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Business

Main Line start-up lets you tell your story in video



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Susan Cohen-Dickler and Jan Dickler, reality TV pioneers, help people record their memories on videos using state-of-the-art technology.

by **Jonathan Takiff**, Staff Writer

Everybody is a star, has a vital story to tell and preserve on video, says Jan Dickler and his longtime business partner and wife, Susan Cohen-Dickler.

It might be about how you first fell in love. Came out. Survived combat. Bonded with a beloved pet. Built a business. And did it . . . your way.

Now with the couple's Gladwyn-based start-up PersonalCast Studios, the Dicklers, veterans of early reality TV shows, are offering the means to share those memories in a thoroughly modern stream-cast digital fashion.

The process makes for "an interesting life review," painless, nonintrusive, and casual, said Malcolm Ecker, a Philadelphia doctor who co-starred with his wife, Elaine, in a recent hour-length PCS "LifeStory" production paid for as a gift by their grown children. (The video costs from \$299 to \$799 depending on running time, from 15 minutes to an hour. See more at personalcaststudios.com.)

The screenshot shows the PersonalCast Studios website. At the top, the logo reads "PersonalCastStudios" with the tagline "everyone has a story ■ tell us tell yours". Navigation links include HOME, ABOUT, STORE, OUR WORK, REVIEWS, BLOG, CONTACT, and FAQ. The main heading is "LET US TELL YOUR STORY". Below this are four service cards:

- LifeStory**: \$599.00 - \$799.00. A chronicle of a person's life - 1 hour one-on-one interview transformed into a cinematic, enduring heirloom. Or chronicle a couple's story - Two 45 minute one-on-one interviews transformed into a single LifeStory.
- LoveStory**: \$399.00. From your very first meeting to the moment you fell in love, re-live the journey that brought you together in an emotional viewing experience produced from 2 half hour one-on-one interviews.
- ShortStory**: \$299.00. It's the smallest joys that often define life and this twenty-minute professional interview will capture a special remembrance sure to bring a smile.
- Tribute**: \$499.00. Offer a Tribute. We'll contact friends and family interviews to tell "true" stories about your "guest of honor", then we'll craft a crowd-pleasing video sure to be a highlight of the party.

No crew invades your home with a mess of lights and cameras. The subject sits down in front of a camera- and microphone-equipped computer or iPad and connects through Facetime or Skype to a PersonalCast interviewer - in the start-up phase, most likely Susan. Just open your mouth and start gabbing.

After the lengthy web-chat - "more conversation really than an interview," Susan Cohen-Dickler said - the subject is asked to lend photos or other materials referred to in the conversation.

What if the cupboard and scrapbook are bare? Producers dig up archival images that suit the tale. And lay down musical scoring that enhances your personal plotline.

Not the best speaker? Fear not. The Dicklers edit out pauses, repetitions, and odd or embarrassing asides at their workstation and rearrange elements to make you the most coherent and amusing of storytellers.

With a couple's LifeStory, each partner is interviewed separately, out of earshot of the other. Then the two interviews are "intercut."

The Eckers still finished each other's thoughts, "which happens a lot when you've been together 55 years, since you were kids," Malcolm said.

"We want the finished piece to be repeatable, shareable, entertaining, and historically interesting, for family, friends, and maybe even strangers," Jan Dickler said. "Someday you might find websites devoted to PersonalCasts, just as today you find TEDtalks and homegrown music videos on YouTube."

Both Dicklers cut their teeth working for Westinghouse Broadcasting, back when it owned KYW-TV.

Jan was on the business side, and Susan enjoyed a long run as producer on *Evening Magazine*, a pioneer in "field"-shot shows.

With *EM* host Ray Murray, the Dicklers then set up Philly-based Banyan Productions in 1993, making some of the first infomercials (one, for the Medicus dual-hinge golf club, is *still* running). And they helped then-fledgling cable channels such as Discovery, the Food Network, HGTV, and Travel Channel get off the ground with "transformative" personal growth storytellers like *Home Matters*, *Trading Spaces*, *The Wedding Story*, and *Ambush Makeover*, working in a style they called "authentic reality."

"We were so ahead of the curve we sometimes had difficulty getting people to participate as subjects, until the term 'reality TV' was explained in a high-profile article in 1998," Jan recalled. "After that, the floodgates opened. We started getting pitched by a new breed of 'professional' reality show regulars who happily jumped from show to show."

At one point, Banyan Productions had "10 or 11" series running simultaneously on cable and broadcast channels, including PBS and FOX, and employed as many as 347 staffers.

But after a staggering 6,000 episodes, the Dicklers were burned to a crisp. They capped their run in 2013 to 2015 with *Natural Reboot* - a makeover show for women who feel crazed and "need to take it down a notch and simplify," Susan said.

For sure, PersonalCast Studios - a two-person start-up in the Dicklers' suburban basement - is just that.