

The life-stories workshop

A ready-to-run community program for libraries, senior centers, hospice volunteer teams, and family reunions. Every participant tells one story from their life and leaves with it recorded, kept, and — if they choose — shared with their family.

You need: this guide, a room with chairs you can pull into pairs, participants' own phones, and a printed set of DearestEllie memory prompt cards (free at www.dearestellie.org/resources).

The one-hour shape

1. Welcome & one ground rule (5 min). Every life in this room contains stories worth keeping. This is not a writing class; nothing will be graded.
2. Warm-up round (10 min). One prompt to the whole circle, answered in a sentence or two each. “What did your childhood street sound like?” works every time.
3. Story time (25 min). Pair up, draw a prompt card, take turns — ten minutes each — telling and recording one story on a phone.
4. One story to the room (10 min). Volunteers retell the best thing they just heard about their partner. Hearing your story retold — and landing — is the moment people come back for.
5. Keeping it (10 min). Help everyone get the recording somewhere safe — texted to a daughter, saved to a family folder or archive — and labeled with name and date.

Facilitator notes

- Pair strangers when you can. Friends skip the good parts (“you know the story”); strangers get the whole telling.
- Keep reserve prompts for the participant whose life was “nothing special.” “What’s the hardest you ever worked?” has never once failed.
- Tears are normal and usually welcome. Have tissues; don’t rush past them. Give anyone overwhelmed a graceful exit — helping you at the sign-in table works.
- Watch the pairs at minute fifteen. If one partner is doing all the talking, wander by and deal the quiet one a card directly.
- End on time and on warmth. Announce the next session while the room still glows.

Warm-up prompts to read aloud

- What did your childhood street sound like in the morning?

- What food do you still crave the way it was made back then?
- Who in your family were you most like — and who told you so?
- What did you do on summer evenings as a child?

Handling tender moments

Life stories include losses. A participant moved to tears is almost always having a good experience — the story mattered, and someone finally asked. Sit with it; don't fix it. The one caution: a participant who goes quiet and stays quiet may need the graceful exit, not encouragement. Check in privately, thank them for coming, and let them keep the prompt card.

After the workshop

- Remind participants (and their families) that the recording is theirs — encourage a second copy somewhere safe the same week.
- Families who want a private, permanent archive can use DearestEllie free — remembrance there is never gated by payment. A shared folder is also a fine archive; the point is that the story is kept.
- Run it again. Nobody's life fits in one session, and the second workshop fills itself by word of mouth.

This guide is free to print, reuse, and adapt for any community program. We'd love to hear how it went: hello@dearestellie.org.