

# chronicle 2011





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## Celebrating life through everyday stories

Years before she became a respected broadcaster, Alannah Campbell lived in a house full of stories. The captivating tales were those of her Maritime grandmother, Mary Logan, who often baked scones as she related them to her youngest grandchild. As a little girl, Alannah may not have anticipated where those stories would lead her, but she was enchanted with her grandmother's memories of growing up in Lunenburg County and heading west at 20, to homestead in Saskatchewan. As Alannah's love for history deepened, she became the official keeper of the family records – sepia-coloured pictures, old letters and tattered journals filled the ever-expanding collection.

What else was she to do but become a journalist, a curious, professional listener? At CBC Radio, Alannah worked as a reporter, editor and documentary-maker and, eventually became the first woman to host *The World at Six* full time. But as her young family grew, Alannah took leave from her career to focus on raising her three children, a role she cherishes. Then, in 2003, a new opportunity presented itself. A CBC colleague, Judy Maddren, asked Alannah to be her partner in Soundportraits, a company that captures personal stories, family memories and intimate tributes, and edits them into one-hour audio memoirs. Since 2003, the two friends have created more than 300 Soundportraits, capturing tales of all ages and stages of life.

A labour of love, Soundportraits acknowledges the “purity of the human voice,” says Alannah. There's no camera, no hair and makeup, no mirror to hold up against our vanities. The subject must simply be open to talking – not always an easy task, especially for the shy or the emotionally private. “One of the things we hear often

is, ‘But I can't possibly have stories that are interesting enough to tell you.’ And the next thing you know, it's two hours later and they can't stop talking!. Everyone's stories are important, poignant and full of wisdom. The audio recordings contain it all: the reflective moments, the laughter, and sometimes a few tears. When you celebrate a life, you realize that we are our stories.”

A journalist's skills are key to the process. Alannah makes it painless, a practice which she's honed over years of interviews and countless cups of tea in strangers' living rooms. “In every life, patterns emerge,” she says. The hopes and wishes for that life – (long held close to the heart and perhaps never spoken out loud) – are sacrosanct to Alannah. “I believe that it's a wonderful feeling to be listened to. And it's a privilege for me to listen.” After more than eight years, she says, the work still fascinates her and she finds it deeply rewarding. “People tell us it is soul-renewing to record their memories. Their families often send us handwritten notes to say how much they enjoy listening to the CDs.”

Recording Catherine Steele in 2003 was a wonderful opportunity – it was Alannah's first Soundportrait and the beginning of a new career path. Dr. Steele was in her last year of life, but she was as articulate and strong-minded as when Alannah has been a student at Havergal. : “As she spoke about her philosophy of education and dreams for young women, I was transported back in time. Her voice literally made me sit up straighter!” Making a Soundportrait, she says, is like “being in the front-row seat at an incredible symphony. I always walk away with some new-found appreciation and life lessons.”