

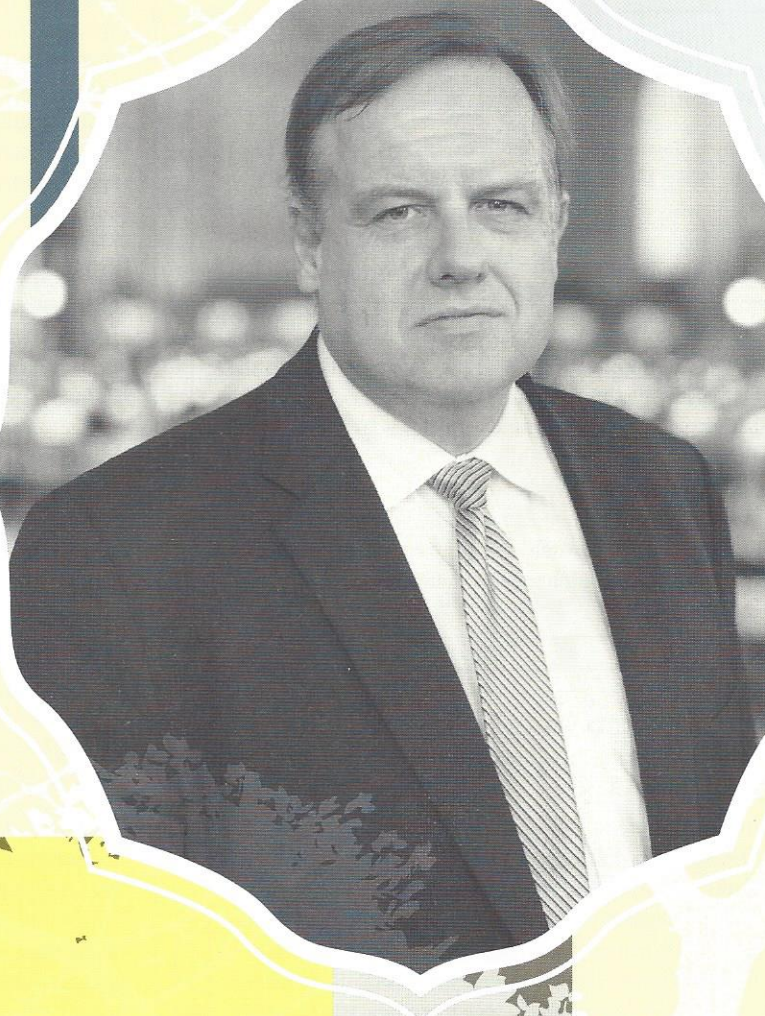
Suffolk

Alumni Magazine



THE FAMILY MAN

Why Mike Brophy Wants to Hear Your Life Story

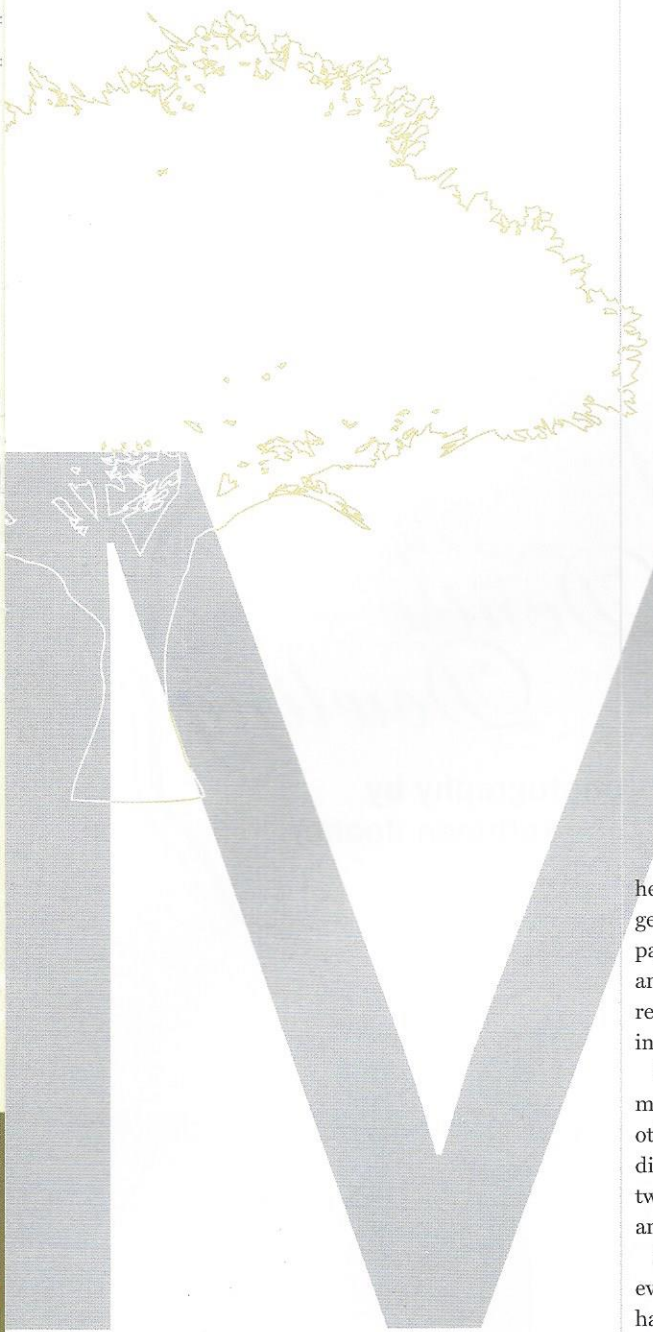


Why Mike Brophy Wants
to Hear Your Life Story

By
Denise Dowling

photography by
kathleen dooher

The Family Man



ICHAEL BROPHY MBA '96 is a grave digger in a suit. A professional genealogist, he would agree with William Faulkner's dictum: "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." At times, a genealogist must handle biohazard—facts that some clients may prefer to keep contained. "People pay me to find documents," says Brophy. "If I find something disturbing, I will offer compassion and support, which is how I like to live my life." When he unearthed newspaper accounts that revealed a client's grandmother had been killed by a drunk driver, for instance, Brophy offered to investigate what happened to the driver, but the client chose not to pursue it.

The researcher has a similar tragedy in his own family's past. In the 1930s, Brophy's great-grandmother was struck and killed by a drunk driver in Boston. The driver, who was wanted in several other places for automobile violations, only served two years in prison. "You think, 'How the hell did that happen that this guy kills someone and goes to jail for just two years?'" he says. "But those were the times; alcohol awareness and sentencing wasn't what it is today."

Brophy even located and interviewed a priest who recalled the event. He also sifted through the driver's past and learned of his hardscrabble background growing up in a broken home. "I might like to find out when he died and whether he had children or grandchildren, someone I could ask if any of this family lore came down," he adds. "But the exchange could be awkward."

The website blacksheepancestors.com catalogs infamous ancestors, which "we all have: You can't hide the truth," says Brophy. He found courthouse papers that revealed his own fraternal great-grandparents had divorced in Ireland 90 years ago—scandalous then, and a family secret. "The Irish tend to be close-mouthed about that kind of stuff, so my father didn't know about the divorce," he explains. "Reading through the divorce papers, it was pretty clear the husband had screwed up. My dad and I agreed that had we been there at the time, we would have had a few things to say to my great-grandfather."

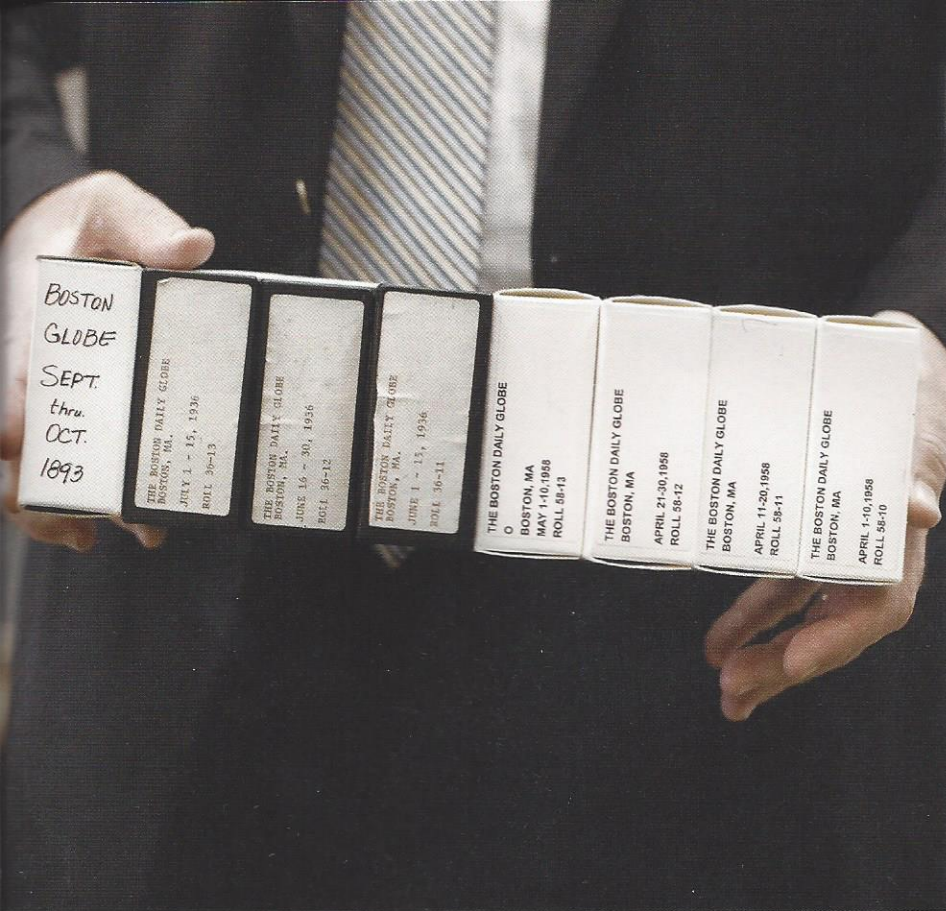


Plant the seed
Links to grow your
family tree at
Suffolk.edu/samonline.

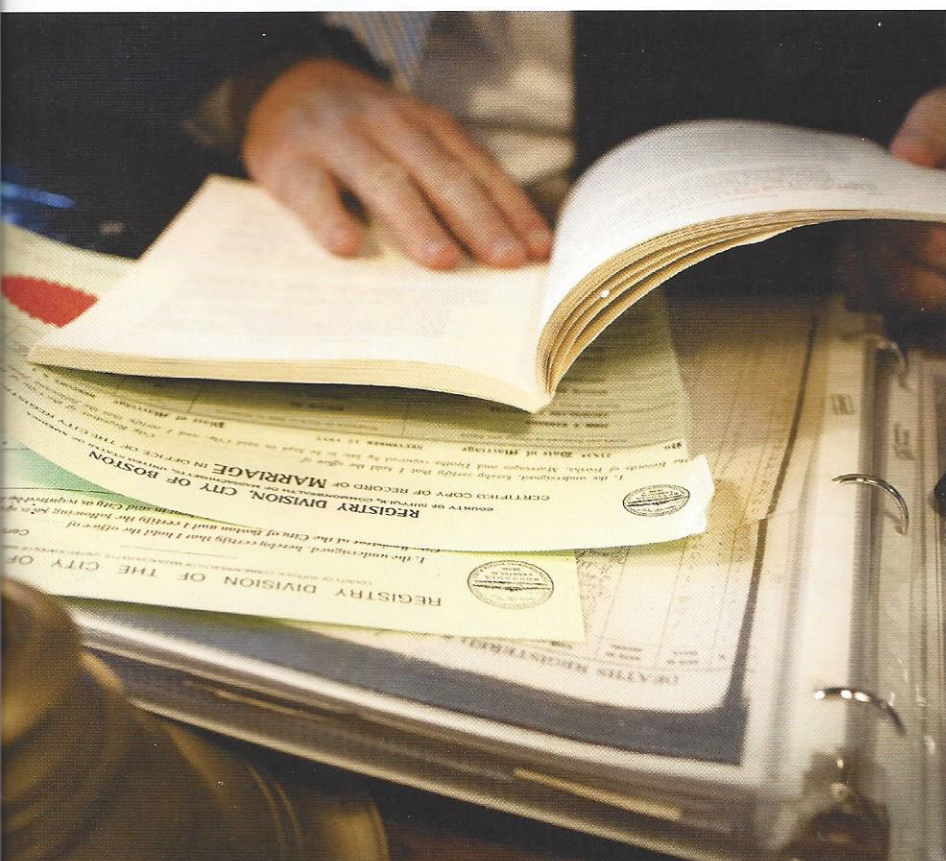
"Standing on the Shoulders of Giants"

Before genealogy, Brophy, 46, was in medical sales. "I felt that to gain a broad experience in business I needed a more general business education than the focused approach I pursued as an undergraduate [at University of Massachusetts Amherst]," he explains.

To obtain his MBA, Brophy selected Suffolk for "its great academic reputation" and urban campus "near to everything in downtown Boston." At Suffolk, he found "interesting, ambitious



ABOVE: Microfilm containing archival issues of newspapers for research
BELOW: Brophy researching documents at Boston Public Library



and bright people" and, in his New Business Creation class, the opportunity to start a company "from the ground up." Brophy left with "a tool set for starting my own business plan." But it took a history lesson for him to deploy that vision.

In 2002, after a maternal aunt passed away and her son compiled a historical tribute, Brophy began studying his fraternal ancestors. "I'd always been fascinated by history," he notes, "and what better history to study than that of your own family?" During spare moments from work, he attended lectures on genealogy research. The Internet offered scant archival resources at the time, so his hunt was old-school: First, he and his father looted the attic for memorabilia. He then dusted off microfilm and trolled census records at repositories. Brophy eventually found his ancestors' school records, as well as passenger ship logs cataloging their journey from Ireland to New Brunswick, Canada. After the Napoleonic Wars ended in the early 1800s, the Irish were encouraged to go to Canada to clear and farm the land in order to send lumber back for shipbuilding. His ancestors were part of that migration.

Brophy also interviewed local relatives and corresponded with others in New Brunswick. Two years later, after receiving copies of U.S. citizenship naturalization papers for his great-grandfather that revealed the town where he resided in New Brunswick, it was time to cross the border. Brophy and his family set out for Miramichi, "the Irish capital of Canada," anchored on the east coast of New Brunswick. He found it exhilarating to walk streets named after his ancestors and tread land granted by the English Crown to his great-great-grandfather in 1825. A former family farm, the soil was barren due to a lean economy for farming, but that bittersweet news was countered by a visit to a cousin's property on Prince Edward Island, where they pulled potatoes from ancestral ground.

Investigating his past deepened Brophy's appreciation for the present. He illustrates this with a quote from an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the NBC celebrity genealogy show for which he has done research.



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“Someone said, ‘We are absolutely standing on the shoulders of giants.’ You bet your ass we are.” His voice lowers an octave. “We think we got problems? People are worried about their 401k plans going down in the stock market crash? Imagine a few days in the lives of your grandparents and great-grandparents when they first assimilated here, or during the Irish potato famine when 1 million people starved to death. We don’t have any problems.”

Brophy found his identity in a metaphorical sense as well. Shortly after the trip, he shed medical sales and became a professional genealogist. He never looked back, although looking back became his job.

A Preference for the Dead

The New England Historic Genealogical Society is a sanctuary from the rest of Boston’s Newbury Street, where even window shopping feels expensive. The air is genteel at this Back Bay center, with family trees on rich paper and gilt-framed portraits. Founded in 1845 and housed in a former bank, the Society has made cameos on *Who Do You Think You Are?*. Sarah Jessica Parker was filmed on the sixth floor, and Ashley Judd appeared by the first-floor mantel.

Though he also works from a home office in Abington, 20 miles southeast of Boston, Brophy can usually be found here (sometimes teasing the librarians with a cornflower-blue-eyed wink) or at the Boston Public Library. “There’s a misconception that you can do your genealogy on the Internet, but only 10 percent exists there,” he explains. “About 90 percent exists in libraries and government buildings.” His time is split between locating estate heirs and doing ancestral research for various clients, from television producers to a wife who wants

to present her husband with ancestral research for his birthday or as an anniversary celebration. The material may be collected into a self-published (hard copy or electronic) book, often with photos. He has also created PowerPoint presentations with history and photos for family reunions.

His clientele is often women north of 50: empty nesters who want to pass something on to their children as a legacy. Many started to sleuth online but hit a roadblock once they tried to dig beyond four or five generations. Their incomes span from middle class to owning their own tax bracket, so they can afford to spend an average of \$500 to \$1,500 for Brophy’s research. Retiree Diane Bennett, who now lives in Canada and considers genealogy a hobby, hired him to trace relatives who emigrated from Ireland and settled in Boston in the 1830s. Brophy even went to Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and photographed tombstones of Bennett’s ancestors. Her family was unaware that their ancestors were buried in the old Catholic section—they had even passed by it while burying Bennett’s aunt two years earlier. His findings were helpful when Bennett was invited to speak at a Jesuit institution about the importance of the Jesuit missions in English Canada. She now had the facts to inform her knowledge of the sacrifices that Irish immigrant mothers made to enable their sons to have a Jesuit education.

Brophy’s passion for history was steeped as a boy in Marblehead, a seaside town north of Boston. Unsurprisingly, he prefers finding dead people to finding the living: “The dead are more of a challenge. It’s more intellectually stimulating and historically interesting, plus it requires a wide variety of sources.” His specialty, Irish genealogy, can be especially vexing:

A number of public records turned to ash after Ireland's civil war ended in 1922 and ammunition stored next to a records office exploded.

Seeking That "Eureka Moment"

There has been an uptick in business as Brophy's expertise has grown and more people are seeking their roots. Research that once required travel can be initiated via the Internet, and genealogy has been the focus of recent television series. A recent *New York Times* article about a show's genesis as a web broadcast illustrates this: In "Analyze This: A Webisode's ID Meets its TV Ego," Mike Hale writes, "In one new 'Web Therapy' scene Fiona's husband tells her, 'The only thing that makes money on the Internet is sex and genealogy.'"

"I think people are so fascinated with their family tree because it deepens their sense of identity; it's a new perspective on themselves," says Brophy. He reviewed Gwyneth Paltrow's late father's Jewish ancestry in Boston via local newspaper and court records for *Who Do You Think You Are?*, but shrugs at the Hollywood connection. "I find common folk just as interesting," he says. "We all have our story. I don't think there is any ancestor who is boring; it's the research that makes the difference."

Brophy is often planted by the microtext on the Society's fourth floor. Or he might scour the historic city directories, checking a sound code above the shelves for phonetic variations on a name ("Brophey" instead of "Brophy," for example). If he's searching for a Harvard man, he'll scout profiles collected in books of Harvard University alums from 1833-1900. Marriage records are exceptionally reliable because the information came from the horse's mouth; however, death records may be dubious because the informant was usually the son-in-law (who was considered the least emotional person in that situation), who may have been ignorant of his in-laws' birthplaces.

Brophy advises the "fan approach" of examining witnesses, neighbors, and other affiliates because your ancestors will appear in their records: "If you know when someone was born and when he was naturalized, you can find out



which county he is from." When you land on an elusive name, professionals describe that "Eureka moment" with hazy rapture: "Some people spend years and years looking for a source," says Brophy. "When they come across it in an archive, the rush is absolutely incredible."

The allure of finding an heir or ancestor can be addictive. "As one genealogist said, 'We are all cousins of Sherlock,'" notes Brophy. At home and off-duty, however, the computer is silenced so he can spend time with his family. His wife, also an Irish Catholic from Massachusetts, pursued dual Irish citizenship, making their three-year-old daughter eligible for dual citizenship as well. "I do the Irish genealogy work," Brophy laughs. "Yet I'll be the only person in my household who is not an Irish citizen because I'm ineligible." (To be eligible, you must be able to prove that a grandparent or parent was born in Ireland.)

Brophy also supports his family with speaking engagements around the country and via Skype. During a festival at the Irish Cultural Centre of

TOOL OF THE TRADE: Microfilm reader displays historical issue of *The Boston Globe*



Meet genealogist
Michael Brophy
Video feature at
Suffolk.edu/samonline.

“Some people spend years and years looking for a source. When they come across it in an archive, the rush is absolutely incredible.”

New England in Canton, Massachusetts, he clicks through a PowerPoint presentation on conducting research this side of the Atlantic, lacing it with jokes and anecdotes about his own family. “I think there’s a statistic that more people fear public speaking than fear death,” he says. “Suffolk helped me gain confidence in that area because we did a lot of projects that required group presentations.”

Lisa Aprea MBA ’94 collaborated on some of those endeavors. “Mike was an excellent public speaker,” she says. “He was very believable in whatever he was attempting to market and always had a good story to spin. I was weak in that area and he built my confidence because he helped people tap into their skills.”

Many genealogists are librarians or archivists with impeccable technical prowess but softer business and customer service skills. Brophy feels that his business degree gives him an advantage, in that being a professional genealogist is much like running a small business. Some professionals will do research before a contract is signed to gauge whether it will be a successful project. Brophy considers this bad business because “undervaluing your services damages the marketplace.”

He credits Sawyer Business School Associate Professor of Marketing Meera Venkatraman for her indispensable lessons on market segmentation, or specializing in a certain product or service. “No provider can be all things to all people,” says Brophy. “By letting my clients know that, I gain credibility and become more than a supplier to my clients; I become a consultant and a valuable resource.”

Brophy’s niche is Irish genealogy of particular time periods; he doesn’t research 16th- and 17th-century genealogy, for example. “There are different nuances related to religious groups, such as Catholics versus Presbyterians,” he clarifies further. “I grew up Catholic, so I specialize in Irish Catholics.”

The Search for “Negative Evidence”

During his research into the estate of a man who died in 1836, Brophy has culled more than 600 names in his database, with descendants starting from the late 18th century. He’s written to probate courts across the country and subcontracted work to other researchers in his expansive search. In pursuit of one obituary, the 6’1” researcher bounds up the marble stairwell of the Boston Public Library to the microtext department and fires up his laptop to conjure a document that uses Family Treemaker software to track each heir. He asks the librarian for microfilm of the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette* from 1948 to find an obituary or death notice of the man’s great-granddaughter, who died in a neighboring town in 1948. He scans copies from 10 days after her death and scours other local news before pronouncing it a “negative find” or “negative evidence”: information that does not directly solve the research question. “But inferences can be drawn from information that is not there when you would expect it to be,” says Brophy, who adds that “Failure to find” certificates can be issued in some

states for legal purposes. He notes the negative evidence in the database and once home, contacts the woman’s hometown library to ask if a local newspaper existed in the 1940s.

After seven years in the business, Brophy charges a premium hourly rate and keeps current on the past by attending “genealogy boot camp” at the Samford Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research in Alabama. A course in advanced methodology and evidence analysis might include tax roll strategies in the South, historic weather (how a fire might have affected property), and military research strategies (perhaps a Civil War widow stretched the truth to qualify for a pension).

“Our focus is not just on finding names but on understanding people, records, laws and the social context,” says Brophy. “For example, under what land act did someone apply for land, or if many people are dying on the same day or dying young, was there a plague? Historians look at the big picture of events, whereas genealogists look at microcosms of local history. What matters is how we use the details between discoveries.”

How a genealogist packages those findings is also critical. Brophy is empathic and circumspect: “I treat a client’s ancestors as my own.” His expression clouds when he alludes to closeted skeletons found on someone’s behalf. Although he never met them, Brophy mourns his great-grandparents’ divorce and his great-grandmother’s death by a man who should have been behind bars instead of a wheel. It is an occupational hazard. While resuscitating the past, he must fight the desire to rewrite it. ☺