

The Legacy Project: Presentation of IIRLR and ICLIP Milestones

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On the 30th anniversary of the International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice (ICLIP), this paper shares the historical events of the organization. Milestones and major accomplishments are highlighted from the early organization of the first conference in 1995 under the direction of the late John Kunz at the University of Wisconsin-Superior to the guidance of Juliette Shellman, Director of ICLIP at the University of Connecticut in 2025. Among the milestones of achievements are included the biennial conferences, the International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review, the Certificate Program in Reminiscence and Life Review, the honorary award recipients, past presidents, and the online website marking these historical events. The organization's longevity is attributed to the dedication, adaptability, and resilience of ICLIP's leadership and members. The future is promising as the organization enters its 4th decade with initiatives for research, education, and practice.

Keywords: legacy; organizational milestones; history

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. – Margaret Mead

The Legacy Project describes the history and milestones of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) and International Center for Life Story Innovation and Practice (ICLIP). Rich in history and traditions, the organization flourished under the guidance of influential people, adapted during pivotal moments of change, and embraced a bright future.

In 1995, the National Reminiscence and Life Review Conference sparked grassroots efforts by a small group of people to lay the foundations of the organization that is known today as the International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice. Strategically, the group built the infrastructure of the organization with a charter and governing bylaws. They created networking forums, cooperative writing teams, and championed each other's research.

Thirty years later, although members can find important documents that are preserved and archived, the stories by the people who were there of the who, what, when, why, and how behind that documentation are in danger of disappearing and being lost forever. Our experience in reminiscence, life review, and storytelling shows that our memories fade, and specificity is lost. The urgency of preserving the organization's history and its

stories presented itself as a challenge. The highlights, milestones, and stories of our organization were captured as they existed in 2024 as a means of keeping our legacy alive in "The Legacy Project."

Origins of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (1995–2011)

In 1995, the International Society for Reminiscence and Life Review was established under the guidance of John Kunz at the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UW-S). John Kunz, the UW Board of Regents, and the advisory board created a charter and formed the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) in 1999. They hired staff, organized conferences, recruited researchers, educators, practitioners, and personal historians for membership from the fields of psychology, sociology, healthcare, gerontology, and industry.

Sadly, in 2011 the organization lost its founder, reminiscence scholar, and visionary, John Kunz. His passing marked a pivotal point in the organization's history. Mr. Kunz established an endowed scholarship to help ensure the continuation of the IIRLR organization. This funding, along with additional support, sustains the biennial conference. John Kunz will be remembered. For those who knew John Kunz and those who will benefit from his generous nature, he honored this organization in thinking beyond his own lifetime to ensure the organization he cared for so deeply would continue to touch and inspire those who never had the chance to know him.

Biennial conferences were held in various cities across the United States and Canada and adjoined the Gerontological Society of America conferences (Table 1). Pre- and post-conference workshops served as training courses on how to conduct reminiscence and life reviews. Keynote speakers focused on developments and advances

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Table 1

Biennial Conferences

| Conference Year | Conference Location |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 1995 | Superior, WI ¹ |
| 1997 | Superior, WI ² |
| 1999 | New York ² |
| 2001 | Chicago ³ |
| 2003 | Vancouver ³ |
| 2005 | Orlando ³ |
| 2007 | San Francisco ³ |
| 2009 | Atlanta ³ |
| 2011 | Boston ³ |
| 2013 | New Orleans ³ |
| 2015 | Orlando ³ |
| 2018 | Boston ³ |
| 2022 | Virtual (UConn) ⁴ |
| 2024 | Virtual (UConn) ⁴ |

¹National Reminiscence and Life Review Conference²International Society for Reminiscence and Life Review³International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review⁴International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice

in the field. Poster and panel sessions gave opportunities for direct engagement with researchers, educators, practitioners, and personal historians.

Members published early research studies and methodological approaches of conducting reminiscence and life reviews, such as *Critical Advances in Reminiscence Work: From Theory to Application*, co-authored by Jeffrey Webster and Barbara Haight in 2002; *The Past in the Present: Using Reminiscence in Health and Social Care*, authored by Faith Gibson in 2004; and *Transformational Reminiscence: Life Story Work*, co-authored by John Kunz and Florence Gray-Soltys in 2007.

Two videos are featured on the website (<https://iclip.nursing.uconn.edu/message-from-the-director/>). The first is: *An Unlikely Friendship* by Diane Bloom, Florence Gray Soltys, Stephen Hawthorne, Lou Lipsitz, Ann Atwater, C.P. Ellis (Claiborne Paul), In-Focus (Firm), Filmmakers Library, Inc., published in 2002. The second: is John Kunz and Mary O'Brien Tyrrell's *The Joys and Surprises of Telling Your Life Story*, a video completed in 2003.

The organization honored excellence with the creation of four awards since 2005 (Table 2). Two awards were created on the 10th year anniversary: the Robert Butler and Myrna Lewis Exemplar Research Award and the James and Betty Birren Exemplar Practice Award. In memory of Florence Gray-Soltys, the Graduate Student Award was

first awarded in 2009. In memory of our founder, the John A. Kunz Award for Distinguished Service was first given in 2015.

Transitions and Challenges (2011–2019)

In 2013, with Thomas Pierce serving as editor, the IIRLR published its inaugural issue of *The International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review* (IJRLR), featuring 11 articles authored by accomplished leaders in the field of reminiscence and life review. The journal has since published over 100 articles and welcomes submissions from diverse perspectives that are of interest to its readership and align with the mission of the journal and its parent organization.

The on-line Certificate in Reminiscence and Life Story Work was launched in 2014 and continued until 2019. More than 100 participants from multiple continents completed the program. They received training on conducting structured life reviews. The Certificate courses were offered for two years at the University of Connecticut (UConn). The course content and instructional sessions are now transitioning to an independent, self-paced online format.

Leadership in the organization has been marked by legends in the field of reminiscence, life review, and storytelling. The dedication of these past and current presidents of the IIRLR/ICLIP are from various countries, disciplines, and occupational roles. They served at least two-year terms as President (Table 3).

The UW-Superior notified IIRLR that support would end on June 30, 2019. The Advisory Board explored various options on relocating the organization and in 2018 at the biennial meeting, the membership voted to relocate the IIRLR from the University of Wisconsin–Superior to the University of Connecticut. As with many new adventures, planning the next steps is as important as the journey itself. In short, the organization established a new center with operational guidelines, secured approval from UConn's legal team, gained the sponsorship and support of the Dean of the College of Nursing, and received membership approval for the organization's relocation. The members and organization extend tremendous appreciation to Juliette Shellman, Gerben Westerhof, and the Advisory Board for their leadership in creating our new home. In 2019, its name was officially approved by the University of Connecticut's Board of Trustees to the International Center for Life Story Innovations and Practice (ICLIP). Gerben Westerhof was the transition President from IIRLR to ICLIP in 2018–2022.

Emergence of ICLIP (2019–2024)

Mentioning the coronavirus or COVID-19 brings memories of a world pivot. Like many organizations, ICLIP had to change to remain a viable organization. Several of our founding leaders had passed away, were seriously ill, had retired, or were otherwise unable to remain actively involved in the organization. An important

Table 2

Award Recipients

| Awards | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| Robert Butler and Myrna Lewis for Exemplar Research Award | James and Betty Birren Exemplar Practice Award | Florence Gray-Soltys Graduate Student Award | John A. Kunz Award for Distinguished Service |
| Robert Butler 2005 | James Birren 2005 | Patricia O'Neill 2009 | Donna Sislo 2015 |
| Peter Coleman 2007 | Barbara Haight 2007 | Dorvat Harel 2011 | Barbara Haight 2018 |
| Philippe Cappeliez Jeffrey Webster 2009 | John Kunz 2009 | Jojanneke Korte 2013 | Juliette Shellman 2021 |
| Toyoko Nomura 2011 | Pam Schweitzer 2011 | Kendra O'Hora 2015 | Cheryl Svensson 2024 |
| Susan Bluck 2013 | Thomas Pierce 2013 | Majse Lind 2018 | |
| Brian de Vries 2015 | Cheryl Svensson 2015 | Deniz Pamuk 2021 | |
| Alison Kris 2021 | Wendy Bancroft 2021 | | |
| Gerben Westerhof 2024 | Sarah White 2024 | | |

lesson ICLIP learned during the pandemic was that some organizations lost their way, experienced declining membership and were unable to remain financially sustainable. The Advisory Board members were determined to prevent that outcome for the organization. To guide the organization forward, members were surveyed, and the Advisory Board carefully considered their feedback.

The face-to-face biennial conference that served as a networking venue became unattainable due to the isolation restrictions of large groups. The Advisory Board pivoted the organization under Gerben Westerhof's leadership and kept the conference, newsletter, journal, certification program, special interest group at the Gerontology Society of America, and the website. At the request of the membership, the first virtual conference was held in 2021, with subsequent online conferences taking place in 2022 and 2024.

Great things can happen when conscientious and determined people share a vision. During this transition, the Advisory Board preserved the important qualities that made this organization a warm and welcoming place for our members. Through the dedication of the leadership team, the advisory board, the conference planning committee, and UConn's IT resources and technology,

ICLIP held a virtual conference to both celebrate the transition to UConn and to restore a sense of community.

The Students Advancing Reminiscence Research (STARR) initiative serves to advance the science of reminiscence and life review through student projects and collaboration. Faculty members at UCONN and ICLIP members mentor these students with their research projects. The STARR group meets virtually, and students work on their reminiscence, life review, and storytelling projects.

In March 2025, the Life Story Research and Practice Collaborative was launched to provide opportunities for networking, collaboration, education, and dissemination of research and best practices among life story practitioners, researchers, and others interested in the field.

The Legacy Project (2022–Present)

Multiple factors influenced the initiation of the Legacy Project. In the previous 3 years before I served as ICLIP's President (2022–2024), the organization had been transformed—a relocation, a new name, and a new charter. It was necessary that the business aspects of the organization were the priority, and any special inspirational initiatives would be delayed. The coronavirus pandemic, starting in late 2019, was a major external force that changed the world and our

organization. Numerous founding members were aging out of active engagement in the organization, a few members had died, and several members were retired. Staff members at the University of Wisconsin—Superior, Esther Gieschen, Program Manager and Donna Sislo, Program Associate had decided to retire, and much of the memoirs and documents from the early years of the organization remained in Wisconsin.

With a great deal of resolution and devotion, the three-member committee, Juliette Shellman, Cheryl Svensson, and Cheryl Brohard, began a tri-fold approach to the project. They all collected archival materials such as written documents, conference proceedings, newsletters, written books on reminiscence, life review, autobiographical memory, storytelling, narratives, and associated topics by our members and others. They searched and reached out to the family and friends of our past presidents and leaders for current contact information. The trio organized archival materials by chronological order for the web-based platform and sprinkled aesthetic appeal, such as pictures, videos, and interviews, onto the web pages with help from UCONN web creators.

The Legacy Project was introduced at the ICLIP virtual biennial conference, *Keeping Our Legacy Alive: Honoring the PAST and Embracing the Future*, in March

Table 3

List of Presidents

| President | Country | Term |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|
| John Kunz* | USA | 1995-1999 |
| Barbara Haight | USA | 1999-2001 |
| Peter Coleman | UK | 2001-2003 |
| Jeffrey Webster | Canada | 2003-2005 |
| Florence Gray Soltys | USA | 2005-2007 |
| Brian de Vries | USA | 2007-2009 |
| Thomas Pierce | USA | 2009-2011 |
| Mary O'Brien Tyrrell | USA | 2011-2013 |
| Philippe Cappelliez | Canada | 2013-2015 |
| Juliette Shellman | USA | 2015-2018 |
| Gerben Westerhof | Netherlands | 2018-2022 |
| Cheryl Brohard | USA | 2022-2024 |
| Alison Kris | USA | 2024-Present |

*John Kunz served as the organization's Executive Director from 1995-2011, organizing the 1995 and 1997 conferences before the role of President was established.

2024. The conference committee sponsored a networking and engagement session, "Panel Discussion with Past Presidents," gaining personal memoirs and recollections of their days with ICLIP.

Reflections/Future Directions of the Lessons Learned

How does an organization carry forward its legacy into the future? The organization reflects upon its creative

and abundant history, the lessons learned through the years, the resilience of members to adapt, and its commitment to a new vision for the future. The organization does this by engaging the next generation of researchers, educators, practitioners, and historians. They provide mentorship and leadership to the next generation. Its mission, leadership, members, and endeavors tell the story of the organization.

The organization welcomed the age of technology and what it had to offer. The single-lens reflex cameras that once recorded the childhood activities of the Baby Boomers have been replaced by smartphones with built-in cameras that can be shared in an instant. In about 10-20 years, we will need to sort through the memories depicted in the pictures and recordings of our digital life to archive this new generation of milestones. ICLIP embraced technology to tell our IIRLR and ICLIP stories. The Legacy Project represents the history of the two organizations, its beginnings, milestones, and dreams of the future. The Legacy Project is prominent on the ICLIP website, and it will continue to evolve alongside technological innovations, featuring more recorded snippets and podcasts, and fewer written words.

The final lesson learned from the Legacy Project is that history guides the future if "we" take the time to learn from it. Let us avoid the mistakes of the past by recognizing the early warning signs. Let us band together, as that small group did some 30 years ago, to expand our future. The founders of the IIRLR organization and the current leaders of the ICLIP organization have left the next generation a solid foundation from which to build the future memories of tomorrow.

Author's Reflections

Looking back on my two-year presidency (2022–2024), I felt it was essential to live the mission of ICLIP through action. The Legacy Project emerged from that intention—to capture and preserve the organization's history through the voices of those who built it. Collaborating with Dr. Juliette Shellman and Dr. Cheryl Svensson was both an honor and a joy. Each brought distinct strengths: Dr. Shellman's leadership as Director of ICLIP at the UConn Elisabeth DeLuca School of Nursing, Dr. Svensson's experience directing the Birren Center for

Autobiographical Studies and teaching guided autobiography, and our shared commitment to safeguarding the stories behind the documents.

Together, we gathered, organized, and curated the narrative of IIRLR and ICLIP so that future generations could not only read about the organization but feel its legacy. This project reaffirmed that the strength of ICLIP lies in its people—past, present, and future—whose dedication continues to inspire innovation, connection, and storytelling across generations.