



Crestwood Preparatory College students Amanda Lee and Max Ahn interviewed Korean War veteran Henry Chu (centre) as part of an oral history project.

Telling tales

Let's encourage all Canadians to share their stories.
by Janet Walker

"Not a day passes over this earth but men and women of no note do great deeds, speak great words and suffer noble sorrows."

I first learned of this quote from a favourite uncle. It comes from English author Charles Reade, who used the inspiring line to open his book *The Cloister and the Hearth*, a tale about a young scribe whose detailed description of people and events stands as a transcript of fifteenth-century life. I've always loved the words because they speak to the importance of the champions among us who don't always find their way into the history books.

That notion of documenting the history of ordinary people was underscored when I returned to the University of Winnipeg in 2010 to study oral history. Through coursework and with practice, it became startlingly evident that when we interviewed our subjects they frequently answered our questions in the form of stories. The ancient art of storytelling helps to link memory with history through narrative inquiry and analytical reflection — an unhurried process that's supported by today's digital audio recorders, which eliminate the necessity for chronological recounting.

Oral history can be an important tool in defining the collective issues of women, or for understanding the rich cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. It can record

insights from businesspeople and cultural leaders or reveal the experiences of pioneers, soldiers, and refugees.

One of the concepts at the core of the study of oral history is known as "shared authority." It reinforces a collaborative process where the interviewer and the narrator contribute not only to understand how things are but also to explore how things got to be the way they are. The dialogue begins with a question or a photograph to help the narrator begin the act of remembering. It continues because there is someone committed to listening — and understanding.

So why don't more people tell their stories?

Perhaps it is because no one asks. It seems to me that people don't share stories because we don't make the time for this. Life gets



From left: Canada's History Board Chair Richard Pound, Governor General David Johnston, Pierre Berton Award winner Mark Zuehlke, and Canada's History President and CEO Janet Walker.

busy. What if our approach to history included an effort to listen more to the tales of our elders? How might younger Canadians undertake the research and preparation that could help older citizens remember or revisit the details of place and time?

Thankfully, there are many talented and dedicated teachers working to introduce these skills to students across the country — teachers such as Scott Masters, a 2012 winner of the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching. His students at Crestwood Preparatory College in Toronto collected the oral histories of Second World War veterans and Holocaust survivors and published them online. So far, the students have collected more than two hundred stories and have broadened their outreach to include family members, recent refugees and immigrants, and community leaders.

When the Governor General's teaching awards were launched in 1996, we had no idea that the program would grow exponentially each year to become an annual national celebration of excellence that spans all history communities, from teachers and academics to writers, broadcasters, film and television producers, museum and archive professionals, and community volunteers. Today, we have honoured over two hundred people at the Governor General's History Awards.

Each is an exemplar of excellence in storytelling, encouraging us to explore the past intelligently and critically and with great passion for our shared stories.

Canada's History magazine has been showcasing great storytelling for nearly ninety-five years. From the historians who write our articles, to the teachers and academics we celebrate, to the museums and archives that offer programming to the public, we strive to support the history makers who breathe life into the past.

Our recent book, *Canada's Great War Album*, is a great example of what can be achieved when we all work together. By sharing your stories, photographs and memories with us, we together ensure that these valuable and essential personal histories are not lost.

History matters. *Your* history matters. By giving voice to all Canadians we give testimony to the human experience.

Janet Walker is President and CEO of Canada's History Society.