The volunteers are being matched with senior citizens who are living at Sivitz Jewish Hospice, at home or at the Charles Morris Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.

The program currently has four volunteers, who conduct their interviews over the course of at least three visits with the senior citizens, according to Brinn.

Volunteers, who were trained last month, are given a set of 22 questions to ask the senior citizens, with the goal of creating a lasting document that will serve as both a memento and guide to future generations.

"We're looking for values, thoughts and words of wisdom," Brinn said.

The questions include:

- “What values and beliefs are important to you, and to pass on to others?”
- “Is there anything in your life that you want others to know about?”
- “Have you ever had a life-altering experience or was there an event that changed your life that you can share with us?”
- “What was the most meaningful event in your life?”

Lessons of a Lifetime was created six years ago at the Charles E. Smith Life Communities in Rockville, Md., said Andy Siegel, a sophomore at George Washington University, who helped develop the training for the program along with its creators, Hedy Peyser and Joshua Stanton.

“My goal was to train, to conduct interviews, and to spread the project to other organizations,” said Siegel, a human services major. “The program has been pretty successful in Pittsburgh.”

So far, the Lessons of a Lifetime project has been picked up by communities in Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland, as well as in Pittsburgh, Siegel said.

“The stories and life experiences you hear from the elderly are so much more valuable than academic education,” Siegel said. “They’ve been through so much; these stories are so valuable.”

In addition to providing a lasting record of one’s values for his family, the interviews for the ethical wills are also often therapeutic, Siegel said.

“Sometimes, there are things that [the elderly] want to get off their chests to a third party,” he said. “Things they have been holding in. Often times, it is a form of closure.”

A “recurring theme” that surfaces in the interviews is the importance of family, Siegel said. “So many times people get caught up in their jobs, and they lose sight of what’s really important.”

John Davis, a volunteer at the JAA’s Sivitz Jewish Hospice for about six months, has conducted interviews with many patients there. He finds it rewarding to see the patients reconnect with who they are by remembering the significant lessons of their lives.

“When people are in that position — when their bodies are not what they were — and they are separated from family and friends, and no longer work at a profession, it’s easy for them to forget who they were and what they did,” Davis said. “[Interviewing them] helps them feel affirmed as a human being. It helps to bring back a sense of self they might have lost.”

After spending time with and talking to many senior citizens, Davis had an epiphany of sorts.

“When you’re growing up, you see old people, and you think they’ve always been old,” he said. “I realized that people are the same. They’re the same people they were; they just look different on the outside. I think age and aging becomes less of a strong line.”

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Want to help?

To volunteer for the Lessons of a Lifetime project, contact Beverly Brinn at 412-521-1975.

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