

# Voices of Legacy: Contemporary Innovators Who Shape Life Story Work

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The field of life review, reminiscence, and life story work has expanded greatly since Robert Butler coined the term *life review* in the 1960s. Its growth reflects decades of dedication by researchers and practitioners exploring the power of personal narrative. This article highlights nine leaders whose vision and commitment have advanced the theory, practice, and spirit of life story work. Building on the legacies of Dr. Robert Butler and Dr. James Birren, founder of Guided Autobiography (GAB), these innovators have broadened access to methods that help people find meaning through story. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the article explores how the field has evolved, why it endures, and what guides its future. Across diverse perspectives, shared themes emerge—curiosity, connection, creativity, and care. As the field enters a generational transition, these voices remind us that preserving its future depends on more than methods or research; it requires honoring the lived stories and wisdom of those who built its foundation.

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In the field of reminiscence and life review, stories have always been both our method and our message. We have long believed that personal narratives, when shared, structured, and reflected upon, carry the power to connect people across generations, cultures, and disciplines. In this article, we pause to listen closely to nine leaders whose voices have shaped the field's direction—its theory, practices, and heart.

These innovators stand on mighty shoulders. The concept of life review was first brought to prominence by Dr. Robert Butler, whose pioneering insights into aging, memory, and meaning made narrative identity a legitimate area of scholarly and clinical inquiry. Building on Butler's legacy, Dr. James Birren developed Guided Autobiography (GAB)—a structured group method that integrated

life themes and life story writing in a small group setting. Over the past several decades, their work helped make life story methods accessible to people from all walks of life.

But methods alone do not move a field forward. The true evolution of reminiscence and life review has depended on the people who have asked hard questions, developed new tools, challenged assumptions, trained practitioners, and opened doors for others. Many of these contributors—researchers, clinicians, educators, and storytellers—have shaped not only what we do, but how we do it. They have mentored, convened, published, and persevered. And today, they form the elder circle of our professional community. All the scholars we've interviewed—except Dr. Susan Bluck—are former presidents of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) or its successor, the International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice (ICLIP).

This moment feels especially important. In recent years, we have lost some of our beloved founders, and others have or will soon step into retirement. As the next generation rises into leadership, we risk losing not just institutional knowledge, but the lived stories and personal insights that have animated this work. That is why we wrote this article: to document, in their own words, the voices of legacy of those who continue to shape life story work.

Each profile in this article is based on an in-depth, conversational interview. We asked open-ended questions such as: *What first drew you to this work? How has the field changed during your career? Why do you believe life story work remains relevant today? What lessons might*

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*today's practitioners draw from your experience?* While each conversation was unique, we were struck by the themes that echoed across them: curiosity, connection, creativity, and care. Most of these leaders entered the field serendipitously—by following a question or responding to an unexpected opportunity. That serendipity led to a lifelong vocation.

You will hear from Jeffrey Webster, who reflects on his lifelong inquiry into why we reminisce, leading to the development of the widely used Reminiscence Functions Scale and a new line of research on wisdom. Philippe Cappeliez describes his role in shaping a structured, evidence-based approach to reminiscence therapy and the enduring influence of the IIRLR community. Brian de Vries shares how his research on LGBTQ+ life stories, coming-out narratives, and the “lifeline” method have helped expand our understanding of meaning-making and marginalization. And Susan Bluck, whose work integrates narrative, psychology, and palliative care, continues her exploration of how life stories help people find meaning, especially at life’s end.

Read how Mary O’Brien Tyrrell stepped outside academia to launch a business dedicated to capturing personal narratives and transforming them into custom books—celebrating and preserving the unique life stories of hundreds of everyday individuals. Tom Pierce tells how a memory cue project led to creating intergenerational story bridges with his students and, later on, to founding this journal.

Juliette Shellman describes the transformative power of reminiscence for culturally responsive nursing—and how she helped rescue and relocate the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) during a time of organizational uncertainty. Gerben Westerhof, whose work spans theory, technology, and improvisational arts, demonstrates how life story work can unite scholarship and community. And Cheryl Brohard recounts how she uses life review in clinical simulations to teach nursing students empathy, anticipatory grief, and dignified care.

Together, these interviews offer more than a retrospective. They form a living archive of what it means to grow a field through story. It is with deep gratitude that we share these voices.

### **Jeffrey Webster: From Reminiscence to Wisdom**

Jeffrey Webster’s journey into life story work began in the late 1980s, during a pivotal moment in both his academic and professional life. Working as a counselor at Langara College and preparing to enter the first PhD program in Lifespan Development and Aging at the University of Victoria, he stumbled upon the topic of reminiscence through a class paper assignment. Looking for a topic, he found inspiration in Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory and Robert Butler’s

work on life review. He said, “Butler was saying, it’s not pathological to reminisce. There’s something cognitively and psychologically worthwhile and emotionally satisfying about it.” What started as a simple term paper later became his first academic publication—and the beginning of a lifelong commitment to exploring the functions and implications of reminiscence.

Webster was driven by a curiosity that contradicted common stereotypes. “We picture older adults reminiscing on the porch,” he said, “but I didn’t actually hear many doing it—and yet I was reminiscing all the time at 21.” This disconnect led him to question not just *whether* people reminisce, but *why*. At the time, most research merely linked reminiscence to happiness without exploring the different *types* of reminiscence. His dissatisfaction with this superficial analysis spurred him to explore the nuanced motivations behind recalling the past.

A major turning point came when Webster received an invitation from Barbara Haight to present at the first international conference on reminiscence and life review. With just one publication to his name, the recognition was both exhilarating and affirming. It also marked his introduction to a broader scholarly community that would go on to become the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review. Webster forged important connections during this period, including with Brian de Vries and the late James Birren—founder of Guided Autobiography (GAB). Birren’s lecture at the University of British Columbia and a coffee meeting arranged by Brian de Vries helped shape Webster’s sense of belonging within this emerging field.

Webster’s interest in reminiscence led him to develop the Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS)—his most enduring contribution to the field. The RFS helped distinguish among different uses of reminiscence, such as identity construction, problem-solving, and social bonding. The scale has since been translated into over 30 languages and remains widely cited and applied in research today. Its impact confirmed what Webster suspected early on: Reminiscence was far more complex and psychologically rich than previously acknowledged.

Webster emphasized the role of international collaboration, noting that much of the recent progress in the field has come from interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exchanges. As more researchers from around the world apply and adapt the RFS and similar tools, Webster sees both a validation of his early work and an expansion of the field’s potential. He expressed concern, however, that the foundational ideas of reminiscence might become diluted as new trends emerge. “Reminiscence,” he said, “needs to stay central. It’s not just an old-fashioned term—it’s the core of what we do.”

Today, Webster’s focus has shifted toward wisdom research, where he sees reminiscence and life review playing a vital role. He’s developed a wisdom scale and continues to explore how reflective processes contribute to

psychological well-being and lifelong learning. He explained, “Reminiscence is part of wisdom; Life review, reflection, learning a life lesson, etc., is what wise people do.” For Webster, wise individuals are those who can reflect on their lives with insight, learn from experience, and pass along meaningful lessons—functions deeply rooted in the life review process.

Throughout his career, Webster has emphasized the *cultural* and *developmental* dimensions of life story work. In his view, reminiscence cannot be understood apart from its social and emotional context. He works to establish theoretical connections between reminiscence and related concepts such as autobiographical memory, attachment styles, time perspective, and, more recently, wisdom. Webster remains proud of the theoretical bridges he has attempted to build—between reminiscence and wisdom, between memory and identity, and between psychology and life narrative.

In sum, Jeffrey Webster’s career exemplifies the evolution of reminiscence research from a niche interest into a robust interdisciplinary field. His work has helped move the conversation from *how much* people reminisce to *why* they do it—and what it means. Through tools like the RFS and his ongoing work on wisdom, Webster continues to influence how researchers, practitioners, and individuals understand the power of life stories.

### **Philippe Cappeliez: Legacy and Future Directions in Life Story Work**

Philippe Cappeliez began exploring reminiscence therapy in 1984 while working at the University of Ottawa. As a clinical psychologist treating depression in older adults, particularly in long-term care settings, he found the environment often monotonous and socially isolating. This led him to wonder whether personal memories could be used more intentionally within a cognitive therapy framework.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, reminiscence therapy was widely practiced but often lacked theoretical grounding. Cappeliez saw the need for a structured, evidence-based model tailored to older adults with depression. Drawing on cognitive therapy principles, stress and coping theory, and the life review literature, he began building a more systematic approach. Cappeliez has embodied a dual identity—researcher and clinician—and moved between academic inquiry and applied practice. Clinical challenges often shaped his research questions, and research findings, in turn, influenced his therapeutic work.

An important influence on his thinking was Paul Wong’s taxonomy of adaptive reminiscence, which categorized different functions of memory—highlighting the value of integrative and instrumental forms of reflection over more problematic types, such as obsessive rumination. Cappeliez collaborated with Lisa Watt, his

doctoral student who had previously co-authored work with Wong and introduced him to James Birren’s Guided Autobiography method, including the use of themed prompts. “That integration of structure into reminiscence was a turning point,” he said.

In the early 1990s, Cappeliez met Jeffrey Webster, a psychologist eager to bridge the divide between clinicians using reminiscence and cognitive psychologists studying autobiographical memory. Together, they published a foundational 1993 paper, *Reminiscence and Autobiographical Memory: Complementary Contexts for Cognitive Aging Research*. “Jeff had the idea and had done most of the work, I just helped shape it for an academic audience. We wanted to connect two communities that rarely interacted.” The same year, Cappeliez was invited to contribute a chapter to *The Art and Science of Reminiscing*, edited by Jeffrey Webster and Barbara Haight, a book that became a landmark in the field.

The International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) played a formative role in Cappeliez’s career. He attended his first IIRLR conference in 1999, in New York, where he met John Kunz and reconnected with Barbara Haight and Jeffrey Webster. The conferences, he recalled, were unusually collegial and deeply influential. The relationships formed there provided both inspiration and a sense of belonging within a growing international community.

By the early 2000s, his work was gaining international recognition. A 2003 meta-analytic review by Ernst Bohlmeijer (and Smit and Cuijpers) helped validate reminiscence-based interventions, especially among skeptics in cognitive-behavioral therapy who had previously dismissed such work as lacking rigor. At the same time, his research with another of his graduate students, Norm O’Rourke, on the psychological functions of reminiscence, such as fostering self-affirmation and social connection, reached new audiences through publications in leading gerontology journals. This elevated the research from a niche interest to something more widely respected. Cappeliez was particularly struck by the global reach of the work. Over time, he heard from researchers and clinicians in diverse places, from Iran to Hong Kong to Australia. What had begun as a niche pursuit was now part of an international movement.

In reflecting on the relevance of life story work today, he emphasized its role in a world that is both hyperconnected and increasingly fragmented—many people searching for meaning amid the collapse of unifying narratives. Reminiscence and life story work offer a way to reclaim identity and purpose. This extends beyond individuals to communities, as illustrated by a recent initiative in his region to publish local autobiographies as part of a broader history project—what he sees as a form of legacy-building.

Looking ahead, Cappeliez hopes the field continues to grow while remaining grounded in rigorous methods and

thoughtful reflection. While passion and creativity are essential, he cautions that they must be matched by strong training and research. Life story work, he believes, can meet the challenges of our time—provided it continues to evolve with both heart and discipline.

### **Brian de Vries: Life Stories, Narrative Complexity, and Connection**

Brian de Vries's journey into life story work began with a personal fascination, inspired by his storytelling parents. He realized that their stories weren't just recollections—they offered insight into how they made meaning of their lives. "I was getting a window into them in some way; I could see the way in which they saw the world and how they found meaning." This early interest led to his dissertation at the University of British Columbia (UBC) from 1986-1988, which explored how individuals construct and reveal self-concept through the stories they tell. His approach was unconventional for its time, drawing skepticism from some faculty, but defended by mentor Peter Suedfeld, who championed creativity in psychological research.

De Vries's research combined narrative theory with "integrative complexity," a method of analyzing how people structure thought in speech and writing. Collaborating in Suedfeld's lab, he helped refine this concept to measure the depth and nuance in life narratives. His dissertation applied these tools to explore the relationship between narrative structure and personal identity, combining both the content and complexity of life events.

De Vries's work aligned with Hans Schroot's "lifeline" approach, focusing on how individuals map significant events across time. His research revealed that what people consider transformative life events often defies external expectations. For instance, becoming a vegetarian after witnessing animal violence or quitting piano lessons were cited as profound turning points—examples that taught him to trust individuals as the most reliable sources of meaning in their own lives. De Vries later adapted this framework into a "relationship timeline." In a study with Alan LeBlanc, they examined how same-sex couples construct a shared narrative. This research, based primarily in Atlanta and San Francisco, revealed how couples negotiate identity and history through shared storytelling and has since been widely cited.

His connection to Guided Autobiography (GAB) began when James Thornton invited him to participate in a gerontology conference at UBC, where he met James and Betty Birren. During Expo '86 in Vancouver, the Birrens led a workshop where Betty led small groups and Jim taught the GAB model—an experience de Vries found both formative and personally meaningful. Impressed by Brian's work, Dr. Birren invited him to spend part of his postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Southern

California (USC). That collaboration led to multiple co-authored publications, including a paper on Guided Autobiography for *Family Relations* and a thematic analysis on death and dying coded for narrative complexity.

De Vries became an early member of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR). He said, "It felt unlike any other kind of meeting I had been to; really social and personal and connected." The atmosphere was warm and welcoming—especially compared to massive and impersonal academic conferences like APA and GSA. He recalls the kindness of figures like Barbara Haight and the low-pressure sense of community fostered by John Kunz, the founder of IIRLR. At the 2001 IIRLR conference, he presented on LGBT narratives, particularly the coming-out stories of gay men and lesbians, highlighting the emotional and social significance of telling them. He recalls Jim Birren calling his work "brave," a comment that struck De Vries deeply—both as a sincere recognition and as a reminder of how marginalized such topics still were at the time.

De Vries advocates for using life stories in long-term care settings, where people risk becoming depersonalized as "room numbers." Sharing life histories can help form authentic connections, transforming institutions into communities. He believes this approach could also bridge broader social divides by fostering empathy and understanding—even across political lines.

Today, de Vries reflects on his contributions with humility, expressing gratitude for the colleagues and IIRLR community that helped him grow. He concluded by saying, "There are personal reasons that we're doing what we do, and I would advocate for honoring those rather than suppressing them." His work continues to shape the fields of gerontology, narrative psychology, and LGBTQ+ studies.

### **Susan Bluck: Pathway to Founding the Life Story Lab**

After completing her undergraduate degree in 1982 at the University of British Columbia, Susan Bluck landed a paid research assistant position in Dr. Peter Suedfeld's lab. He later offered her a Lab Coordinator role despite her not having a graduate degree—an unusual opportunity that fostered her love for research.

In her role, Bluck worked closely with graduate students and met Brian de Vries. Together, with Suedfeld and other colleagues, they co-developed a content analysis manual to assess cognitive complexity in people's speech. This early exposure to narrative research was pivotal. "People would say, 'Analyzing stories? That's not science,'" she recalls. "But we were proving otherwise." Her early focus on memory and stories stayed with her throughout her career.

De Vries and Bluck became friends as well as co-authors with James Birren on a GAB paper that explored

death-related motivation using Birren's narrative GAB data. Bluck believes that article—her first publication—began her interest in death-related themes and how individuals recall death events as part of their life story. Later, as a graduate student herself (UC-Irvine, School of Social Ecology) she published a theoretical paper revisiting Robert Butler's concept of life review through the lens of autobiographical memory research. Though inspired by the power of reminiscence in people's lives, she was also skeptical of the idea that it could be a panacea for everything from depression to self-esteem, as seemed to be touted in the growing literature. This led her to pursue, across her career, foundational questions such as: "*Why do people remember their lives at all? What are the adaptive functions of remembering?*"

After obtaining her doctorate, Bluck secured a postdoctoral fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. Unfamiliar with the institution's reputation, she was drawn there by the dynamic research program—and was amazed to discover she'd joined a world-renowned institution. "I was naive and really had no idea how prestigious it was," she admits.

After her time in Berlin, training as a lifespan developmental psychologist, Bluck entered the job market. She had just published, with co-author Tilman Habermas, *Getting a Life: The Emergence of the Life Story in Adolescence*. The paper formed the basis for her research program as she started an Assistant Professorship at the University of Florida, opening her Life Story Lab in 2000.

Throughout her career, Bluck has remained deeply interested in autobiographical memory and life stories. Her early work in reminiscence and GAB laid a foundation for a research trajectory that bridges autobiographical memory and reminiscence with humanistic constructs such as meaning and purpose across the lifespan. She sees the end of life as an often overlooked but crucial chapter in people's stories, a theme that has resurfaced in her work over the past decade. Recently, Bluck has focused on Dignity Therapy, a form of end-of-life reminiscence that helps terminally ill individuals reflect on their lives, affirm their worth, and shape how they will be remembered. Backed by major research funding, her work in this area integrates narrative, psychology, and palliative care, continuing her exploration of how life stories help people find meaning—especially at life's end.

Looking back, Bluck values the early freedom of her career—a time of open curiosity and intellectually satisfying work without academic pressure. "It was a wonderful time in my life," she recalls. That period of openness led her to the questions that still authentically interest her today: "Why do we tell our life stories? How do memories help us make meaning—especially at the end of life?"

For Bluck, exploring those questions, and guiding the next generation of students to do so, remains a fulfilling endeavor.

## Mary O'Brien Tyrrell: Advancing Life Story Work Through Compassion and Enterprise

Mary O'Brien Tyrrell's journey into life story work began with a question: *How do we preserve the voices of elders before they're lost to time?* As a public health nurse, she was trained to listen attentively and respond to individual needs. Over time, this practice deepened into a purposeful effort to capture the meaning of people's lives through their own words.

In 1994, O'Brien Tyrrell founded Memoirs, Inc., a company built on the belief that storytelling affirms dignity in aging. Her model was deeply personal: She conducted in-depth interviews, crafted narratives in the client's voice, and produced custom leather-bound books—heirlooms that honored the full arc of a life. "When someone holds that book in their hands," she wrote, "they see the life they've lived—and the worth of it."

Her entry into the professional life story field was shaped by a pivotal encounter with Dr. Robert Butler at an aging conference in Minnesota. At that meeting, Butler introduced her to John Kunz, founder of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR), encouraging them to collaborate. That introduction marked the beginning of a long friendship and a shared vision for advancing life story work.

In 2002, O'Brien Tyrrell and Kunz co-produced *The Joys and Surprises of Telling Your Life Story*, an educational video funded by a MetLife grant, the Association for Personal Historians, and contributions from O'Brien Tyrrell's clients. The hour-long program featured commentary from major figures in the field, including Robert Butler, James and Betty Birren, Barbara Haight, Susan Perlstein, Florence Gray-Soltys, and Kitty Axelson-Berry, along with interviews with several of her own clients filmed in her Saint Paul home. The result was a thoughtful exploration of the therapeutic and transformative power of life review—a tool to educate and inspire both practitioners and the general public.

Her 2012 book, *Become a Memoirist for Elders*, is both a practical guide and a philosophical blueprint. Drawing on years of experience, O'Brien Tyrrell outlined every step of the process, from building trust and recording interviews to shaping stories and addressing ethical concerns. She emphasized the importance of professionalism, fair compensation, and mentorship. Her insistence that this work could be both heartfelt and sustainable helped legitimize the emerging field of personal history.

O'Brien Tyrrell's work stands at the intersection of reminiscence, legacy, and social entrepreneurship. Her memoirs were not ghostwritten autobiographies or polished nostalgia—they were intimate collaborations shaped by careful listening, emotional nuance, and literary skill. Clients described the process as life-affirming, even transformative. Families often discovered new dimensions

of loved ones they thought they already knew. As she wrote, “When an older person tells the story of their life, they *re-member* themselves. They put the pieces together, often in a new way. That’s healing.”

When she became president of the IIRLR in 2011, O’Brien Tyrrell brought her practitioner’s insight to the professional community, advocating for the role of memoirists/personal historians as essential partners in aging and wellness work. She urged the field to view storytelling not only as a research topic and therapeutic method but as a professional pursuit—one that deserved recognition, training, and fair pay.

Her impact is especially evident among those working independently with older adults. The model she pioneered—personal interviews, respectful narration, and high-quality production—has become a gold standard. Many current life story professionals cite *Become a Memoirist for Elders* as the resource that helped them turn passion into practice.

O’Brien Tyrrell’s legacy continues through the next generation of memoirists, Guided Autobiography instructors, and life story practitioners. Her blend of compassion, craft, and entrepreneurial spirit elevated life story work from a heartfelt pastime to a respected profession—and in doing so, she helped ensure that more voices, especially those of older adults, will be heard and honored for generations to come.

### **Tom Pierce: Preserving Memory Through a Journey from Psychology to Life Story Work**

Tom Pierce, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and a member of the research faculty at Radford University, has academic roots in neuroscience and psychology. Pierce’s career reflects a deepening interest in the human experience of memory across the lifespan. His educational path began in Maine, continued through McGill University in Montreal, and led to graduate work in experimental psychology at the University of Maine. Initially drawn to neuroscience, his postdoctoral work at Duke University Medical Center focused on cognitive aging and behavioral medicine under mentors Jim Blumenthal and David Madden. It was here that Pierce developed a scientific foundation that would later support the expansion of his research program into reminiscence.

Pierce’s turn toward reminiscence emerged from a project he designed to create personalized memory cues for individuals living with Alzheimer’s disease. Recognizing the evocative power of family photographs and personal narratives to surface long-dormant memories, he developed a method using PowerPoint slides embedded with audio recordings. Each slide featured a scanned photograph accompanied by a recorded story—told in the participant’s own words, unfiltered by the perspectives of spouses or children.

One of his first participants—a long-time guest speaker in his aging course—helped shape the model. Over the course of a semester, Pierce scanned more than 800 of her family photographs, visiting her weekly to record the stories associated with each image. The presentation contained hyperlinks from one slide with information about a particular person, event, or topic to other slides on the same subjects. In this way, the idea was to recreate, in a very rough sense, the pattern of associations we all have of one thing reminding us of other things. While many of these stories were shared openly, the most poignant often began with the phrase, “Okay, turn that off and I’ll tell you how it *really* happened...”—a signal that what followed was a deeper, more private layer of memory that she didn’t want to share in public.

After completing the project, Pierce returned to share the final presentation. As she viewed the completed archive, the participant turned to him and said, “*I just want you to know—you know things about me that my kids don’t know.*” The comment left a lasting impression. “It’s always stuck with me,” Pierce reflected. “I think she meant it as a compliment—because I had spent so much time with her, listening carefully to her stories, and I genuinely enjoyed hearing them. But it also made me a little sad.” Soon, undergraduate students joined the effort, creating similar presentations for community elders as part of independent study projects. The work was deeply meaningful, offering both generations a unique intergenerational bridge through storytelling.

Pierce’s contributions extended into the academic realm, particularly through his collaboration with Dutch researcher Hans Schroots on “lifeline analysis,” which illuminated the phenomenon known as the reminiscence bump—a peak in autobiographical memory recall from early adulthood. This work helped contextualize the power of life story activities within broader psychological patterns.

He was introduced to the reminiscence special interest group at a Gerontological Society of America (GSA) meeting in 2001, Pierce connected with pioneers like Barbara Haight and later attended his first International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review conference in 2003 in Vancouver, Canada. Pierce emphasized the importance of in-person interaction. “I think it’s crucial that we continue to gather face-to-face when we can—to talk about our work, build collaborative relationships, and simply share stories about collecting and sharing stories,” he said. Although he acknowledged the growing role of virtual meetings, especially given the global distribution of scholars across continents like Asia, Australia, and Europe, he expressed concern that virtual communication cannot fully provide the same opportunities for people from these different countries and cultures to get to know each other as friends and colleagues.

Pierce served as President of the Advisory Board for IIRLR from 2009-2011. During his term the Advisory

Board voted to establish a peer-reviewed journal, The International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review, a marker of the growing maturity of field. Most notably, during his term the IIRLR lost its Executive Director and guiding force of the organization, John Kunz, after a long battle with cancer. At its 2011 meeting in Boston, the membership renewed its determination to carry on John's work, with the support of the organization's sponsor, the University of Wisconsin-Superior.

Pierce considers his most significant contribution to the field to be his work as the Founding Editor of the *International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review* (IJRLR). The idea emerged during a Gerontological Society of America meeting in New Orleans in 2010. Having edited the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR)'s newsletter for some time, Pierce had developed a rapport with John Kunz (Founder and Executive Director of the IIRLR), and he chose an informal setting—the hotel bar—to propose the idea of launching a scholarly journal. “I figured that would be the best place to pitch something new,” Pierce recalled with a laugh. “John was very receptive, but honestly, he probably would've liked the idea if we were meeting somewhere much less comfortable.”

The journal has since grown into a respected, open-access publication, running exclusively on volunteer labor and free software. Pierce said, “It's free to run, and it's free for authors to publish their work. That was really important to me—to ensure accessibility for contributors around the world.” Pierce takes great pride in the journal he built and the accessible, community-driven model it represents. “That's the thing I feel best about,” he concluded. “We created something meaningful—something that supports the field without barriers to entry. And that, I think, is worth holding on to.” Since its first issue in 2013, the IJRLR has published over 100 papers.

### **Juliette Shellman: Bridging Cultures, Shaping Care Through Reminiscence in Nursing**

Juliette Shellman's journey into life review and reminiscence work began unexpectedly in a long-term care setting, where she witnessed firsthand the emotional and cognitive impact of older adults reflecting on their lives. A poignant moment with a hospice patient—who transformed emotionally when recalling the past—prompted Shellman to explore life review. “She started to cry, and I thought she was depressed,” Shellman recalls. “The hospice nurse said, ‘No, she's reminiscing.’ I had no idea what that meant, but I had to find out.”

This moment sparked a lifelong passion. Through her master's and PhD studies, Shellman made reminiscence a cornerstone of her academic work. Attending the 1999 International Life Review Conference in New York, where Robert Butler himself was present, confirmed her commitment. “It was a career-changing event,” she says.

Shellman has focused much of her research on culturally diverse populations, especially older Black adults. She emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity in reminiscence, recognizing that approaches must be tailored to different communities. “Reminiscence is a great tool for learning about a culture,” she says. “If everyone reminisced, we wouldn't have so many problems with cultural misunderstanding.”

Her work has not been without challenges. In trying to address depressive symptoms among older Black adults through reminiscence, she encountered resistance—particularly around the stigma of mental health and perceptions of weakness. Building trust took time, requiring years of consistent presence at a senior center and partnerships with community members who could serve as cultural bridges.

As a nursing professor at the University of Connecticut, Shellman has integrated reminiscence into nursing education, particularly through community health clinicals where students visit older adults at home. She developed the Elder Care Cultural Self-Efficacy Scale and found that students who engaged in reminiscence gained confidence and empathy. “They saw older adults differently and learned a lot about history,” she notes. Her dissertation revealed both statistically significant and deeply personal impacts, validating her belief in reminiscence as a tool for cultural understanding and connection.

Shellman emphasizes that reminiscence is not just a tool for social work or psychology. “I see it as a natural fit for nursing,” she says. “When I went to nursing school, it was to care for people—and that interaction, that connection, is at the heart of it.” But the modern hospital climate, she acknowledges, often stifles those intentions. “The students come in excited, wanting to talk and connect, but many leave the profession within a few years because they can't be the nurses they dreamed of being.”

Shellman also developed a peer reminiscence training program to further community-based interventions. Despite academic and administrative demands, she remains deeply committed to expanding this work. Her dream is to create a formal training program that embeds reminiscence into nursing curricula, particularly to help students from diverse backgrounds bridge cultural gaps in patient care.

Her leadership extends far beyond the classroom. Shellman spearheaded the transition of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) to the University of Connecticut—a lengthy process that required institutional support and coordination with the board. As president of IIRLR at the time, she feared the institute might dissolve, but she pushed forward. Her determination and leadership helped preserve the organization, originally founded in 1995, as a vibrant community for researchers and practitioners in life story work to connect and collaborate.

“Now we’re five years in as the International Center for Life Story Innovation and Practice (ICLIP)—we’re not in the red, and I think we’ve done well,” she said. Reflecting on the journey, she added, “I never thought I’d be in this position. But I kept it going. I think that’s my contribution.”

Her vision remains clear: to make reminiscence accessible, culturally informed, and central to nursing practice.

### **Gerben Westerhof: Bridging Psychology, History, and Technology in Life Story Work**

Gerben Westerhof traced his entry into the field of life story work to his collaboration with Ernst Bohlmeijer in 2005. At the time, Bohlmeijer was developing a life review intervention and needed a way to measure meaning in life. Westerhof, then focused on qualitative research in meaning-making, joined forces with him, bringing tools like sentence completion tasks that offered both qualitative depth and the possibility of quantification. Another impetus came from the intersection of psychology and public history. Westerhof, who had debated between studying psychology or history, found a satisfying bridge in life story work—especially through studying older adults, whose stories offered a living lens into 20th-century history. He even partnered with a historian in a project on how narrative identity evolves over time and in historical context.

Later, Westerhof’s work expanded into technology. At the University of Twente, known for its technological emphasis, he led a project that created online life story books for people with early-stage dementia. These digital books allowed participants to collect personal photos, music, and videos, with the help of trained volunteers. The goal was to support autobiographical memory by creating external, multimedia memory aids. Though funding limited the reach of the program, about 50 participants completed books, all of which were also printed for families to keep.

While some aspects of personal meaning can’t be directly measured, Westerhof explained that interventions often include structured exercises, with outcomes evaluated through changes in depressive symptoms or mental well-being. The evidence base has grown significantly over the past two decades, and Westerhof cited a landmark meta-analysis by Martin Pinquart, which synthesized data from nearly 200 studies, confirming the effectiveness of reminiscence and life review in treating depression—especially among older adults.

Looking back, Westerhof believes life story work isn’t only relevant in academia. He praised the collaboration between researchers and practitioners at conferences hosted by the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR), calling it a rare blend of theory and applied wisdom. “Listening is such a

basic skill, yet so undervalued today,” he said, noting how fast-paced communication often drowns out meaningful connection. Westerhof praised the collaborative and democratic spirit of the reminiscence community, especially through conferences that unite researchers and practitioners. “It’s not competitive. People want to learn from each other,” he said. “There’s genuine appreciation and exchange.”

Westerhof also highlighted his work with Jeffrey Webster on the theoretical links between reminiscence and mental health—research that has been widely cited. He hopes his legacy bridges both scholarship and practice: “I’d be happy if I’m remembered not only for what I published but for how this work has been used to improve people’s lives.”

One of Westerhof’s most personal contributions to storytelling is his work in playback theater—an improvisational form in which actors perform audience members’ personal stories on the spot. With themes such as *belonging* or *life during the pandemic*, audience members share a real-life experience, and trained actors and musicians—guided by a director—immediately bring it to life through movement, poetry, and music. Sometimes one actor will embody a dancer, another a poet, transforming a memory into something shared and seen.

Performances typically involve 30 to 50 people, but some have drawn audiences of 200. The impact is profound: people experience not only being heard but also feeling their story resonate with others. “There’s a strong sense of recognition and acceptance,” Westerhof said. “It brings people together. It’s emotional and affirming.”

He noted that group reminiscence and playback theater share the same core values: deep listening, mutual recognition, and community-building. He cited research by Israeli colleague Shoshi Keisari, who used playback theater with older adults and found it led to improved well-being and reduced depression—mirroring outcomes of structured life review. Westerhof believes playback theater captures the very essence of life story work. “It’s about living out another person’s story, honoring its emotional truth, and bringing it to life in a way that invites others in,” he said.

Asked about his legacy, Westerhof reflected on both theory and impact. He highlighted his widely cited research with Ernst Bohlmeijer and Jeffrey Webster on the links between life review and mental health, but added, “I’d be most proud if this work continues to be used in practice—to help people make sense of their lives, heal, and connect.” As society becomes more efficiency-driven and tech-oriented, he argues, the human need to reflect and be heard becomes more urgent. “It’s perhaps more important than ever to listen to people’s stories—and to learn from them.”



## Cheryl Brohard: Enhancing Nursing Education Through Reminiscence and Simulation

Cheryl Brohard has been deeply involved in integrating life review and reminiscence into nursing education and practice, particularly in palliative care. Brohard's commitment to storytelling runs deep. Raised in a family of storytellers, she encountered life review academically during her MSN program at Case Western Reserve. Her early research involved laryngectomy patients recalling their pre-surgery lives. This shaped her interest in autobiographical memory and led to her PhD at the University of Utah, where she focused on oncology patients in hospice care. "I asked them about key moments—like being diagnosed with cancer—and how family history shaped their experience of dying," she explained.

Brohard is currently leading a grant-funded initiative to enrich undergraduate nursing education using simulation-based learning, interprofessional collaboration, and the principles of palliative care. This most recent grant, part of a series of projects she is directing, focuses on preparing nursing students for complex end-of-life care scenarios through evidence-based teaching strategies. Working in partnership with a colleague from the Graduate College of Social Work who shares her background in oncology, Brohard is building simulations that combine clinical skill development with emotionally intelligent care. Central to these scenarios is the inclusion of reminiscence and life review, a practice Brohard believes is foundational to meaningful patient interaction. "Every time a nurse walks into a room and asks, 'Where are you from?'—that's a piece of reminiscence," she explains. She uses this approach to encourage students to open conversations about anticipatory grief, family history, and end-of-life wishes in a compassionate and indirect way.

Her simulations go beyond lecture and role-play. With earlier grant funding, Brohard purchased a \$90,000 high-fidelity mannequin capable of simulating advanced symptoms like pain, anxiety, and shortness of breath. This lifelike patient, affectionately named Julia, is used across multiple teaching scenarios, including one where she dies. In each session, students must manage clinical symptoms and navigate intense family dynamics, guided by a layered script, video support, and faculty facilitation. "She turns blue, she cries out for help—she feels real," Brohard says. "We even embed a family member actor in the room to challenge students further."

Crucially, reminiscence is built into every step. Students are encouraged to ask about the patient's or family's past experiences with illness and death, and about cultural rituals or beliefs that might guide care decisions. Brohard also ensures her approach is codified for future educators. Her syllabus includes detailed learning objectives, simulations, and PowerPoints that will outlast

her tenure. "I'm trying to leave a legacy," she says, "not just in skills, but in how we teach empathy and connection." Currently surveying former students, Brohard is exploring the long-term impact of this training. Her goal is to validate how experiential learning rooted in life review affects nurses' confidence and emotional intelligence in real-world settings. As she puts it, "If one student tears up during Julia's story, I know I've reached them. And that will change the way they nurse—for life."

Throughout her career, Brohard has been an active member of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR). She credits connections with researchers like Barbara Haight, Jeff Webster, Philippe Cappeliez, and Brian de Vries with influencing her scholarly path. "Networking made all the difference," she said. "Barbara Haight once gave me four key suggestions in a 20-minute conversation that shaped my entire research."

She is committed to sharing her work broadly. One of her articles adapts Haight's structured life review model for patients with dementia, while another forthcoming piece focuses on palliative care scenarios. These resources are being made available through the ELNEC (End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium) library and open-access journals to encourage replication and adaptation by others. Her goal is to improve patient care by helping individuals manage symptoms and preserve dignity through storytelling. Brohard views life review and reminiscence work as increasingly vital, particularly in today's fast-paced, digitally-driven learning environments.

## Conclusion: Carrying the Torch—The Future of Life Story Work

The luminaries profiled here—Jeffrey Webster, Philippe Cappeliez, Brian de Vries, Susan Bluck, Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, Tom Pierce, Juliette Shellman, Gerben Westerhof, and Cheryl Brohard—represent the generative arc of a movement: one rooted in reminiscence, shaped by science, carried forward by empathy, and sustained through community. Their collective efforts have defined, deepened, and diversified the field of life story work, each carving a distinct yet interconnected path that has enriched academic inquiry, clinical practice, and human connection.

Across decades and continents, what unites their contributions is a conviction that stories matter—not as anecdote, but as architecture for identity, tools for healing, and bridges between generations and cultures. These researchers have expanded the contours of what life review and reminiscence can be: from Webster's theoretical modeling of memory's functions to Cappeliez's integration of clinical psychology, to Pierce's storytelling bridges between students and elders, and de Vries's exploration of LGBTQ+ relational timelines. Each

has illuminated facets of human development that might otherwise remain hidden—especially in aging, illness, and loss.

Their work reinforces that reminiscence and life review are not just methods—but a mode of survival. Shellman’s culturally attuned nursing interventions show how reminiscence can be a force for equity. As a public health nurse turned personal historian, O’Brien Tyrrell brought storytelling directly into the hands and homes of older adults. Her model was practical, intimate, and dignifying. Bluck’s research on memory’s adaptive function pushes us to ask foundational questions about the purpose of remembering at all. Brohard’s high-tech simulations prove that even in the most clinical environments, patient dignity can be restored through simple questions like “Where are you from?” Westerhof’s digital innovations and playback theater storytelling remind us that life stories can be experienced through many forms—and that embodiment, art, and performance can often say what words alone cannot.

Together, these scholars have nurtured not only the field but also the communities that sustain it. Institutions like the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR), now continued through the International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice (ICLIP), reflect their shared commitment to accessibility, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Conferences, journal publications, training programs, and classrooms have become the ecosystems where this field breathes and grows. As Webster noted, these communities are rare in their collegiality—offering both intellectual rigor and heartfelt connection.

And yet, as many of these leaders have acknowledged, the field faces a critical juncture. The risk of dilution is real: As new tools and frameworks emerge, the core concepts of reminiscence and life review must not be lost in translation. Webster warned against marginalizing the term “reminiscence” itself, arguing that it remain central to the mission. De Vries emphasized the need to retain the personal motivations behind this work, advocating for vulnerability and authenticity alongside scientific method. Westerhof urged us not to let fast-paced communication flatten the art of listening.

These cautionary notes are not pessimistic—they are protective. They speak to the urgency of safeguarding the values that made life story work transformative in the first place. As Bluck and Shellman have shown, skepticism can be constructive; it reminds us to question our assumptions, to remain attuned to power dynamics, and to ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate, emotionally honest, and ethically sound. Likewise, innovations—whether in simulation-based nursing, digital archives, or improvisational theater—must be guided by intentionality, not novelty for its own sake.

What emerges from this interwoven tapestry of contributions is a powerful and enduring truth: People

need to be seen, heard, and known. Whether in the twilight of life or the threshold of adulthood, individuals carry within them stories that hold meaning—not only for themselves, but for families, caregivers, communities, and cultures. To facilitate those stories, to honor them, and to learn from them is an act of service as much as it is a scholarly or clinical pursuit. As O’Brien Tyrrell reminds us, “Storytelling affirms dignity, and that dignity is foundational to wellness, especially in later life.”

The torch, however, cannot be carried by this founding generation alone. Their legacy invites new scholars, clinicians, and storytellers to take up the work—with curiosity, with cultural humility, and with a commitment to both evidence and empathy. Already, younger researchers are expanding the reach of reminiscence work into domains such as dementia care, social justice, end-of-life dignity, and intergenerational trauma. They are bringing new technologies, new cultural frameworks, and new voices to a field that has always been richer when it reflects the full complexity of human experience.

Looking forward, the challenge is not merely to preserve what these luminaries have built—but to evolve it with integrity. This means cultivating spaces—physical and digital, academic and communal—where life story work can continue to thrive. It means advocating for funding, training, and publication opportunities that center narrative and meaning-making as legitimate and essential modes of care and inquiry. It also means amplifying marginalized voices and making sure the life stories being collected, studied, and celebrated reflect the full diversity of our global society.

In the words of Philippe Cappeliez, “There are personal reasons we do what we do.” That sentiment—echoed in different forms by nearly every individual profiled here—reveals the moral heart of this field. Life story work does not come from dispassionate detachment; it arises from love, grief, curiosity, and often a deeply personal encounter with the fragility and beauty of life. Whether sparked by a chance conversation, a mentor’s guidance, or a participant’s whispered story after the recorder is turned off, the work begins in relationship—and it continues in community.

International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice (ICLIP) spans the globe, and all of these scholars have been an integral part of that international movement. It has survived institutional transitions, funding droughts, academic skepticism, and cultural shifts—not because it is trendy, but because it is true to something timeless: the human need to reflect, to remember, and to be remembered.

As this chapter concludes, another begins. The next generation of practitioners and researchers will chart their own course—but they will not do so in a vacuum. They inherit a rich and generous legacy: one filled with wisdom scales and lifeline maps, with nursing simulations and

playback stages, with scaled-up metrics and quiet, intimate interviews. And they inherit the invitation to listen deeply,

act with care, and carry forward the stories that help us all make meaning of our lives.



## Biographical Sketches of Interviewees

**Jeffrey Dean Webster**, Ph.D., received his BA and MED from the University of British Columbia and his doctorate from the University of Twente in the Netherlands. He has conducted research in lifespan developmental psychology (focusing primarily on reminiscence, time perspective, and wisdom) for over 40 years at Langara College in Vancouver where he is currently Faculty Emeritus. He currently lives on a beautiful island off Vancouver where he enjoys kayaking, gardening, biking, and pretending to be a woodworker. [jdwebster2014@gmail.com](mailto:jdwebster2014@gmail.com)

**Philippe Cappeliez** retired as Emeritus Professor in 2014 from the University of Ottawa, after 30 years in the School of Psychology. He taught cognitive-behavior therapy and clinical geropsychology, and pursued research on the functions of reminiscence in older age and on reminiscence therapy for depressed older adults. These days he enjoys hiking (snowshoeing in winter) and bicycling, volunteering in services for older adults, singing with a choir, reading history books, watching soccer and hockey games, a bit of traveling, and spending time with family and friends. [philippe.cappeliez@uottawa.ca](mailto:philippe.cappeliez@uottawa.ca)

**Brian de Vries**, Ph.D., is professor Emeritus of Gerontology at San Francisco State University and Adjunct Professor at Simon Fraser University (in Vancouver). He received his doctorate degree from the University of British Columbia in 1988 and completed a post doc the following year at both Simon Fraser University (with Dr. Gloria Gutman) and the University of Southern California (with Dr. Jim Birren). Continuing with this cross-national record, he lives with his husband in Palm Springs, for much of the year, and on Pender Island, in BC, for the summer. Brian has studied life stories, including the Guided Autobiography, over the course of his career; he has focused on the perception and flow of time, the end of life (and life stories), and the ways in which women and men, gay and straight, single and partnered, reveal and report their lives, relationships, and themselves, through stories. [bdevries@sfsu.edu](mailto:bdevries@sfsu.edu)

**Susan Bluck**, Ph.D., has an international reputation as a scholar in the area of autobiographical memory and life stories. She has been Director of the Life Story Lab at the University of Florida, mentoring doctoral and undergraduate students in narrative research, for more than two decades. She is also a dedicated educator,

enthusiastic in teaching young adults about real-world issues of aging, and death and dying. Susan believes that understanding and cherishing our past is key to living well in the present and envisioning a meaningful future. [bluck@ufl.edu](mailto:bluck@ufl.edu)

**Mary O'Brien Tyrrell**, M.S., R.N., is a pioneer in the field of personal history and reminiscence work. Trained as a nurse, she brought her skills in listening and care to her later vocation as founder of Memoirs, Inc., a business dedicated to helping elders preserve their life stories in beautifully bound books. She is the author of *Become a Memoirist for Elders: Create a Successful Business*, one of the first practical guides for combining reminiscence interviewing, writing, and publishing into a sustainable practice. Mary also served as president of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) from 2011 to 2013. She has spoken and taught widely on the value of legacy work, empowering practitioners to honor older adults by capturing their voices and experiences. Mary lives in Cape Cod, MA, close to her daughter and grandchildren where she continues to be an advocate for preserving life stories as a vital form of care. [maryobrientyrrell@gmail.com](mailto:maryobrientyrrell@gmail.com)

**Tom Pierce** grew up in a small town in Maine and went on to take a B.A. in Psychology (1984) from McGill University and a Ph.D. in Psychology (1990) from the University of Maine. He then completed a two-year post-doctoral fellowship in the Center for the Study of Aging at Duke University Medical Center. He has served as a faculty member in Radford University's Psychology Department since 1992, mainly teaching courses in statistics and research methods to undergraduates and graduate students. He was President of the Advisory Board for the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review from 2009-2011 and has served as Editor of the International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review since 2011. [tpierce@radford.edu](mailto:tpierce@radford.edu)

**Dr. Juliette Shellman** has dedicated 30 years to nursing focused on improving care for older adults. She is an associate professor at the University of Connecticut School of Nursing and also serves as the Director of the International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice (ICLIP). In her role, she finds her collaborations with ICLIP members to be highly

rewarding as they work together to advance the art and science of reminiscence. Juliette loves listening to the life stories of older adults, traveling, and supporting the Red Sox and the UConn Huskies!

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**Gerben Westerhof**, PhD, is a professor in Narrative Psychology and Technology at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. His main interest is in understanding how stories about personal lives contribute to mental health and well-being. Besides developing more basic theoretical and methodological approaches, he has worked together with practitioners in developing and evaluating interventions, like life review therapy. He is also involved in storytelling in theatre as an actor in playback theatre.  
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**Cheryl Brohard**, Ph.D., began her Oncology Nursing career in the early 1980's, working in hospital systems across three US states. She has served as a registered nurse practitioner, clinical director, educator, and mentor. Her research on life review and autobiographical memories led her to the University of Houston, where she is an Associate Professor. Devoted to the art and science of Nursing and to interprofessional education, Cheryl brings enthusiasm and energy to improving the lives of people with cancer and serious illness through reminiscence and life stories.  
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## Authors

**Cheryl Svensson**, Ph.D., has worked in the field of aging since the 1970s. After completing a Master of Science in Gerontology at USC, she moved to Sweden to complete a Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of Lund. She collaborated with James Birren for more than twenty years to promote Guided Autobiography (GAB) and is currently the founding director of the Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies, a 501(c)(3). Passionate about life stories and dedicated to serving the GAB community, Cheryl lives a bi-continental life—spending winters in the fast lane of Southern California and summers in the bicycle lane of Sweden. [cheryl@thebirrencenter.org](mailto:cheryl@thebirrencenter.org)

**Sarah White** is a freelance writer and personal historian who helps people write about their lives and work. As a developmental editor, writing coach, and ghostwriter, she spends her days immersed in other people's worlds. In addition to working 1:1 with clients, she teaches reminiscence writing, creative nonfiction, and writing craft. Sarah holds a degree in Journalism from Indiana University and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the University of King's College-Halifax. She lives and works in Madison, Wisconsin and vacations on the Lake Superior shore as often as possible. She has taught Guided Autobiography workshops since 2004.  
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