

Member Profile

Kathleen Mossman Vitale: Documenting Textile Traditions

Pegi Bevins

Award-winning journalist, photographer, and publications editor Kathleen Mossman Vitale credits her love of photography, adventure, discovery, native peoples, and weaving to her parents. Her mother, Rachael Gould Mossman, was a textile expert and collector, who studied and collected textiles in India, Ceylon, Nepal, the Philippines, Yugoslavia, San Blas Islands, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Guatemala. Her father, Everitt Lee Mossman, was a lawyer and amateur photographer. He photographed and kept diaries of his wife's travels.

Kathleen was born in Vallejo, California, and remembers the family's excursions to expand Rachael's collection. On one extended trip around the States right after World War II, her mother bought a skirt pieced of many colors of cloth from the Seminole Indians in Florida, and weavings and pottery from Southwest Indians. In 1960, Kathleen and her mother traveled to Yugoslavia, searching for textiles for Rachael's Master's thesis.

The next year, Kathleen earned her own degree in art history from UC/Berkeley. Two years later, she and her husband, Paul, entered the Peace Corps, where they spent two years in Ecuador doing community development work. In 1965, Paul joined USAID as a specialist in urban affairs. The couple spent another five years in Ecuador, two in Brazil, and three in Peru, returning to the States between each assignment. Kathleen did freelance photography and writing while overseas, and worked on newspapers and high tech publications while stateside. She continued her photography and writing career through 1992, when she took early retirement and moved to Oregon. There, she volunteered at the University of Oregon Museum of Art, and learned videography and digital editing.

After her mother's death in 2001, Kathleen donated Rachael's 700-piece textile collection to the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC/Berkeley, where it can be seen today. While helping to catalog and photograph the collection, she met anthropologist and textile scholar Margot Blum Schevil. From this meeting was born a collaboration that led to Endangered Threads Documentaries, whose goal is to produce educational documentaries recording endangered indigenous art forms. Their first, "Splendor in the Highlands: Maya Weavers of Guatemala," was released in 2005. Their next, "100 Years of Maya Weaving," is planned in conjunction with a 2007 exhibition of Guatemalan textiles at the Hearst Museum. Other documentaries under development include "Magüey in Guatemala," "Making a Huipil" (by Cheryl Guerrero), "Cobán Cloth" (with research by Margot on the diaphanous white-on-white P'ikb'il weaving), and "Empowering Women," a series of interviews with six women who work with indigenous weavers in Guatemala. For information on ordering documentaries, see www.endangeredthreads.com.

Pegi Bevins is a freelance writer and editor of products for language arts classrooms and an author of two children's novels. She can be reached at prbevins@iowatelecom.net (email). Visit her website at www.funwaytoteach.com.