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# Communities that Sustain: Legacy Exploration and Preservation Groups. A Presidential Fellow's Journey

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# Communities that Sustain: Legacy Exploration and Preservation Groups. A Presidential Fellow's Journey

*Victoria L. Bacon*

I am very grateful for having had the opportunity to pursue my dreams as the 2014–15 Presidential Fellow. As with all dreams and passions, my story begins long before a project was conceived. I was excited to attend an annual holiday gathering of friends in New Hampshire. It was December 20, 1996, and I had not connected much with this group of friends since changing jobs, as I no longer worked in New Hampshire. The 1990s were tough for finding work as a psychologist, as managed-care companies were paring down mental health benefits to consumers. This was the impetus for me to move to full-time teaching in graduate counseling. I was excited to see old friends, people I had golfed and skied with for years. One of my male friends, Mickey, had recently become a parent to his first-born, a girl. Mickey was full of stories and had many photos to share; he was a proud parent.

The evening took an unexpected twist that changed my life and, ultimately, the course of my career. Mickey had decided to explore his legacy by conducting genealogy. The birth of his daughter inspired him to investigate his heritage so that he could pass his legacy down to his children. Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary (2014) defines legacy as "something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor from the past." We hand down our stories, images, values, and so much more. Preserving and sharing one's legacy provides a sense of connection to our past, our ancestors, and our family history.

I remember that evening and our conversation as if they were yesterday. Mickey shared with me how he was conducting genealogy, describing his research efforts and findings in great detail. This was 1996, a time when one needed to visit various archives and libraries and manually "look up" information; unlike today, where technology allows one to conduct portions of this type of research on a computer, iPad or smart phone from home. Although I felt a sense of excitement, I told Mickey that I was reluctant to explore my legacy, my past, as my father was an orphan and my mother died when I was young. At that time,

I had no documented family history or contact with living relatives. My excitement and curiosity got the better of me; by the end of the evening I had agreed to meet Mickey at the National Archives in Waltham, Mass. The journey of exploring my legacy began on a wintery day in January 1997; it became an extraordinary journey that continues today. Since that day, I have found and met living relatives, visited grave sites of my ancestors and their homes that date from as early as the 1600s. I have found books that contained my family's genealogy, stories, photos and history. A comprehension of my life and my legacy has grown exponentially. I now have a historical context and connection to people, places and family history – *my family, my ancestors*. The journey has been a source of healing for me.



*The author visiting the Freer House, New Paltz, New York. Author's photo.*

Over the course of these years I began to wonder if this sort of journey could be healing for others, too. In 2001, I visited the FamilySearch Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, to learn more about researching my legacy. As I conducted my own research, and interacted with and watched others, I became convinced that a lot of people were interested in pursuing the same quest. Although I went to the FamilySearch Center in search of information about deceased relatives, I was delighted to learn that a relative had been conducting research on my maternal family line for many years. Shortly after this visit I telephoned Margaret, my cousin

once removed, who lived in Ohio and was now in her 80s. She was a feisty, assertive woman, who was on a mission. During our initial conversation, Margaret suggested that I apply for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), as my ancestor, Captain Abel Woodbury, had served in the Revolutionary War. I told her that I would give it some thought. Not surprisingly, I received an email from a woman at the DAR chapter closest to my home the very next day, and yes, I became a DAR member.

One of the more notable facts I learned was that I am a descendent of Hugo Freer/Frear, a Huguenot from France with a recorded history dating back to 1517 in Germany. Hugo Freer immigrated in 1670 with six other Huguenots to what is now New Paltz, New York. The Freer House at 32 Huguenot Street is “one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in the United States,” one occupied for 250 years. It is hard to describe my thoughts and feelings as I walked through the Freer house, looking at the inner structure, taking in smells of the past 344 years, and sitting in the Freer pew at the Huguenot Church. These were brave people who left Europe to seek religious freedom, and who volunteered to fight in both the French and Indian War (1754–63) and the Revolutionary War (1776–83). The Huguenot ancestors are in my father’s maternal line. What strikes me is that

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my orphan father was a very strong and courageous person who valued freedom, spoke out against injustice, and felt strongly about family loyalty—all characteristics exemplified by the Huguenots since the 1500s.

Over the years I dabbled in genealogy research, especially when the internet made it much more convenient. As a psychologist, I became interested in the psychological benefits of exploring one’s legacy. I published a couple of articles and offered a workshop for mental health professionals, yet the demands of teaching and the goal to become tenured seemed to pull me in a different direction. In 2008, my father died rather suddenly. He had shared very little over the years about his upbringing, as he was an orphan who suffered a life-threatening injury as a child. His passing rekindled my desire to explore my heritage and family history. During this time I created a wellness group model for adults. The groups’ goals were to enhance members’ senses of psychological well-being by increasing their connections

to family, heritage, and the global community, and to promote positive development with the beneficiaries of their legacy—future generations. Group work has been my primary area of expertise in clinical work, teaching, and scholarship for more than 35 years, and so the melding of legacy and group work made sense to me. I designed the *Legacy Exploration and Preservation Group Model* to promote psychological health by guiding adults to engage in self-reflection, explore their family histories and traditions, rediscover their roots, deepen their life purposes, and expand their capacities for caring. Specifically, these psychoeducation/support groups aim to guide adults toward becoming “keepers of meaning” by exploring, preserving and sharing their family legacies with future generations.

*Legacy Exploration and Preservation Groups (LEPG)* were developed to provide a framework for group facilitators to help participants explore their legacies, to make sense of memories and information they uncover or have revealed to them, and lastly, to help



*The LEPG Team, 2013-14 (L-R): Patricia Kennedy, Melissa Shea, Kristen Anderson, Maureen Boiros (Mental Health Counseling Graduates, Bridgewater State University). Author's photo.*



*The LEPG Team, 2014-15 (L-R): Victoria Bacon (Project Director), Kristen Anderson, Melissa Shea, Shannon DelPapa, and Maureen Boiros (Mental Health Counseling Graduates, Bridgewater State University). Author's photo.*



evoke a shared wisdom. The LEPG project was launched in May 2013 with a Special Projects Grant from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and with matching funds from Bridgewater State University (BSU). This funding was provided to pilot the LEPG Model with women veterans living in Southeastern Massachusetts. In

personal relationships. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006) contend that psychological health and well-being occurs when participants identify their strengths (an outcome of group work), feel empowered (by “meaning making” relative to one’s family, discovering one’s voice, and learning to make good decisions in life), and actively engage to

prospective members. As we do so, I am collecting quantitative and qualitative data on the effectiveness of the LEPG Model with the aim of creating an evidenced-based group intervention. In addition, I have developed an Advanced Group Counseling Certificate program for training mental health clinicians in Southeastern Massachusetts that requires its participants to complete an LEPG internship. The Fellowship year was also used to build a marketing platform for sharing this project with BSU and beyond (<https://my.bridgew.edu/departments/LegacyExploration/SitePages/Home.aspx>).

It is exciting to be able to combine my passion for exploring and preserving my legacy with my teaching and scholarship endeavors. The fellowship year was transformative as both a scholar and psychologist, and has underlined for me how a personal journey can become food for professional rejuvenation.



*LEPG Artifacts. Author's photo.*

August 2013, the first LEPG Team was made up of three licensed mental health counselors, BSU alumni who had graduated with master’s degrees from the Department of Counselor Education, and a mental health counseling student who served as the Graduate Research Assistant. The project team conducted Legacy groups at BSU and two locations in Plymouth, Mass; there were three such groups in 2013-14 and three in 2014-15.

As the *Legacy Exploration and Preservation Groups* piloted during 2013-14 included women veterans, several key dimensions of the group’s deliberations were borrowed from the Veteran Wellness Model, an approach to mental health group work developed in 2012 specifically for wellness interventions with veterans: a sense of purpose and meaning, mental health/wellness, and social/

promote change within one’s community. Robert Akeret (1991) states that sharing this wisdom provides “timeless lessons” for future generations. Though exploring and preserving one’s legacy can take many forms—compiling photo-memoir books, writing memoirs, genealogy or poetry, recording oral history, scrapbooking, producing a family cookbook, or others—the process of exploring legacy, the seeking of identity, is as important as any of the details that we learn about our pasts.

The Presidential Fellowship 2014-15 provided me with dedicated time and resources to continue offering *Legacy Exploration and Preservation Groups* to adults in Southeastern Massachusetts. Today, the project continues as a multiyear, multipronged effort to expand access to *Legacy Exploration and Preservation Groups* at no cost to



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*The author visiting family cemetery plots. Author's photo.*