

Remembering Kate Rinzler

by Jeff Place

Archivist, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collection, Smithsonian Institution

Each year the Smithsonian Folklife Festival holds a special evening concert to honor both its co-founder Ralph Rinzler (1934–1994) and a key person with whom he collaborated. The 2011 Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert pays tribute to his wife, Kate. For many years during Ralph's tenure as director of the Festival, Kate was his confidante and worked closely by his side.

Kathryn Hughes Rinzler (and Ralph always referred to her as Kathryn when he was addressing her affectionately) was born in 1937 in London, England, to an old New England family. She followed her dream to be a modern dancer and choreographer, studying dance in college and performing until she became a mother and her interests turned to teaching. She remarked, "That became one of the main themes in my life, to become a teacher.... It's much harder to be a dancer or choreographer—I was for a while—but then that got transformed into writing plays from oral histories, creating choreographies for children, and in the meantime, I was really studying children's ways of transforming their energies." Kate used art to teach children about social issues. And children's folklore—their art and their games—became another major theme in her life. As she was tied closely to the Folklife Festival through Ralph, she created a section of the Festival dedicated to children's folklore. Kate invited storytellers, musicians, and other tradition bearers such as Bessie Jones from the Georgia Sea Islands, Alison McMorland from Scotland, Paul Ofori-Ansah with his African games, and Stu Jamieson with Appalachian traditions to work with children on the National Mall. A series of films was produced on children's games and distributed through the Smithsonian Office of Museum Programs. While Kate directed the children's section of the Festival from 1974 to 1979, she solidified the concept of children's activities as a core theme for the Festival. In the years since then, children's programming has always been

part of the Festival, and we have Kate to thank for that.

During the many years the Rinzlers lived in Washington, they owned a wonderful large row house on Ninth Street SE, full of folk art that they had collected. "Jam sessions" were held here, with musicians hanging out in the spacious gardens. And it was here that they hosted many a reception for luminaries they had known through the Festival, the folk music scene, and the civil rights movement. The Rinzlers spent their downtime on Naushon Island, off the coast of Cape Cod, a large private island owned by Kate's family. The family would gather in the handful of houses on the property, and they would travel around by horse and carriage as there were no automobiles on the island. It was a blissful spot, a place for relaxation and creativity.

Kate spent several summers working with the Bread and Puppet Theater in Vermont. In the 1980s, she taught school in Pembroke, North Carolina, a community made up mostly of Lumbee Indians, who had been involved with the Festival since its early days. During this same time period, she traveled to India to conduct fieldwork for an exhibition, *Aditi: A Celebration of Life*, mounted at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History as part of the Institution's contribution to the Festival of India in 1985. She subsequently took what she learned from this experience and incorporated it into her work with the American Indian schoolchildren in North Carolina.

After Ralph's passing, Kate coordinated the annual Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert for a number of years until she sold their long-time Washington home and moved west to Prescott, Arizona. During her final years she worked as an artist, mainly in the medium of batik, and found a wonderful new community of friends. She lost her long battle with cancer on Christmas Day 2010. She will be missed.