Characters' Bios and Backstories

“Successful characters are multi-dimensional with distinctive physical attributes, emotional traits, appearances, personalities, intelligence, vulnerabilities, emotions, attitudes, idiosyncrasies, and hopes and dreams. Writing successful characters also means digging deep into their past and present.”

– Susan Kougel

The narrative name for characters’ past is the “backstory.”

10 tips for successful character bios

On your way to learning your characters, try this pre-writing activity. Interview your characters. Use the questions to help get to know their personalities, experiences, etc. and bring them to “life”.

What’s your name?
Who named you?
Does your name/naming mean anything to others? You?
If you could be someone else, who would it be?
Who do you most love in the world?
What do they look like?
How would you describe yourself at different ages?
Who challenges you the most?
What challenges you the most?
What’s something you could never tell anyone else?
Or you’d be afraid for someone else to know?
What’s the biggest apology you ever gave?
What’s your favorite thing to do? Why?
What’s your dream?
When is the last time you had your favorite meal?
What was it? Who cooked it?
What’s your favorite story?
Do you ever lie?
Why can we believe you?
Do you believe in angels?
If you could have a conversation with anyone – living or deceased – who would it be? Why?
What do you crave?
Who do you long to see?
What is your best memory? Worst memory?
If we asked your best friend about you, what would s/he/they say?
How old are you?
Name a song that makes you happy...one that makes you cry.
Who can make you laugh more than anyone else in the world?
What is your biggest fear?
What are you willing to do for what you most want to achieve?

Make a list of 100 or more questions like these.
Create questions that cover every aspect of a person’s existence.
Answer them for/with your characters.
If you’re writing a memoir, answer them for the people in your narrative and for yourself.