

Larry App is a film documentarian who lives in Bristol. He recently completed a series of interviews chronicling the history of Elkhart's Italian neighborhoods.

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## [Got a story to tell? There's an App for that](#)

By JENNIFER MEIER

### THE GOSHEN NEWS

BRISTOL — Documentarian Larry App says believes everybody has a story to tell. Whether they're 8 years old or 98 years old, they all have stories.

"There are these people living right next to you," App said. "You just don't know the stories these people have."

But App does know many of these stories. In fact, he's developed a passion for recording these experiences into a business. Through his production company, Stories Retold, App puts into DVDs personal biographies, family histories and community documentaries.

App, an Elkhart native and now Bristol resident, began his business in 2005. Although his background is in accounting and light office information technology support, App has always had an interest in recording family events.

At first he would takes pictures and often set a recorder on the table during holiday events to record conversations.

"I had one of the first video cameras," App said. "It was a big, heavy black-and-white camera with a separate recording unit."

With the advent of low-cost video editing software, App converted these tapes to DVD.

"The first event that struck home to me how important all this is — these stories — was when my mother and her group of seven childhood friends asked me to bring over my video camera and just tape them telling stories of how they met, their experiences at school, their stories of marriage and life," App said.

After receiving the DVD, one of the women had tears of gratitude in her eyes. She told App that memories were all she had at her age.

"That's what got me thinking," App said. "This could be a service."

Preserving history

A friend of App's saw his work and introduced him to long time Elkhart resident, Frank

Lucchese, part of a large Italian family. It wasn't long before App was recording the Lucchese's family history.

"Frank wanted to preserve not only his family's history, but the family's traditions and values," App said. "He told me he knew what they were and his children had a good idea of what they are, but the grandchildren may not and their kids may not. 'We don't want this to be lost' he told me."

Five interviews and 12 DVDs later, the Lucchese family history was recorded. And Frank gave App permission to use the DVDs to help promote Stories Retold. He also told App about Elkhart community's Italian American Relief Association or IARA, commonly known as the Italian Club.

"Back then, the Italian Club was like the pub of the neighborhood where Italian Americans would gather and talk about things on a daily basis," App said. "It was mostly a social group. They discussed events and played cards. But they also would rally around each other and offer support and maybe financial assistance if needed."

App describes the neighborhood on Harrison Street in Elkhart that stretched from Fourth to 10th streets, as a "Little Italy." From the early 1900s until the late 1970s, the area was well known for its Italian residents and vibrant culture.

"So many people have fond memories of that neighborhood and its establishments," App said. "It was a nice, tight community. Discriminated against, very little money. Yet, somehow they came through all this being a happy people and helping people next to them even if they were not Italian."

These people, App said, were successful businessmen and successful citizens. He wanted to learn how it all happened.

As App's interest grew, Frank worked with him, setting up 20 interviews with former Harrison Street residents. Two years later, with a two-hour DVD, a bonus DVD, and five additional DVDs with full-length interviews, App's Stories Retold documents "Our Italian Neighborhood," released this month and available for purchase through [www.StoriesRetold.com](http://www.StoriesRetold.com).

"There were a lot of Italians with a lot of stories," App said. "I wanted to target the oldest generation that I could — those that lived right in the heart of it."

Each interviewee was asked the same questions. None of them saw the questions ahead of time. And none of them heard the other's responses to the questions. When App put together the DVD, he posed one of the questions and then recorded each of the responses.

"It was incredible. You hear the commonness of the answers," App said. "For instance, you hear about the importance of the vegetable gardens and what they grew. You hear the same words, the same phrasing. Really, it was amazing."

## **A colorful piece**

App's oldest interviewee was 98, his youngest, 64. He recorded memories of such establishments as Ronzone's grocery, R.E.'s Pool Hall and Nicky D's restaurant.

The latter business, says App, is one that any Elkhart citizen over the age of 50 probably remembers.

"It was a colorful place. It was as well known for its atmosphere as it was for its food," App said. "Famous people from Chicago frequented its tables. There were lines down the block to get in."

The neighborhood even had an annual picnic, with residents traveling in cars and buses to different locations to celebrate their closeness with games, swimming, singing, dancing and drinking.

"You look at the film and you think that's not unusual to see something like that if it were a family reunion," App said. "If you remember that it's not, and it's a neighborhood doing these things ... that's pretty neat."

This latest project started App thinking about creating other documentaries with more national appeal. To help pay the expenses of putting together documentaries, he is in the process of starting a not-for-profit that could lead to government funding and foundation grants. App has several ideas for his next projects.

Meanwhile, he continues to enjoy putting together family histories and personal biographies. One recent biography came from a woman in Nappanee. She wanted to give her son and his family a Christmas present.

"She told them she had a gift for them, but she wouldn't tell them what it was," App said. "They were all seated together when the video began. I told her to sit back and watch their reaction out of the corner of her eye. She did. Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound. And when it was done, they gave her a standing ovation."

Stories like these make it all worthwhile for App.

"I get to meet these people, hear their stories, preserve this history," App said. "I could do this forever."