Alison Rourke and Lisa Upton – “Storylines – Building your Life Story on Paper, CD or DVD.”

Journalists Lisa Upton and Alison Rourke have worked all over the world for major TV, radio and newspaper organisations, including the BBC, ABC and SBS. From Moscow to Mongolia and London to Lahore, they have covered stories in some of the world’s most dangerous locations. Their talk at Sydney Probus examined the art of storytelling, including how they have adapted their skills to create oral history in print, on audio CD and on film, through their company, Storylines (www.storylines.net.au).

“People often ask us: ‘Is my story interesting enough to write a book about or make a film about?’” said Storylines’ co-director, Alison Rourke.

“We tell them that every person’s story is part of a family jigsaw and if one piece is missing, the picture will never be complete in the future,” she said. “We hope that people will look back at our films in 100 years’ time to learn more about their heritage.”

Co-director, Lisa Upton, says interviewees often tell Storylines things they haven’t told their families.

“There are probably two reasons for that,” said Upton.

“Firstly, Storylines’ interviewers actually ask the questions whereas many families, mine included, tend to get caught up in day-to-day life and don’t stop to ask about each other’s histories or memories. Also, sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger, particularly a stranger who happens to be a journalist,” she said.

Some of the people who commission Storylines to record their personal history have had experience with the media but the majority haven’t.

“To put people at ease, we do a lot of research before recording anything - much like a journalist in the middle of a big story,” said Upton.

“Whether we are making a book, an audio CD or a film, this will involve several conversations with the client as well as possibly talking to other family members, where appropriate.”

For further information about Storylines or to see samples of the company’s work, please go to www.storylines.net.au or contact Storylines on: ph 1300 886 615. Email: info@storylines.net.au

Summary of August 2012 Address

Introduced by John Thom, Alison and Lisa are Journalists with over 20 years media experience having worked in many parts of the world including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States in addition to Australia. They have both covered stories in some of the world’s most dangerous locations. On returning to Australia they determined to establish their business Storylines to assist people to record their memories, family history or their own life story in a combination of all or any of the print, audio or film media.

Lisa commenced the presentation by illustrating to us what it was to be able to tell a good story. Lisa was required to cover a story from the Punjab relating to the trading of “body parts”. She learnt how mostly teenagers had their kidneys sold by their parents and that there were no laws or regulation to prevent such activity. She learnt to understand the issues for the poor and the need for money that led to the trading but the reality was that the sellers did not make the real money the profits went to the middlemen. Ultimately her work in this area led to the making of a film that was widely distributed and led to the laws being changed to prevent further trading. A trailer of this film “The Body Bazaar” was shown to the members.

Lisa later covered the Pakistan earthquake from which 80,000 people perished. She found it difficult to come to grips with this statistic and sought the stories of ordinary people who had survived. One such story related to a man who had lost all of his family and had little clothing for the freezing temperatures. Lisa offered him her coat she had recently acquired but to her surprise the man asked her to give it to
someone who needed it more. For Lisa it was a lesson in understanding the “little stories” to illustrate the “bigger picture”.

With this background we moved onto how the stories of ordinary people are valuable even if only to them and their families. These stories reflect family history and generational change and importantly illustrate the special memories that are embedded in the mind of the person. We listened to an audio recording of Alison’s father recollecting on her grandfather who fought in the Second World War, was captured in Timor by the Japanese, taken to Changi prisoner of war camp and later moved to Burma to work on the railroad. In this recording was included a rendition of “O Sole Mio” by Luciano Pavarotti which had special meaning as this was the aria sung by Alison’s grandfather to the prisoners of war held below decks whilst being attacked by the American forces as the ship sailed to Burma. Alison encourages the inclusion of music in audio or video recordings when it has special meaning.

Both Alison and Lisa are surprised by what people can recollect as generally those people do not know that they have this knowledge in their memory and it is the questions that are asked that are important to trigger such memories. People who engage Storylines often tell stories they have not told their families. They both feel that through their questioning and without embellishment they can add colour to the story.

Further videos were shown of the recollections of Bruce Tyrell, Winemaker and Joy Broughton, a lady doctor. These were presented to illustrate that generally people are initially nervous to start but they relax and accept that their story is interesting enough and leaves a legacy for the younger generation. The media, which Storylines uses, can range from a simple short printed publication with or without photos to audio and DVD and complete published biographies. Further information for members can be found on the club website.

Questions from members related to use of music, “looking for the magic”, copyright, costs (between $800 - $5500), use of oral history for National Libraries/Museums and style of presentation e.g. storybook or memoir (depends on the client can be either).

Ray Hyslop gave the vote of thanks to Lisa and Alison and believed that in his memory we had never had a duo of presenters before. Ray reflected that their presentation was fascinating to listen to and reminded us that history is sometimes lost because people are not interested. Ray encouraged both to keep up the good work and looked forward to hearing more of their success.