

IN THE FRAME Expert Megan Smolenyak



US-based researcher and self-styled 'genealogical adventurer' Megan S Smolenyak is famed for many achievements, among them discovering Barack Obama's Irish heritage and being consultant to NBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* series. She tells us what makes her genealogical clock tick ...

Q WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN FAMILY HISTORY?

I've been doing genealogy since I was about 10 years old as the result of a homework assignment, so it's all Mrs Berkowitz's fault! Have been obsessed ever since!

Q WHAT'S TAKING UP MOST YOUR TIME THESE DAYS?

I'm working on another TV show, as well as helping the US Army, FBI, NCIS and coroners with cold cases. Also writing about genealogy for *The Huffington Post* and doing 'the needful' in preparation for my next book coming out in early 2012. Taking a breather from speaking, but will be back on the road next year. Maybe it's time to return to WDYTYA? LIVE!

Q HOW DID YOU MAKE IT TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY?

A combination of serendipity, lots of hard work and rabid curiosity! I genuinely consider myself to be one of the luckiest genealogists alive, but it's also not unusual for me to log 18–20 hours a day, 7 days a week on some projects. And I'm about as stubborn as they come when tackling a mystery. I like ones that make my brain hurt!

Q WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED DURING YOUR CAREER?

I'm a broken record about this, but there's no such thing as a boring family. Every one of us is descended from astounding people who weathered and accomplished so much. We're wimps in comparison!

Q WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE GENEALOGY WEBSITE?

How to choose?! Everyone knows Ancestry, of course, but I also love FamilySearch, FindaGrave, GenealogyBank, DeathIndexes, FindMyPast, etc. I typically have a dozen or so sites open in my browser at any time, so don't make me pick just one! It's the cross-pollination from working with many resources – online and offline – that ultimately solves most puzzles.

Q HAVE YOU FOUND A SKELETON IN YOUR OWN FAMILY HISTORY?

My most conspicuous skeleton is a great-grandfather who murdered his wife, my great-grandmother. And that was after he abandoned a previous wife and kids back in Ukraine. Nice guy, eh?

Q WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE ARCHIVE/LIBRARY/ORGANISATION?

I'd have to say the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Most amazing genealogical resources in the world, period.

Q WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR TOP FIND SO FAR WHEN RESEARCHING SOMEBODY ELSE'S ROOTS?

That's hard to say. Am happy to have found Annie Moore (first immigrant to Ellis Island), as well as Barack Obama's Irish roots and Michelle Obama's family tree (it was wonderful meeting them in Dublin!). I'm always grateful when my sleuthing helps get the g-word out there, but I like to think that my forensic, cold case work makes a difference, even if only for a few people at a time.

Q ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF GENEALOGY? WHAT DO YOU THINK THE WORLD OF FAMILY HISTORY WILL LOOK LIKE IN FIVE YEARS TIME?

Yes, I'm optimistic, but it's difficult to predict how things will look in five years. I'm hoping for more global (I still struggle when I have a case involving, say, the Philippines or Japan), more open (improved accessibility and less obsession with privacy for even the long-deceased), and more genetic (have been playing with DNA for over a decade now and it keeps getting better and better).

Megan's companion book to the US *Who Do You Think You Are?* series can be purchased via her website www.HonoringOurAncestors.com, where you'll also find out more about Megan's work.