



Organizations looking for youth service opportunities and for ways to bridge the generation gap between younger and older community members may want to launch a Life Stories project, where younger volunteers interview senior citizens to learn about their lives and the community's history.

## Planning Your Project

1. First, create an action plan. A concise action plan can be shared with project partners, volunteers, peers and even your local media. Focus on the vision, mission and goals of your project, and clarify your project's potential short-term and long-term community impacts.
2. Once you create your action plan, it's time to identify your project partners. Consider a range of potential partners, including individuals, groups and community organizations to help plan and/or implement the project. You will need at least one partner to recruit and coordinate the seniors. Consider guest artists, local oral history experts, technologically savvy individuals or groups, and even media partners.
3. Organize an initial planning meeting to bring together your project partners and supporters. At the meeting, discuss the project logistics, agenda and budget. Determine roles and responsibilities for implementing the project.
4. Whether you already have volunteers or you are beginning first-time recruitment efforts in your community, always follow the best practices of volunteer recruitment. This includes targeted messaging, getting the word out in the community, and following up with volunteers in an organized, professional manner.



## Preparation

Thorough preparation leading up to the day of your project is essential to creating a quality experience for volunteers, seniors and project partners. Six to eight weeks before the project date, create lists of critical tasks that need to be completed or in progress each week leading up to the project.

## Interview Techniques

Volunteers will probably feel both excited and anxious about interviewing seniors. Likewise, seniors may feel unsure about what is expected of them and seem reserved when it comes to sharing their personal stories. Before seniors arrive at the project site, train volunteers in interview techniques that will help put seniors at ease. Also, explain the protocol for recording stories so that your transcript results will be consistent. Prepare the Life Stories interview questions in advance and distribute to volunteers during orientation. Prepared questions will encourage conversation between volunteers and the seniors and help alleviate any anxiety about finding things to talk about.

## Executing the Project

Schedule volunteers to arrive at the project site before the seniors so they can participate in an orientation covering the project goals and interview techniques. You may invite a guest presenter, such as an oral history professor, to assist with the orientation. When the seniors arrive, lead the volunteers and seniors in a warm-up activity so that everyone can get to know each other and feel comfortable. When ready, match two volunteers with each senior and begin conducting the interviews. One volunteer can ask the interview question while the other volunteer takes charge of recording the conversation. After the interviews are completed, the group will create keepsake books using the stories shared by the seniors. A person with experience in book arts could lead volunteers and seniors in this activity. The project takes about four hours to complete, but it can be divided into two two-hour sessions.



## Reflection

The Life Stories project concludes with volunteer reflection and evaluation. Reflection is a structured time for volunteers to think and talk about their service experience. The purpose of reflection is to help volunteers understand the community issues they affect through service, to problem solve as a group and to inspire future action. If appropriate, invite seniors to participate in the reflection session with volunteers. The facilitator of this session should prepare in advance facts and questions that relate to the issue and volunteer projects to help encourage meaningful reflection.

Evaluation is key to understanding the effectiveness of the Life Stories project. By asking volunteers to complete an evaluation form, you will find out if the project met volunteer expectations, fulfilled the project goals and/or impacted volunteer knowledge, attitude or skills.

## Interview Questions

The interview questions, prepared as handouts in advance of the project, can address a range of topics or focus in on specific experiences. Some ideas for topics include childhood, youth, love, work, education, historical events, inventions and community experiences. Remember, the questions you prepare for the interviews should all be open ended, thoughtful and respectful.

### Question Ideas

- What is your name, and why were you named it? Did you have a nickname growing up? How did you get it?
- What are your parents' names?
- How many brothers and sisters do you have? Names and ages?
- Where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- What was your hometown like?
- What kind of house did you live in? Who lived with you?
- Where did you shop?
- How is the world different from how it was when you were a child?



- What do you think are the most important inventions made during your lifetime?
- Describe an evening out with friends when you were a teenager.
- What were the hardest choices you ever had to make? Do you feel like you made the right decisions?
- Have you ever been in love?

## Variations

The Life Stories recipe can be varied to meet the needs of your community, project partners or volunteers. And, if you or your partners have specific skills or interests, you should try to incorporate these into the project. For example, if you have the technological capabilities, you could create a web site rather than a book. Or, you may choose to bring the same group of volunteers and seniors together once a week over a longer period of time to produce play at the conclusion of the project. It's up to you!

The rich life experiences of our nation's seniors, when embraced by the community, strengthen our families and neighborhoods and help us understand our history and traditions. Even so, many of us know very little about the seniors residing in our communities or even in our own families. People who do not build relationships with community elders rarely have the opportunity to discover the rich, unwritten history revealed through their life stories. Recollections of journeys taken, perspectives of historical events or ways in which the community has changed—the Life Stories project preserves and honors these unique stories, transforming seniors' experiences into community assets by giving us a context for how we think about our communities then, now and in the future.

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