

Hearing is believing

Libertyville man's product chronicles life stories to keep

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By Jim Powers | Managing Editor

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As Rick Kerman and his son, Josh, drove home from Wisconsin last weekend, the disc in the car's CD player wasn't playing the latest sounds of one particular group. Instead, their 13-year-old son listened to a variety of voices, some he knew, some he didn't, talk about him, his parents, his family or just about life, in general.

One particular anecdote caught his attention. His late uncle's manager shared some thoughts, stories and heartfelt emotions about his uncle Andy, who died in 1984 before Josh even got to know him.

"It was a whole different perspective of information that Josh didn't know about my brother, and that I didn't even know," said Northbrook resident Carol Kerman, Josh's mother.

Kerman's brother was Andy Kaufman, the "Saturday Night Live" icon probably best known for his role as Latka Gravas on the TV series, "Taxi."

The connection was made possible by a product called LifeOnRecord, which is being marketed by Libertyville resident Alaa El Ghatit. The concept is simple: People use the telephone to record stories, share memories or even journal their lives, and the collections are stored on a CD or saved as an MP3 file available for download to a personal computer.

"The stories were poignant, and gave people a chance to reflect," Kerman said of the keepsake CD, which was a gift for Josh's Bar Mitzvah. "In this age, we don't have the time or make the time to do much reflecting."

"I've been surprised at the passion, the sentiment people have," El Ghatit said. "It just shows how powerful the human voice is, and how it can make an ordinary thing become special."

Two years ago, El Ghatit began tinkering with the concept. He tried to be a good father, taking photos and videos of his four children, ranging in age from 2 to 10. "But pictures didn't capture the emotion, and even video didn't tell the story," he said. He saw LifeOnRecord as a way to "tie everything together," in the hope that like people have gravitated to audio books, they are more likely to listen to a voice recount a family story.

When he was a victim of downsizing at his corporate job in November 2006, El Ghatit decided to plunge full-time into promoting LifeOnRecord. It wasn't without reservation, but at age 40, he said he felt the timing was right to try it now.

"I've been extremely motivated," he said. My wife has been extremely supportive. This is a trip into the great unknown."

El Ghatit has sought answers from family members and friends, using their input to shape his product and pricing. Special occasions, like Josh Kerman's Bar Mitzvah, and weddings, provide an immediate niche to explore. "That's almost been the struggle of whether to go with one niche or several," he said. "I'm looking for the right avenues, right way to get the word out."

Carol Kerman said in her case, El Ghatit was especially helpful in being specific with the people who were being asked to contribute to Josh's CD of stories.

"Every person we sent a post card to responded," Carol Kerman said. "For a child of 13, some of what he listened to may not mean much right now, but he's going to have it forever. I don't even know the ripple effects, but it's sweet right now."

