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MINNEAPOLIS -- When Tara McGovern was a little girl, her father read to her every night and sang her to sleep. Now, when the 19-year-old college student is upset or can't sleep, she slips the DVD of him into her laptop computer, relaxing at the sound of his infectious laugh.

In the video, Paul McGovern is animated, his gestures uninhibited. As he talks about leaping hurdles in track, his feet leave the couch and they "bicycle" high in the air. The sight makes Tara laugh and cry at the same time.

"I get scared that I'm not remembering my father," she said. "I'm a very sentimental person. Just to watch it, everything comes back -- his body movements, his voice. Memories start popping up. It's like he's there, but in a different way."

Now Tara counts the video as her most precious possession. Longtime friend Ellen Luepker shot the video in 1995 during many hours of interviewing McGovern at the family's Eagan home. At the time, Luepker was starting a business called Living Portraits (www.livingportraits.com), an early entrant in what has become a burgeoning video biography industry.

"We're in the age of the biography," said Perry Cowen, a former photojournalist whose Once Upon a Time Video Productions is among about 40 Minnesota biography businesses that have grown with the popularity of memoirs, TV biography shows and inexpensive camcorders.

Their services range from Cowen's slick A&E-style biographies (costing \$5,000 to \$20,000) to video collages in which family photos are layered with music for several hundred dollars. Luepker charges \$5,000 for a Living Portrait. Each in-depth life review takes her 50 to 60 hours to produce and, when completed, fills two two-hour DVDs.

Most of Luepker's subjects are in their 70s or 80s. Often their grown children hire Luepker, hoping to preserve their parents' stories while they're alert enough to recall details and energetic enough to enjoy the process. Families tell Luepker that 30 to 40 percent of the information their parents share with her is new to them.

"Doing a life review is a developmental need, that all people have, to put their lives into perspective," said Luepker, a Twin Cities psychotherapist for 30 years who is best known for her work with sexual abuse victims. While Living Portraits is separate from her therapy practice, her interviews retain the reflective flavor of an intimate conversation.

Before sitting down to do portrait interviews, Luepker asks family members what questions they hope to have answered: What was it like growing up on the farm? How did your family survive the Depression? How did you propose to Grandma? Do you have any regrets? Occasionally they ask about painful issues -- childhood abuse, personal failures, the death of a child -- that the family has avoided discussing.

"Clients who served in World War II tell me they have never shared their war memories with their families. Families want to hear these stories. Once the memories are preserved on videotape, families say, it opens new possibilities for future discussions."

Women tend to be more reluctant than men to talk about their lives, Luepker said. "They say, 'Who would be interested in my life?' And yet those women are phenomenal."

She thinks of Helga Schey, 85, of Crystal, Minn. For years Schey's daughter had wanted Luepker to interview Schey and her husband, Rolf, 89. After Helga had a heart attack, the project acquired urgency.

"I asked them about what each of them had contributed to each other's lives," Luepker said. "I learned from Helga how special it was to be wanted and to be the focus of Rolf's life."

At the beginning of the interview, Helga's hands shook, Luepker remembers. "She didn't look nervous but she was holding on for dear life to a paper, and the paper crackled with what sounded like gunshots." Luepker offered her a rubber ball to squeeze as she revisited emotionally charged events.

Helga was just 4 when her mother died. She described watching her father tenderly help her dying mother sit up to sip a drink of water. That was Helga's last image of her mother. Sad as it was, that memory spawned other unexpectedly good ones, including of the aunt who "appeared from nowhere" to care for their large household.

Telling her life story to an attentive listener was therapeutic, enabling Helga to graft an adult's understanding to painful childhood experiences. She realized how resilient she had been as a child. And how her faith and her family sustained her. Most important, Helga realized that the joyful parts of her life far outweighed the sad things. She felt better in the present because she had reviewed her past life.

Luepker remembers Fiona McGovern, now 21 and a graduate of Northland College in Ashland, Wis., peeking around the corner as a little girl as she interviewed Paul McGovern in 1995. At the time, he was 40, a beloved girls' soccer coach, father of two elementary school-age daughters, Irish immigrant and a popular professor of epidemiology and statistics at the University of Minnesota.

Six months before, he had learned that he had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease. His doctor said McGovern might have just a year to live and he wanted to leave a memoir for his daughters.

He talked about growing up in Ireland and attending a boarding school, his love of sports, and making sure that his daughter's days began and ended with something positive.

Luepker did the portrait as a gift. Then it sat on a shelf for the next seven years as the family traveled, adding memories of soccer tournaments and trips while the family coped with McGovern's deteriorating condition.

He died on Oct. 11, 2002. After his funeral, family members and friends gathered in knots around the video. It packed an emotional wallop as viewers remembered McGovern as a loquacious man who couldn't sit still.

"I was not as close to my dad as my sister was," Fiona said. "That's why I appreciate [the video] so much. I almost feel like I can go back and have a conversation with him by watching these tapes. I learn stuff from them that I didn't ask about while he was alive."

Tara nearly wore out the original videotapes before her family transferred them to DVDs. For her, the portrait is a source of solace, a means for grieving.

"I was only 8 years old when my dad was diagnosed, so I don't have very many memories of him fully healthy," Tara said. "So it's invaluable to me because it triggers memories of him that wouldn't be easy for me to come up with otherwise."