

Telling the Story:

EXPLORING YOUR CLIENTS' LIVES

Your clients' life stories may be the most valuable gift you can give them.

BY COLLEEN BIONDI AND SHERRIE STEVENS

Artist Ken Flett has devoted his career to exploring the lives of people society has left behind, such as street people, drug addicts, alcoholics, and the impoverished. Using photography, painting, words, and personal memorabilia, Flett “shows” their stories by illustrating their “spark, passion, and spirit,” restoring to these individuals their dignity and respect.¹

For the past seven years, volunteers at Catholic Family Service (CFS) in Calgary have followed a similar path by writing life histories or biographies (lifebooks) for another marginalized societal group, kids in care. Kids in care are children who have been removed from their families of origin and placed in government care due to abuse, neglect, or their families' inability to care for them at home.

Each volunteer lifebook writer is assigned one child's history and spends about 75 hours researching Child Welfare files and writing the story of the child's life. The final product is given to the child upon leaving the system as a young adult or at adoption.

The importance of lifebooks has been documented in Child Welfare literature. Lifebooks "bring together in one place bits and pieces of data that make for a comprehensive picture" of what has happened in a child's life.² Thus, they provide "historical continuity"³ for children in care and offer foster children the following hope:⁴

- that they can differentiate from families of origin
- that they can integrate good and bad feelings toward themselves and others
- that they can integrate the past, present, and future
- that they can answer historical questions and straighten out misconceptions
- that they can develop intact senses of identify.

Lifebooks offer the ups and downs, trials and triumphs, struggles and accomplishments of children in foster care. Lifebooks include basic information about the child, such as family and birth history, medical history, educational and placement history, and "real life" stories of birthday parties, camping trips, favorite toys, colors, and pets.

Lifebooks also help children make sense of chaotic situations in their lives. Frequently, children in long-term care have memory gaps or are confused about what really happened in their families to warrant government care. As years go by in care, they may

How Can You Use Lifebooks in Your Organization?

- **LIFEBOOK CLIENTS NEEDN'T BE CHILDREN.** Consider a wide range of clients, such as Alzheimer patients, people with disabilities, or new immigrants. These groups would benefit from a record of their histories. So would poor and homeless people, alcoholics and other addicts, and the chronically or terminally ill. Indeed, a personal lifebook can bolster anyone's self-esteem.
- **ENCOURAGE USING ALL FIVE SENSES** in creating a "book"— seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, speaking. For example, a story can include videotape, audiotape, words, textiles, and aromas.
- **USE TRAINED VOLUNTEERS** to work on the project. Their approach is refreshing and unencumbered by professional ideology or theory. If you know people who would be good lifebook writers, phone and invite them to participate.
- **INVOLVE STAFF FROM DAY ONE.** They need to understand the rhyme and reason for such a program. Use them in training and supervising volunteers.
- **ASK YOUR CLIENT GROUP** what would work for *them*. Don't assume you know best.
- **CREATE AN ADVISORY GROUP** of pivotal stakeholders for ongoing lifebook consultation.
- **GET YOUR LOCAL MEDIA INVOLVED.** They'll be interested, and their support will go a long way in educating the public about your organization and work.
- **START SMALL.** Solicit feedback. Review and revise.
- **DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL.** Begin with what already works, then adapt from there.
- **OFFER A VARIETY OF SUPPORT TO WRITERS,** such as one-on-one consultation, networking, review meetings with staff, volunteer recognition.
- **PHONE THE LIFEBOOK WRITING "INFO LINE"** (403-233-2360) for other tips and strategies. Or visit the Web site www.cfs-ab.org, or e-mail biondic@cfs-ab.org.

Tips for Motivating Volunteers

- **VALUE THE WORK.** Use phone calls and notes to show your appreciation.
- **DON'T FORGET** volunteers' families. Include them in events. Give them inexpensive appreciation gifts. Let them know you understand that their support is crucial.
- **PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES** for volunteers to meet frequently and support one another.
- **OFFER CREATIVE REWARDS**, such as child care, free parking, restaurant coupons, Internet access, or free training.
- **USE THE BUDDY SYSTEM.** Provide each new volunteer with a mentor.
- **GIVE VOLUNTEERS FREQUENT FEEDBACK**, and seek feedback from them. Ask what would make their job easier. Then follow through on their suggestions.
- **PRAISE THE PERSON**, not the work. Instead of, "This is good," say, "You did a great job!" Nothing motivates like a one-on-one, face-to-face compliment.
- **USE EVERY EXCUSE** to celebrate achievement.

forget where they've lived, which therapists helped them, who their friends were, why people have moved in and out of their lives in a seemingly random way. Decisions which are clearly the result of heavy caseloads, stressed-out social workers, bureaucracy, or changes in government policies (foster moves, new workers, case plan alterations) may be viewed from children's perspectives as examples of their worthlessness. Lifebooks offer salvation by separating reality (my parents abused me) from fantasy (I deserved it) and by assigning responsibility to accurate parties.

Volunteers at CFS review all relevant material and rewrite it in a comprehensive, well-rounded, nonjudgmental package. The children thus have, perhaps for the first time, an accurate rendition of their lives, allowing them to put their circumstances in perspective and to mature into healthy adulthood.

Since 1991, the Lifebook Writing Volunteer Program at CFS has provided over 200 lifebooks for kids in care. Volunteers are recruited from the newspaper, radio, television, or word of mouth and are fully screened, trained, supervised, and evaluated. Screening includes personal interviews, reference checks, and security clearances with the police and child-protection system.

A three-hour training session follows. During training, vol-

unteers learn about the Child Welfare system and the impact of changing policies on kids in care. Volunteer trainees are encouraged to examine personal biases and judgmental ideas which may surface in writing about the tragic experiences of these children.

During this session, trainers discuss different writing styles with volunteers and suggest how to word unfortunate incidents in a child's life. They prepare volunteers for the difficult things they may read and explain how to search out the positives, as there are always happy moments in a child's life. The challenge for lifebook writers is how to relate the facts in a positive manner—how to retell a life which has had more negative events than most.

Since Child Welfare workers make the referrals, they are the consumers as much as the youth receiving the lifebooks. Thus, volunteers are also trained to interpret input and editing from the Child Welfare workers.

After training, volunteers decide if they're ready to commit to writing a book for a child in care. If so, each volunteer is matched with a Child Welfare worker, and the two meet with the coordinator of volunteers. At this match meeting, they discuss administrative details, and the volunteer signs a confidentiality statement.

Lifebook writers must agree to keep confidential not only the information they read but any information they hear discussed.

After the match meeting, the volunteer works independently to research and write the lifebook. The coordinator of volunteers

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checks regularly to see that progress is being made and to offer emotional support. File reports of repeated abuse and neglect can be very explicit and troubling, and volunteers often need to talk about their reactions. Yet, because of the confidential nature of the task, they can't share details with family and friends. Thus, the coordinator's supportive role is crucial.

Volunteer lifebook writers have proven to be a dedicated group who have the time (three hours per week within office hours), energy (they are passionate about children's issues and approach the program from a fresh perspective), and skill (they may be writers, students of social work or psychology, educators, or businesspeople) to do the job. At CFS, lifebook writers have established a Network Support Group, which meets monthly. At these meetings, volunteers talk about difficult material, their struggles to find positive stories to relate, and their frustrations with how a system has affected young lives. The group also invites speakers and experts in areas relating to children, abuse, and development. Presentations have been offered on children's advocacy, foster care, attachment disorder, and multicultural issues.

Although this work is clearly factual, there is room for volunteers to put their unique and creative stamp on the project. Volunteers have:

- included a fabric collage with the narrative text
- documented the history of a reserve where a native child was raised
- identified the news headlines and the Oscar and Grammy winners for a child's birthyear
- included details about a child's medical disability
- included anecdotes from past foster parents and social workers
- added an addendum with blank pages for a child to continue the story
- audiotaped the text
- drawn items of interest to the child, such as butterflies throughout the text
- incorporated affirmations and motivational sayings into the text
- included a father's letter explaining why he could no longer care for his child.

Evaluation is a vital part of the lifebook program. Every six weeks, the writer meets with the Child Welfare worker and the coordinator of volunteers. This meeting provides a structured setting to determine that the process is on track according to the initial contract. A final evaluation takes place when the book is completed. Throughout the project, there are many opportunities to solicit feedback from all parties.

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An integral part of any volunteer program is appreciation. Lifebook writing is an independent task which usually involves little face-to-face contact, so the challenge for the coordinator of volunteers is to ensure that volunteers are feeling valued. CFS has an annual volunteer appreciation event, but ongoing recognition is also important. Thank-you notes and telephone calls acknowledge the sometimes difficult process of lifebook writing.

Also important is understanding the time and support the volunteer's family gives to the task. To show its appreciation, CFS distributes free or inexpensive items such as theater tickets, event passes, or two-for-one coupons to volunteers' families.

Seasoned volunteers are asked to participate in training new volunteers. Reference letters are provided for volunteers hoping to explore other writing or social service work. All these approaches serve to value the fine work done by the volunteers.

An African proverb suggests that "it takes a whole village to raise one child". The lifebook writing program at Catholic Family Service is one example of a community investing in special children—children in care. ■

Footnotes

¹The story of this Calgary, Alberta, artist is described in "Mixed Media Marvels" by Valerie Fortney, *Avenue Magazine*, September 1996.

²Schafer, Judith and Christina Linstrom, *How To Raise an Adopted Child*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1989.

³Steinhauer, Paul, D., *The Least Detrimental Alternative: A Systematic Guide to Case Planning and Decision Making for Children in Care*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

⁴Backhaus, Kristina A., "Life Books: Tools for Working with Children in Placement," *Social Work*, November-December 1984.

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Ellis, Susan, *The Volunteer Recruitment Book*.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Volunteer Liability & Risk Management*.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Volunteer Management, Leadership Series*.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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