

A new bio-therapy for the dying

August 21, 2006 12:00am

Article from: **Herald Sun**

JILL Singer writes: How much do you know about your parents' history?

Listening to my uncle deliver my father's eulogy, it shocked me to realise there were things I didn't know about his life and how much there was to ask him.

Not the secrets he was entitled to take with him to his grave, just things such as what sort of child he was, when he started making lists of everything and why he kept seven hammers lined up in his shed.

How I wish I had taken the time to capture his memories before it was too late to pin down the names and places that figured in his earlier years.

It has been a rare privilege for me to meet a group of people who understand the importance of recording the histories of so-called ordinary people.

Eastern Palliative Care is based in Boronia and has started a client biography service for those suffering from a terminal illness, thanks to grants from the Federal Government and a large corporation.

The service involves training volunteers to visit the dying and make audio recordings of their memories, which are then transcribed and edited into a written biography, complete with photographs where possible.

The first biography to be completed happened to be of a most astonishing man who died last March.

His history is not mine to share with you, but it sparkled with insight into our country's rich past.

While the main purpose of inviting dying people to tell their stories is for their own benefit, after speaking with this man's widow and one of his sons it struck me how much his family gained from the client biography service.

As the son revealed, he learned much about his father's early life from the biography and used it to help prepare his eulogy.

The idea for client biographies for the dying came from the Te Omanga Hospice in New Zealand.

Anne Jones runs the program there and visited Australia this year to share her wisdom with budding volunteer biographers.

It was fascinating to hear Anne tell of the many potential benefits of the program, perhaps the main ones being the sense of purpose it gives to people facing death, the improvement in their self-esteem and the lessening of their depression.

It is a program that deserves to be widely adopted.

Unfortunately, it usually takes the actual or threatened demise of entire groups of people before we clamour to hear the

recollections of those at the end of their lives.

I am thinking here of the wonderful work done by the Shoah Foundation, established by film director Steven Spielberg.

The foundation has recorded the testimonies of many thousands of Holocaust survivors, as well as other witnesses and perpetrators of atrocities against Jews, homosexuals, gypsies and sundry political prisoners of the Nazi regime.

This work is of inestimable value for those interested in learning from this period of time and for those who lived through it.

Also in my mind is the shrivelled and heavily tattooed 90-year-old woman I met some 15 years ago in the mountains of the Japanese island of Hokkaido.

She was one of the last surviving members of the Ainu, Japan's much maligned indigenous people, and was spending her final days putting her memories into a small tape recorder.

Sadly, she was speaking a language that few of her descendants could understand, but at least they were motivated to capture her story and get it translated before she vanished.

Most of us do not live lives of such dramatic historical significance, but this in no way lessens the worth of our individual stories to our families and to us.

One of the saddest aspects of the biography work now being done by Eastern Palliative Care is that many of their clients die before their stories are fully told.

It is no news our society is plumbing unprecedented depths of self-obsession.

Never before have we witnessed ordinary people so eager to publicly expose themselves on often mindless reality TV programs, internet blogs and the like.

Yet for all this frenzied self-exposure, we are none of us learning all that much about ourselves or each other, or what it means to be human.

What a wonderful thing it would be if we could appreciate the wisdom of recording the stories of our parents and grandparents before it is too late.

Just imagine how much their stories would be valued by future generations.

Here we are, with everyday homes filled with all kinds of technological wizardry, MP3 recorders, word processors, digital cameras.

Yet we are not using this technology to trap the information that one day we might consider precious.

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