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Remembering Karyl Denison Eaglefeathers

A link in the chain of New York Folklore

BY IRA MCINTOSH

[Editor's note: Ira McIntosh is the son of Karyl Eaglefeathers, who died in September 2012.]

"Karyl could write a winning grant proposal, bake fresh loaves of bread, and knit a pair of mittens all on a Sunday morning. . . and still get to church on time."—Laurie McIntosh

Karyl Eaglefeathers made significant contributions to the preservation of the folklore and culture of New York State, and the Catskill Mountains, in particular. I remember her development as a graduate student and a budding folklorist. You might say that I was her research assistant back in those days. She was often trying to track down yet another old-timer to urge them to share their stories, songs, and memories of life in the homespun days. We traveled the back hollows of the Catskills together while she was doing her field research. It astounds me how many of those roads, fields, and farms have since grown up to brush and woods.

I can still picture her field recorder. It was quite a machine. I remember she was very, very protective of that machine, because it was so outrageously expensive to get a quality tape recorder like that in the '70s. And she had that recorder for years and years and years. She was so proud of it and the recordings that she made. It had a lot of fascinating knobs and switches and meters and gauges



Karyl in 2011. Photo courtesy of the Ira McIntosh Archive.

on it. It seemed so big and heavy, but I was scarcely more than a toddler then. Maybe it just seemed big because I was littler.

Her work often seemed big. Many of the sources she sought out for interviews and research were elderly, but they still tended to be exciting characters who were larger than life. I was five years old when she took a year off from teaching to go get her master's degree.

Her research involved ethnomusicology, folk heritage, and museum studies. Even when I was just a little kid she talked to me about her work as if I were a colleague, not just somebody who was tagging along. I happened to be the person who was on hand. I guess I was sort of like an unpaid intern. I never have published as much as she did, but I guess I might have gotten started earlier in life than she did with serious cultural studies.

And it wasn't just working with the tape recorder and collecting people's stories. She was also at the cutting edge of photography. I remember going to the dark room with her an awful lot as she was developing her pictures. I had to be there, because she didn't have a babysitter for me. I would bring books and read them by the red light of the dark room. For a long time, she was really, really intent on documenting dry stone architecture: things made of local field stone, put together without mortar, like the stone walls we see all over the landscape. But not just stone walls: barn foundations and stone piles and stone silos and stone gate posts and carriage blocks and stone buildings and stone barns and milk houses. I suppose it was after seeing some stone structure fall down that she decided that different styles and types of stonework needed to be documented. She did that all over the Catskills and beyond, and she demonstrated local differences in the stonework. In one neighborhood, there would be someone who was particularly good at it, and so all of the neighbors would have that person help with their stonework, and you'd see that style in that area. A couple of miles away, it was likely to be a completely different sort of work.

Like traveling around collecting culture and trying to document things with her tape machine, photography was something she did not only as part of her studies—she just did it because she knew it needed to be done, and that some of these unique ways of doing things ought to be preserved. She knew that as an older generation aged and passed on, a whole way of life was at risk of being lost unless some human context and wisdom could be gathered and saved.

Karyl felt that it was especially important to do that for people who had grown up before homogenized popular culture became so ubiquitous. She saw that diverse ways of making life work became specialized to local areas. She was able to document and preserve a lot of the ways that our regional and local culture here had developed prior to being blended into a much broader culture by electricity, telephones, broadcasting, and other high-speed, easy communications.

After earning her master's degree in American folk culture from the Cooperstown Graduate Program, she went back to teaching for a year. That was convenient for me, because she taught third grade in South Kortright, just a few doors down the hall from where I was attending second grade. So we still traveled to work together, pretty much every day. And after school we would very often go do some of the same sorts of things... go try to find stonework to take pictures of, if the light was good that afternoon, or go meet with an old-timer back in some hollow or clove to talk about how things got along, and how things were different now from the way they were before electricity came along.

Having saved some money from a year of teaching, it was time to continue pursuing her work in folklore, so we went out to Bloomington, Indiana, where she studied folklore under Richard Dorson at Indiana University. Around the same time, she was working during the summers with Norman Studer to revive the Catskill Mountain Folk Festivals. Much of Studer's invaluable work is preserved in the M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives in Albany. I can imagine that it must have been an exhilarating time for her: working with Dorson and Studer, two of the real pioneers of folklore as a science. Norman was very excited about the idea of reviving that folk festival with the enthusiastic young energy of my Mom who wanted to make things happen. And that enthusiastic energy is something she kept for her whole life, making things happen all the time. She was good at biting off more than anyone could chew and then chewing it all and then some, and just generally accomplishing more than anyone should be expected to.

Later, while working on her PhD in folklore, she became director of the Monroe County Historical Society Museum in Bloomington, Indiana. There she absolutely immersed herself in figuring out how to best run a museum. She began to specialize in museum management and did work for The International Council of Museums and conducted museum training projects for the United Nations Economic and Social

Karyl D. Eaglefeathers (1952–2012)

Dr. Karyl Denison (Hunt) Eaglefeathers or Vanheo'o (Standing Sage Woman) died on Thursday, Sept. 13, 2012.

She was born on Aug. 2, 1952, to Charley and Louise Hunt.

A resident of Bloomville, Karyl was the wife of Clifford Eaglefeathers, mother of Ira, Shana, Erika, Eli, Tyson, Jonathan, David and Nate. She was grandmother to "about 17 of 'em," including, Sol, Eli, Cedar, Julian, Sage, Ava, Charley, Barley, Jasmine, Sky, Kaylee, Destiny and Nathan. Karyl's siblings were Barbara, Barry (deceased), Jill, Jack and Daryl. She was adopted by Nancy Sandcrane in the Cheyenne way; and sister to Patty Old Man.

KD was a teacher in the broadest sense. As her mother, Louise wrote about her own mother, "Teaching came as easily to her as breathing." Beyond the simple conveying of knowledge, she was a moral exemplar for her family, her students and her community.

Karyl's lifelong commitment to service and nurturing continues to have a ripple effect on countless lives across the world.

Excerpted from the obituary published in The Daily Star, Oneonta, NY, September 17, 2012. www.thedailystar.com/obituaries/x1709879243/Karyl-Denison-Hunt-Eaglefeathers

Council, the International Commission for the Training of Personnel, and for governments and organizations on every continent, except Antarctica. Her doctoral dissertation in folklore focused on the role of museums in developing countries.

She spent two years as a professor in the Museum Science Program at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, where she was curator at the National Ranching Heritage Center. Then it was back to Indiana University to work as Director of Museum Studies while teaching folklore and anthropology. She took great pride in an award-winning introductory folklore course that she wrote. In 1995, Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer appointed her as State Director of Cultural Resources for the duration of his term in office. There, she was responsible for the State Museum, as well as other culturally and historically significant sites throughout the state.

When a new governor was elected in Wyoming, Karyl headed north to Montana, where she pursued another one of her passions—early childhood development—



Karyl in 1978. Photo courtesy of the Ira McIntosh Archive.

becoming Director of the Tribal Head Start program for the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. While working in Montana, she developed health, community, and identity-based programs, including a Cheyenne Language immersion program. There she met Clifford Eaglefeathers. He was one of very few remaining Northern Cheyenne elders fluent in the Cheyenne Sacred Language.

Clifford became Karyl's husband, and for more than 10 years, they collaborated on various projects, including teaching, a weekly radio program, the preservation and field documentation of the Northern Cheyenne Sacred Language, and a Rockefeller fellowship to study persistence and change

in the Northern Cheyenne Sundance. Since 2008, their language preservation work has been supported by the National Science Foundation, and Clifford continues this important task.

In 2003, Karyl returned home to New York to join the faculty of Empire State College. She was able to buy the house her parents had built in the 1930s, and in that way, reconnected with some more of her own family heritage. When she got back home to the Catskills, she simply picked up where she left off, finding ways of preserving and celebrating local heritage and traditions.

Communities around the region still benefit from her work documenting traditional

dances and fiddling styles and facilitating the mentoring of a new generation of dance callers and musicians through the Catskills Folk Connection, an organization she founded along with fellow folklorist Virginia Scheer in 2006. Catskills Folk Connection continues to organize and sponsor community dances.

I am grateful that she left me with some of the skills that allow me to carry on with parts of her work. I don't bring quite the depth of scholarly research and the same formidable credentials to my work, but forging community connections, shared experiences, and a sense of history and place through music and stories has been a large part of my mission in the world.

She made sure I understood, by the time I was a tiny little fellow, that making music and sharing stories is what real people do with their time, and that it's important for individuals, as well as their communities. That's an idea I'm glad that I got early and never lost.

One recent project I particularly enjoyed was working with my mother, K. D. Eaglefeathers, to develop a musical ethnography of the New York City water supply system in the Catskills, a program we presented together at venues in the Catskills and Hudson Valley between 2005–2011. Considering that I began accompanying her on field work jaunts starting in 1973, one could rightly say our professional collaborations spanned nearly 40 years. She crafted a body of work that will continue to serve others, and so many of us are fortunate to be able to build upon her efforts to preserve bits of our heritage, so that it can be passed along for generations yet to come. ▼

Ira McIntosh is a performer and teaching artist who presents programs for schools, libraries, festivals, conferences, historical societies, and other venues across the state. He also collaborates on projects with his wife, acclaimed storyteller Story Laurie McIntosh. They live with their two children at the site where the Catskill Folk Festivals occurred in the 1970s. Photograph by Catskill Images.



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