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*Feeling thankful for
our families...*

by William Ledle

GETTING TO KNOW

Your Parents



Ask people about the lives of their parents and you may receive a blank stare in response. Many of us don't know much about our parents beyond the most basic facts of their lives. This "not knowing" happens naturally. As children, we aren't interested in things like family history and if we do hear stories, they are soon forgotten. Before we know it we are adults, busy with our own families. Too soon, our parents are gone, and with them a lifetime of memories and wisdom. It doesn't have to be that way. Learning about the lives of our parents is simple, and it can provide a much-needed understanding of people we love, but from whom we may have drifted.

Here are some things to do (and one thing not to do) to learn about your parents' lives, regardless of their age.

START BY ASKING SIMPLE QUESTIONS. Ask questions you're sure your parents can answer. "What kind of cars did you have when you were young? Did you play any sports in high school? Do you remember your first job? How did you meet Daddy?" Your goal is to begin a dialogue. There is an element of trust in this sharing, and your folks want to know that you really care. Why keep it simple? Because to open up the flow of information, your parents need to be able to answer your questions. Too often, people begin by asking difficult questions that may make an elderly parent feel embarrassed and inadequate. Don't start with "What was Great-Grandpa Johnson's middle name?" or "What unit did your father serve in during World War II?" If your questions stump your parents, the dialogue will be cut short.

WRITE DOWN IMPRESSIONS. Names and information about parents and grandparents will naturally come up in stories. Write down what you hear, but when you start out, focus on your parents. As much as you would like to gather names, dates and places, pay special attention to feelings and impressions. "How did you feel when your father died? What did Mom say when you proposed to her?" Be sure to write down what you learn. If possible, type up your notes after each session.

Bill Ledle is a consultant specializing in family-owned businesses. He frequently writes about family history and lives in Sandy, Oregon.



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