

O'Krent's LifeStories Alive captures history through interviews

While people often think of doctors, lawyers, accountants and even comedians as stereotypical Jewish occupations, Jews have become increasingly diversified in their vocational choices, as in all aspects of life in the United States. Over the next several months, The Jewish Outlook will feature a series profiling the wide range of interesting occupations where one might not expect to find Jewish professionals in Central Texas. If you or someone you know would like to be considered for this series and are available for an interview, contact tonyia76@gmail.com.

By **Tonyia Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

After working full-time in the retail floor covering industry for 25 years, in the company his great-grandfather founded in 1915, as well as his own businesses Austin and San Antonio, Mike O'Krent found his calling: recording the stories of his clients' loved ones lives.

O'Krent joined his family's retail floor covering business every summer during high school and while working toward a marketing and management degree at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. After graduating from college in 1980, he worked full-time for his grandfather.

"At the beginning, I learned from the floor up," O'Krent said. "I did everything."

Eventually he worked his way through sales and management, until he ran O'Krent Floor Covering Corp. In 1991, he left the company to run another San Antonio flooring business with a friend.

As a volunteer with the Jewish Federation of San Antonio, O'Krent, who was born and raised in the Alamo City, spent some of his spare time teaching area schoolchildren about the Holocaust.

"Something always intrigued me about the Holocaust," he said. "When I was a kid, part of the story of Pesach was you were told you were there. You were a slave of Egypt. So when I heard or read about the Holocaust, I felt I was there, that it would have been me. I still feel that way."

O'Krent remembers, when he was speaking to a class in rural southeast San Antonio, a student told him he had asked his parents the night before what color is a Jew and what does one look like or wear.

"Not only was it an introduction to the classes about the Holocaust, it was an introduction to Judaism, like a first," he said. "Most of them really want to know."

SPIELBERG'S HOLOCAUST PROJECT

O'Krent enjoyed the program in San Antonio so much he jumped at the chance to delve deeper into volunteer work when the opportunity arose to interview Holocaust survivors for Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. He paid his own way to Los Angeles for three days of intense training and, in 1996-2000, conducted interviews for the program.

"What intrigued me about it is its purpose. We're in race against time," O'Krent said, noting that at the time Holocaust survivors were dying at a rate of 1,000 a day.

The foundation taught volunteers, in-



At left, Mike O'Krent interviews Ken and Carolyn Smalling in Northport, Long Island, N.Y.

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O'Krent says of his work, 'It's the first time in my life I've done something I'm really passionate about.'

cluding O'Krent, to focus 20 percent of interview time on survivors' lives before and after the war and 40 percent of the time on survivors' experiences during the war.

"The reality is that the people affected had normal lives before the Holocaust," he said. "It's important we know that, what life was like then."

Many of those with whom he spoke, O'Krent recalled, became much more or much less religious after the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, in 1998, O'Krent moved to Austin, where he bought and managed a local floor covering business. After he sold the business in 2004, a business coach he consulted observed that he lit up when he talked about interviewing Holocaust survivors and asked O'Krent if he could turn that type of work into a business.

"A light bulb went off that got brighter and brighter and brighter," O'Krent said.

In January 2006, he founded LifeStories Alive, a company that specializes in making personal history videos — digitally mastered records of life stories with personal accounts, photos and mementos of family history — for families. During the past two years, he has conducted nearly 100 interviews.

While O'Krent said bootstrapping a business as a sole proprietor, without the cushion of seed capital or much marketing, has been challenging, he has found his work rewarding.

"What I do is priceless for families," he said, explaining that when his clients see and hear their great-grandparents on their television screen telling the stories of their lives, they are able to connect to their ancestors.

"You know that magical connection links to them, and that's a wonderful thing," he said.

People often tell him, O'Krent said, they wish they had learned of his services sooner, before a relative died.

"I need to find a way to tell people, 'Don't wait,'" he said.

When faced with the challenges typical of running a small business, O'Krent said, he motivates himself by watching interviews he has conducted with people who have special stories, like the son of a World War I veteran who talked about stories his father told him and a song he sang to him as a child.

"Bob starts singing the song and, after one verse, he starts crying and says he misses his daddy," O'Krent said.

'FIRES ME UP'

Another memorable interview was with a World War II veteran. After telling some war stories, the man discussed his late wife and how much he misses her.

"That just fires me up," O'Krent said, "because you get the essence of who this man is, how unselfish he is and how much he loves his family."

Few people in the United States do the type of work O'Krent does. The only trade organization he has found with any presence is the Association of Personal Historians, whose members include biographers and personal historians. He has not met anyone else who provides professional quality video without a time limit.

"I don't care how long it is," he said. "I just want to capture their stories."

O'Krent mostly builds business through word of mouth, and his work has taken him all over the United States. He believes his Jewish background and experience interviewing Holocaust survivors informs his perspective.

"One of the reasons our religion will never die is, it is rooted in history and the past," O'Krent said. "The Passover story is a perfect example; we're connected to these people who lived centuries and thousands of years ago. Family is so important, and that upbringing and perspective

is an advantage."

At the same time, O'Krent has run into some anti-Semitic and racist attitudes in his work. He said he has handled such infrequent encounters by moving on, and that the flip side has also occurred. The granddaughter of slaves told him her grandmother encouraged her to drink out of the water fountain designated "whites only," to teach her she was as good as everyone else. When caught, she told him, they pretended they could not read.

"These are awesome stories," he said.

Besides his business, O'Krent is president of the Metropolitan Breakfast Club, serves on the Zachary Scott Theatre Center board and is a member of Congregation Agudas Achim. He is married to Linda O'Krent, has two children and two stepchildren, plays golf and practices ashtanga yoga.

When asked about the origin of his last name, O'Krent said his grandfather never admitted to it, but his marriage certificate lacks an apostrophe in the last name.

"He must have added the apostrophe after he married," O'Krent said. "I've been told 'okrent' is a Polish or other Eastern European language word meaning 'boat' or 'ship.'"

By the end of the year, O'Krent said, he hopes to expand LifeStories Alive into other U.S. markets. He plans to train people across the nation — starting in Houston, Dallas and San Antonio — to benefit families in other cities.

"It's absolutely incredible to do something you're passionate about," O'Krent said. "It's the first time in my life I've done something I'm really passionate about. It makes the struggles and challenges well worth it."

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