

# Rachel LaCour Niesen, Photojournalist

*The founder of Save Family Photos discusses her efforts to preserve other families' memories.*



Save Family Photos, a virtual campfire where people can gather and share their stories online, has allowed Rachel LaCour Niesen to merge her interests in both personal and world histories by curating a selection of intimate family images from around the globe. Earlier this year, she took over *The New Yorker* photo department's Instagram account for Mother's Day, where she uploaded a series of photographs of family matriarchs with accompanying stories. She speaks about how her own family inspired her project.

**What was your motivation for starting Save Family Photos?** — I'm lucky to have two 91-year-old Southern grandmothers who love telling stories. These two women have both breathed life into my project. My Mississippi grandmother has a large, wood-paneled wall of family photos. As a child, I used to walk along that wall and stare at my family's faces. I saw my grandparents as children, my father graduating from high school, my uncle as a student in New York City, my aunt at a swim meet. I saw faces full of hopes and dreams—long before I ever existed. In those moments, I realized something powerful: My story started before me. When my grandfather died a year ago, I wanted to celebrate his life. I started scanning old photos of him,

then I posted a photo and story about him on Instagram and invited family and friends to do the same. Now I've received more than 10,000 family photos and stories from around the world!

**Why is remembering to remember so important?** — Remembering means much more than just jogging your own memory: Really remembering requires recounting memories over and over and over again. The tradition of oral history, of sitting around a campfire and sharing stories, is often overlooked in the digital era. It's slower. But it's what makes memories last for generations, not just for a social-media minute. When we take time to talk about our photos, we give them deeper meaning and context that can be passed along in the form of stories. Family stories make our futures richer by making our roots deeper.

**What can families do to maintain their archives?** — It's easy to feel overwhelmed when you think about the total number of family photos gathering dust in your own attic or basement. Just choose one photo and ask a family member what they remember. One is enough. Soon you'll discover that one leads to 10 and more family members will want to get involved. Then it's no longer a chore—it's a collaboration. There's

no convenient time to preserve your family history—just start somewhere.

**Please tell us about your own family.** — As a Southerner, I grew up surrounded by stories and oral history. We love to talk. In fact, we talk so much that my Midwestern husband was totally overwhelmed the first time he had holiday supper with us! We can't get enough of a good story, whether it's ours or someone else's. That's probably why I love curating other people's family stories—I'm always drawn in as if it were my own family.

**How did your family encourage you to be creative?** — I was a curious, creative, unconventional kid. Whenever I felt like I didn't fit in, my Mom would gently say, "Normal is a cycle on the washing machine." It reassured me that—no matter how quirky I was or how unusual I felt—"normalcy" was relative, maybe even irrelevant.

**How can creativity be found in noncreative fields?** — I think we're all born with creative energy. The real challenge is finding your medium and embracing it. Once you do, you'll never look back. I love this quote from Jackson Pollock: "When I say 'artist,' I mean the one who is building things—some with a brush, some with a shovel, some choose a pen." REL