

Island Lives: Outdoors was in Carol Berryman's heart

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Her name was Carol Berryman, but many called her Mother Nature.

The moniker was bestowed by Berryman's teenage kids, Don and Cathy, back in the 1970s -- when they weren't quite as passionate as she was about outdoor excursions -- and spread to colleagues and summer students she took under her wing at her beloved Goldstream Provincial Park.

She worked at the park for more than 20 years as a nature interpreter, and later spent several years there as a volunteer extraordinaire -- touching the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors.

She even lived in the park for several years after retiring in 2001, in the trailer next to the nature house, leaving only to die after a lengthy battle with cancer the day after her 71st birthday in February.

Berryman loved nature but wasn't misty-eyed about it.

She was known to dissect a salmon carcass to make the kids who were watching squeal.

She'd lick a banana slug to prove it will indeed make your tongue go numb.

She was very much about "getting her hands in the muck and getting other people's hands in the muck," says Adam Taylor, park naturalist at Goldstream Nature House.

She was also "a phenomenally good communicator and just such a caring person," he adds. "I think everyone of the volunteers considered Carol to be her mentor."

Berryman had a way of sharing her impressive knowledge in a fun

way, right down to impersonating Emily Carr, recalls Genevieve Singleton, a natural history interpreter from Duncan who encountered her as a child many years ago.

"She could connect with teenagers, and make them say 'Wow, that's cool,' " says 16-year-old Rachel Singleton-Polster, who met her on trips to Goldstream with her mother.

Berryman was knowledgeable, having learned from the great naturalist Freeman (Skipper) King, but her strength wasn't just in knowing. It was in imparting the wisdom, the wonder and the responsibility humans need to have for nature.

She was a warm woman, and students felt comfortable confessing their mistakes to her. She'd often share self-deprecating stories of her own.

One of the low points of Berryman's life occurred when provincial funding cutbacks threatened the existence of the nature house in 2002.

"The nature house wouldn't have stayed open if it wasn't for volunteers, and Carol was a huge part of that -- as an ex-staff member and an incredible naturalist," Taylor recalls.

"She was volunteering right up to the end," adds Singleton. She "went into the nature house even when she was really ill and would talk to people, tell people where to look for the woodpecker hole or the best place to watch salmon, or what eagles were out in the estuary."

She took "a lot of joy" in talking to kids from the city about the wonders of nature, says son Don, now 48. And that grew out of taking her own kids on nature outings.

He credits his mother with staying home and creating the "perfect" 1950s-60s home life on Gosper Crescent in Esquimalt while his father, Glen, whom she married in 1957, went off to work.

Not so perfect as far as the kids were concerned were Carol's burgeoning passions for camping and fishing.

"Carol was falling in love with nature and could not get enough of it," he said in her eulogy.

Her interest put a stop to Saturday-morning cartoons.

"Being dragged out of bed by your mom at 4 a.m . . . to sit in (a) small boat in the cold was not exactly our idea of a good time," he wrote. "But Carol thought it was fantastic. I can remember her singing out 'Here, Fishy, Fishy, Fishy' as we mindless(ly) trolled back and forth."

Way back when on the West Coast Trail, she had the kids scrounging for limpets for a boiled dinner or convinced young Don to go waist-deep in icy water to catch crab.

Don and Cathy welcomed adolescent independence from Mother Nature's fishing trips: "Life was better! That is, until Mother Nature showed up with a bassinet full of fish to clean," he wrote upon her retirement.

And no tossing the guts. "Oh no! You had to save the eggs and preserve them in a Mason jar with Borax, so they could be used for steelhead fishing in the winter."

Luckily, she always had lots of cinnamon buns on hand to be devoured after the chore was complete.

Carol Dyson was born in Duncan on Feb. 2, 1936, and lived in rural Shawnigan Lake, often going fishing with her father.

The family moved to Oak Bay when she was six.

In high school, she was interested in theatre and eventually performed in *The Merry Widow* at the Royal Theatre. She trained as a practical nurse, but wasn't cut out for that.

"I think she had too much compassion," says Don. "It's difficult for a nurse to feel so much her patients."

She became a park naturalist in 1974 around the same time her marriage ended, starting at Manning and Garibaldi parks before moving to Goldstream. At 50, she became partners with Randy Dixon,

until he died about 18 months ago. Independent to the end, she carried on alone as caretaker, with poodles Ben and Okie for companionship.

Parksville naturalist Pam Murray saw Berryman almost every day before her death.

"We threw her a big birthday the day before. She turned 71 and she died the next day. How many people get to spend their last night on Earth with a bunch of people gathered together celebrating them?"

The memorial posting on the naturehouse.ca website praises her for setting

"an example for generations of environmental educators on how to educate with gentleness, grace and a true heart."

When she was wheeled past Murray into the ambulance, she summoned a very low stern voice and said: "I'll be coming back."

Berryman was true to her word, Murray believes.

"I feel her in that park, still."