

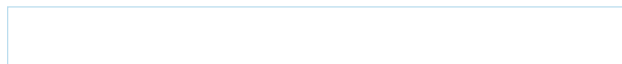
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Families' life stories go digital

SCI-TECH SCENE | Photos scanned, turned into video scrapbooks in clients' homes

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BY [SANDRA GUY](#) Business Reporter



Everett Johnson looks at each day with glee following his double lung transplant two years ago.

Johnson's wife, Cheryl, wanted to create a DVD video for Everett's 67th birthday to commemorate his recovery and their life together. She wanted the DVD to include family photos, and she wanted to convert to DVD two VHS-era family videos.

"I had tried to do it myself, but I couldn't get my iTunes to play," said Cheryl, 57.

Cheryl saw an advertisement in her Huntley community's monthly magazine for My Life Story ([Mylifestorynow.com](#)), a local company that quickly scans photos and memorabilia into digital format in people's homes.

It's the brainchild of businessman and technology entrepreneur Jim Litwin and his family.

Cheryl called Litwin and was pleased to realize her project in time for her husband's birthday.

Mary Stone was at her wit's end trying to find someone to digitize 1,000 photos of her family that she had never had time to scrapbook.

"I tried so many places to ask them to scan my pictures and put them on a CD-DVD," said the 55-year-old Huntley mother of two, an employment-screening investigator.

Stone also found her answer in My Life Story.

Not only did Stone get the photos digitized, she recorded the narration and chose the length of time each photo remained on the screen and whether transitions between photos appeared as a dissolve, a clockwise swipe or a page turning in a book.

"I'm typical of a lot of busy mothers. I had thrown all of my children's photos in a shoebox," Stone said. "I spent many months recovering from traumatic foot surgery, and I sorted all of those photos by date.

"I had 1,000 photos and no way to do anything with them," she said.

Stone saw a flier for My Life Story in her community's lifestyles magazine.

It was a godsend," Stone said, noting that Litwin showed great patience throughout the process. "Why didn't anyone think of this before?"

The disc that clients receive can be inserted into a DVD player so it can be shown on a television set.

Litwin, whose 30-year career includes executive positions at MyPoints.com, Wunderman/Y&R, Vertis Communications and Sears Portrait Studio, holds an MBA in marketing from Northwestern University's Kellogg School and a bachelor's in film and television production from Columbia College. Litwin also ran his own company, Dr. Hook-Up, in which he and other technicians helped people set up their VCRs and other electronics equipment inside their homes when these first became popular.

Litwin and his family considered 35 business ideas before deciding to invest in the photo-scanning and family-history-telling business.

He realized the value of doing in-house work because he had heard horror stories of photo-

scanning companies that shipped customers' cherished mementoes overseas to be copied and lost them.

Litwin bought two types of scanners that he could easily take to people's homes so he can scan everything on the spot.

"It's a very rewarding business," he said. "You get a good feeling helping people preserve family memories."

For most photos, Litwin charges 39 cents a scan. For delicate or small items, he uses a slower flatbed scanner and charges 87 cents each. He charges 47 cents for each 35mm slide scanned.

Litwin scans the images at a high resolution so they work with the next-generation Blu-ray DVD format. The Blu-ray DVD player, designed to provide real-as-life images on high-definition TV sets, is expected to be a hot item this Christmas.

In the process, Litwin keeps two backup copies besides the final CD so that more copies can be made.

Families may submit music to accompany the photos, slides, news clippings and other mementos that Litwin scans.

"People amaze me with the things they want to do with these pictures," Litwin said. "They want to put the images on T-shirts, coffee mugs or onto a Web site to e-mail friends."

Frank Cost, a professor of digital publishing at the Rochester Institute of Technology and co-director of the Printing Industry Center in Rochester, N.Y., said Litwin's theory is correct in that most people need help collecting, categorizing and memorializing their family heirlooms and treasured memories.

"We've found through research that the vast majority of people who log on to Web sites to do their own photo books quit because it's too difficult," Cost said.

The field holds vast opportunity worldwide, said Cost. "We see companies popping up in Germany, in France and in the Third World to capture this pent-up desire by people who want to put their life into a format that they can pass on to their children and grandchildren," he said.

Cost is requiring his new-media publishing students to choose a single photo that defines their family, and to write a book about that photo. He is partnering with Colorcentric Corp., an automated book publisher, to produce the books.

Litwin sees potential for My Life Story to provide services in other way, such as helping Alzheimer's sufferers who get anxious to see loved ones. For example, an Alzheimer's patient who asks repeatedly to see his or her daughter could be prompted to touch the daughter's photo on a touch screen and hear a recorded message of assurance that everything is OK and a reminder of the daughter's next visit.

Litwin also hopes to eventually franchise the business.

"It's a perfect business for someone who has an interest in photography and technology," he said.