

Memories are kept like this

Interview, candid photos meant to preserve life story

By Diane Hassan
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Rozanne Gates, 63, said, "I'd give anything to listen to my mother's voice, but she died at an early age.

That longing is part of the reason she and Suzanne Sheridan, 57, both resident of Westport, launched The Legacy Project USA last month.

The idea of the business is to capture people's voices and images and preserve them as a family keepsake for present and future generations.

The women's backgrounds make them well suited for the task.

Gates has worked as a theater agent and stage manager, and for 26 years represented Tony Award-winning actress Lynne Thigpen. When Thigpen died suddenly in 2003, a foundation was established in her name to help struggling New York actors.

For the foundation Gates did a series of 10 interviews called "Shop Talk" at the Drama Book Shop to introduce young thespians to successful actors, casting directors, directors and producers.

Sheridan, a professional photographer, has owned a studio in Westport for 14 years, where she's shot photos of individuals, families, pets and special events.

The two women's collaboration sprang from programs Gates created as executive director of First Night Westport/Wilton.

For the "Living History" program on Dec. 31, 2006, attendees could visit the Westport Historical Society, sit in front of a computer with a mini-cam, and record something of their family's history.

In 2008, when the First Night theme was "We Are Family," local photographers volunteered their time to take portraits of many different kinds of families — groups of relatives, co-workers, sports teams, etc.

"It was very, very successful," Gates said, and "Suzanne Sheridan was the photographer most people chose" to work with their family.

Now the two have "combined our skills and are taking advantage of (today's) technology," Gates explained.

A client who books The Legacy Project

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Photos, recorded interviews help to preserve a life story

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gets a two-hour session in his or her home or at the Westport studio. It begins with a 30-minute photo shoot with Sheridan, after which Gates conducts an informal interview while running a Zoom H2 digital recorder.

The end result, just 10 days later, is a 20-page photo album with a copy of the interview on CD tucked inside.

"The smile that it brings when people hear themselves on the CD and see themselves in the book," Sheridan said, "the good experience the subject feels while being listened to for over an hour while they connect with the value of their own life, that's what I enjoy most about our work."

"I love the sense of joy and emotion that people express during the photo session and the interview," she continued.

"I love listening to the stories," Gates said. "And Suzanne's photos always capture a person's essence."

Ridgefield resident Kathleen Sheridan, who is not related to Suzanne, was a perfect candidate for The Legacy Project. She was born on Feb. 22, 1922, in Yonkers, N.Y., and married her husband, Phil, in 1945.

They had nine children and eventually 16 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

"There's another great-grandchild on the way," she said. "I was married to Phil for 63 years, but he passed away five months ago."

"Kathleen and I spent over



"The smile on her face seemed to get bigger and bigger as she recalled some of the very special moments that marked her life," Rozanne Gates said about interviewing Ridgefield resident Kathleen Sheridan, shown in her home.

an hour together," Gates said. "We hadn't realized the time had passed so quickly — her story was so engaging."

"I thought the experience was wonderful and I really enjoyed meeting the ladies," Kathleen Sheridan said. "They were delightful."

Her interview with Gates was both "silly and serious," she said. "I enjoyed my conversation with her very much. I was completely comfortable."

"Her eyes were gleaming," Gates said. "The smile on her face seemed to get bigger and bigger as she recalled some of the very special moments that marked her life."

"She told stories, some horrifying, of living in the South during the Civil Rights movement and driving black voters to the polls in 1965," Gates said. "Kathleen is a woman who believes in equal-

ity for everyone, and I was moved by her commitment to human justice and dignity."

"She was amazing," photographer Sheridan added. "I thought she was lovely both inside and out. She was full of life and full of stories that she can now share with the rest of her fabulous family."

"I think what Rozanne and Suzanne are doing is just great," subject Kathleen Sheridan said.

"I've told a lot of these stories to my own kids a few times, but sometimes you get the feeling that it's going in one ear and out the other. This way, they'll always have them."

The Legacy Project's basic package of photo album and audio CD/DVD is \$329. Gift certificates are available. Appointments can be arranged by visiting www.thelegacyprojectusa.com.