

# The Beacon

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## Volunteers & Careers

**Did you (or someone you know) change careers, start a business or go back to school after retirement?**

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## CAPTURING PERSONAL HISTORIES ON CAMERA

By: Barbara Ruben

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In preparing a personal history DVD for Joyce Taylor (left), videographer Abby Sternberg films Taylor as she describes important mementos and artwork around her home. Sternberg's digital media services company, Media Masters, captures life stories, milestone birthdays, retirement parties and other events on DVD.

Local porcelain artist Joyce Taylor shows off her intricately painted vases and plates, demonstrates her technique and shares recollections of teaching students for more than 40 years on a recently produced DVD.

"Anything you do to create keeps you young because you have to think of what you're going to do next," she says to the camera recording her. "I'm never expecting to get old because I'm always thinking of what I'm going to do next."

The 40-minute DVD is one of hundreds Annandale, Va., videographer Abby Sternberg has made of personal histories, weddings, wakes and other life events. Like the DVD she made of Taylor, many of Sternberg's clients — and their adult children — ask her to record their life stories.

"I help people communicate their backgrounds, their lives, their passions. Some people when you start to talk to them don't think they're important enough or interesting enough. But I think everyone has something to share," she said.

## A career transition

Trained as a social worker, Sternberg spent several decades in the mental health field. Along the way, she took classes in video production at Fairfax Cable Access because she wanted to create educational programs on mental health, parenting, stress management and other topics.

Over time, she transitioned from social work to creating DVDs. She now owns Media Masters, a digital media services company.

Sternberg was inspired to begin recording people's lives about 20 years ago when she discovered a new self-help group for people who have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Sternberg's father died of ALS in 1978 at age 65.

"No one had video recorders then. I said, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if people with ALS, while they could still communicate, could record their lives?'"

So Sternberg began volunteering with the ALS group, shooting videos of events on the weekends, while working as a social worker in private practice during the week. But the more videos she shot, the more Sternberg realized that this could become her primary career.

"I really wanted to help record people's lives and celebrate happy events. I was already doing that with weddings and anniversaries and 90th birthdays. I was basically helping celebrate life throughout the life cycle," Sternberg said. "I wanted to combine my people skills with my video production skills."

## Preserving memories

In her personal documentaries, Sternberg can combine footage of interviews with still photographs from the subject's life and snippets of their favorite music. While some clients focus on telling their life stories, others, like Taylor, focus on a passion, such as gardening or embroidery. Others share family recipes while being filmed cooking in the kitchen.

Sternberg taped one family in which the father was in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's disease so that he could share some of his recollections. His daughter brought him a photo of himself as a little boy to help spur his memory.

Sternberg meets with her clients and gets to know them before she starts taping. "It's almost like a life review or an ethical will," Sternberg said. She gets them to open up by asking questions that get them to think.

"What is important to you in life? What does it mean to be a good person? If your kids could think of you as a bumper sticker, or a poster or a T-shirt, what would it say? What do you want them to remember about you?"

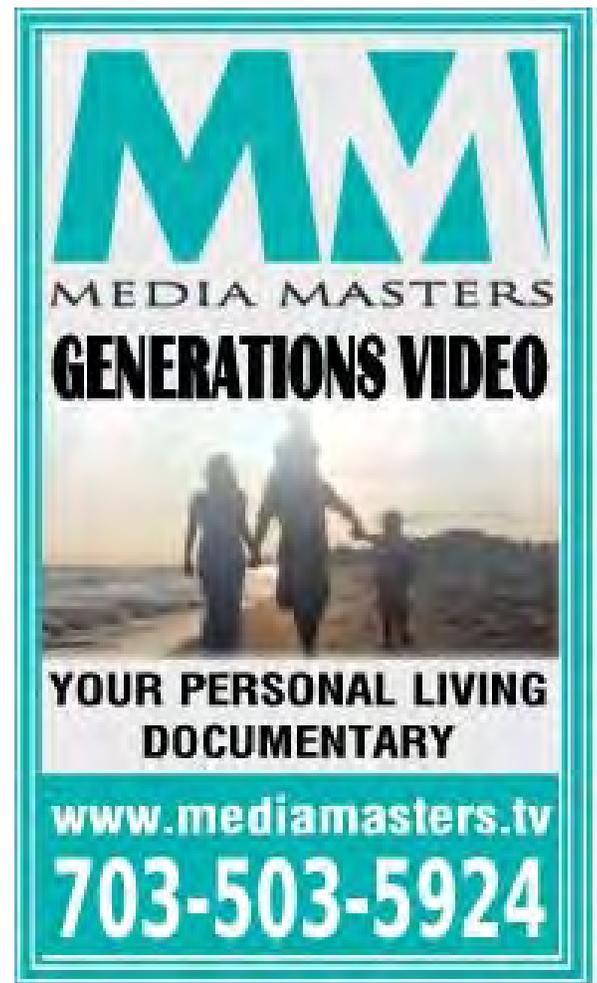
She also uses her services to help clients downsize before moving, recording them talking about objects they've collected or touring their house describing memories from each room.

"You don't need the thing, but it's good to keep the memory," she said. "They can talk about the item: 'We got this when we were on a trip to Italy in 1965' or 'this tree was planted 30 years ago,'" she said.

While Sternberg is still a member of National Association of Social Workers and does some video work for them, she has no regrets about the turn her career took.

"I feel like I'm doing my brand of social work with a video camera," she said. "I'm helping people communicate and solve problems with video."

Fees for Sternberg's life history videos start at \$750. A DVD photo montage (30 to 35 photos) set to music is \$125.



The advertisement features a teal border. At the top, the letters 'MM' are displayed in a large, stylized, teal font. Below this, the words 'MEDIA MASTERS' are written in a smaller, teal, sans-serif font. Underneath, 'GENERATIONS VIDEO' is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. The central image shows a blurred photograph of three people walking away from the camera on a beach at sunset. Below the image, the text 'YOUR PERSONAL LIVING DOCUMENTARY' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the website 'www.mediamasters.tv' is written in a teal, sans-serif font, and the phone number '703-503-5924' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font on a teal background.