

The following has been expanded and edited, after the article was published in the Jewish Journal, in order to clarify some details and information. The original article can be seen at: http://jewishjournal.com/culture/lifestyle/50_plus/222268/everybody-tale-tell-ellie-kahn-wants-hear-hand-many-possible/

The storyteller

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EVERYBODY HAS A TALE TO TELL, AND ELLIE KAHN WANTS TO HEAR AND HAND DOWN AS MANY AS POSSIBLE



Ellie Kahn (right) with Louise Polansky, whom she interviewed for an oral history in 2013.

BY [EITAN AROM](#) | PUBLISHED JUL 28, 2017 | [50 PLUS](#)

Actor Jon Voight walked into Jerry's Deli in Studio City on a recent afternoon and made a beeline for Ellie Kahn, a sprightly 68-year-old with tight, red curls. The two had met before at another San Fernando Valley deli. After shmoozing for a bit, Voight, 78, moved on, making the rounds. It was a Friday afternoon, and Jerry's was full of old folks taking long lunches.

This is Kahn's target market: elderly people with plenty of stories to tell.

Kahn, an occasional contributor to the Jewish Journal, makes her living as an oral historian, a job that mostly entails interviewing elderly folks and saving their life stories in a book or video presentation. Her 25-year career arose largely out of her natural attraction toward senior citizens and their stories.

"My ex-husband always said he had to stop me from picking up old people in the park, because I just was very drawn to them," she said during a recent interview at Jerry's. If Kahn happened to be seated

next to an old person at a Jewish deli counter, she said, “I’d end up hearing their whole life story, because everyone has one and I love listening.”

Kahn’s career is built on the idea that everybody has stories to tell and these memories are important to save for future generations. She draws on experience from her past careers as a journalist and a therapist to help people to open up about their lives. And she worries that each day that passes, people who haven’t had the benefit of an oral history are taking their stories to the grave.

“When I started doing this work, I said that my mission was for every person to have a chance to tell their life story. It makes me sad that so many people don’t get that chance.”

She discussed her work and philosophy with the Journal in an interview that has been edited for clarity and length.

Jewish Journal: How did you get into this line of work?

“When I started doing this work, I said that my mission was for every person to have a chance to tell their life story.”

Ellie Kahn: I was a full time journalist, writing for Travel + Leisure, for medical publications, for the L.A. Times, and the Los Angeles Herald Examiner. When I met an interesting older person, I would want to write about them in whatever magazine I was writing for. One day a friend who knew how much I enjoyed seniors’ stories said to me, “Do you know about the field of oral history?” And I had never heard of it. I found a mentor and started. My parents were my guinea pigs. Fortunately, 25 years ago when I interviewed them, they both had clear memories. My mom’s been gone for 12 years and my father for 5. Having their stories saved means the world to me.”

– Ellie Kahn

JJ: What is your favorite part of the job?

EK: The intimacy that I feel with the person, spending that many hours with them. You know, five hours, 10 hours, 20 hours — it’s very intimate. I love giving them a chance to share their life stories, which I believe is a rare opportunity for all of us. The other satisfying aspect is when the family gets the book or the video and they say, “Wow, we never heard some of these stories.” How often do families sit down for hours and have such conversations? One of my interviews was with a couple who were both Holocaust survivors, and their daughter-in-law hired me to do it as a surprise for her husband, their son. When he got the book he called me the next day and said, “I was up all night reading this book and crying.” He said, “There was so much I didn’t know before.” That is very gratifying for me. It’s also painful when I hear the regret that people feel when they didn’t save the family’s stories.

JJ: Twenty hours is a long interview. What happens to all that tape?

EK: I’ve interviewed about 150 people over the 25 years and usually it’s more like 5-10 hours. The family gets a CD or DVD copy of the entire interview. The longer interviews usually end up being edited into books or shorter videos. Either audio or video recordings can be transcribed and made into a book. Video interviews can be edited into shorter projects, typically of 15-60 minutes. Sometimes these

are used for a tribute for a celebration or a memorial. The edited videos and books incorporate photos and documents as well. If the interviews are for a documentary film or a tribute for a fundraising dinner, then it is always edited. For instance, the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California hired me years ago to produce a film, “Meet Me at Brooklyn and Soto” which involved interviewing 50 people, and editing that into a one-hour film.

JJ: What are the costs for your work?

EK: My basic fees start at about \$400-500 for a half day voice or video recorded interview, and, if people want an edited book or video produced from these interviews, the costs for the editing typically run from about \$5,000 to \$10,000, or more for longer interviews. Most people see this as a priceless part of their legacy. As one client said, “We spent over that for a new sofa! It’s obvious which is worth more, and the investment to save our stories will last forever!”

JJ: What do you think is the primary value of the work you do?

EK: As I said, far too few people ever get a chance to talk at length about themselves with someone truly listening. I think everyone should have that opportunity. I see it as a healing experience, and a way to find meaning by reviewing one’s life. Grandparents and parents feel honored that their family values their stories and memories enough to have them recorded. And descendants benefit from knowing about their heritage and their roots, and about the people who came before them. It’s a gift that lasts from generation to generation.

JJ: You most often interview people who, because of their age, are confronting their own mortality. What lessons have you drawn from that?

EK: It’s very helpful for someone facing their last chapter of life to feel free to talk about that fact. But people avoid the topic. A Holocaust survivor might protect their children by not describing what happened, and the children are protecting their parents by not asking them about their experiences, and there goes the connection that they could have had through sharing those stories. And similarly, too many people, when they have a parent or spouse who’s dying think they’re doing a good service by not bringing up the subject. They’re afraid that they’re going to upset the person or make them sad. But really the person ends up feeling isolated. When someone is facing their last chapter of life—at any age—it’s healing and satisfying to review and share their life stories, to find meaning, and to know these stories will live on.

JJ: What do you do when you’re not doing oral histories or kibitzing with Jon Voight at Jewish delis?

EK: I hike, I go to the bird sanctuary, I do nature photography, I spend time with friends. I obsess a bit about the safety of wildlife in my backyard, and take pictures of baby doves and squirrels. And I’m updating my own family history.

For information: www.livinglegaciesfamilyhistories.com

Ellie Kahn (818) 522-5600 ekzmail@gmail.com

