

Poetry and Pentecostal spirit in Black Mountain

Minister and poet Mamie Hilliard is retired, but engaged with her surroundings, mountain people

By Shelly Frome
Special Black Mountain News

BLACK MOUNTAIN — Nestled deep in the southern reaches of Black Mountain with the Blue Ridge Parkway hovering in the far distance, Mamie Hilliard finds herself sheltered by her beloved log cabin and embraced by the peace of the natural world.

In the near distance, she can look out on the sourwoods beginning to bloom “with their little white things hanging down.” She fondly notes they’re the first ones that turn a bright red, the bees make the very best honey, and Black Mountain is known as the sourwood town.

Whether she’s reminiscing, exploring her world or getting down to the business at hand, you

instinctively know that you’re in the presence of a memorable person, one whose rhythm blends in perfectly with each and every endeavor.

Looking back, she recalls coming from the farm in Tennessee to Camp Merri-Mac for girls on Montreat Road. At the time, she was well acquainted with animals and nature but hadn’t been in touch with many people.

She was quite taken with the mountains and her fellow campers and soon discovered her parents had come here during their courtship. In fact, her daddy had worked summers at Blue Ridge Assembly. Now that the camp is co-ed, her grandsons are at Merri-Mac carrying on the legacy. As a matter of course, legacy and continuity become two more



Mamie Hilliard

telling touchstones. “There are six of us who live here in Black Mountain from those camp days and are still in touch, including Annie Hall.”

But it’s not as though she’s always lived an easily evolving life. She married an army chaplain, went around the world with two children in tow and had a third child in Heidelberg, Germany. You could just simply say she’s developed a highly centered approach over the years. A perspective that stood her in good stead when she decided to become a member of the clergy.

At age 60, she was ordained at a Pentecostal

seminary during the time she and her husband moved to Chattanooga. It all came about as she envisioned a spiritual component to a master’s in social work. As a fifth generation Disciple of Christ who came from a long line of clergy and educators, the Pentecostals gave words to her quest.

“Pentecostals feel things. It comes from the Pentecost when the spirit came and everybody spoke in their own tongue. That’s what Jesus promised he would send to comfort us. ‘I will not leave you comfortless. My spirit I leave with you.’ That’s what they say happened at Pente-

cost at the gathering during biblical times. It’s the holy spirit that happens in your heart and mine.”

It comes then as no surprise that she would find spirit in the cabin she inherited from her folks in 1985. It also comes as no surprise the 106-year-old structure is made of hard chestnut that has lasted through many a season, and that spirit extends to the mountain people themselves.

“Living here is in my DNA. It’s home because of the spirit that’s here. This house was built by people who were mountain people. I say that because I love the mountain people. They’re authentic, they’re real. They don’t have roles to play. You take up for each other. You don’t talk about it. You just know you do.”

“The logs in this cabin were cut by an old whip-saw cutting back and forth. I feel it in there. I feel the original folks and

my parents when I’m in here because they all had the spirit. I feel a real heritage that’s been loaned to me for a while and I will pass on to my children. I’ve lived a lot of places with my army husband but this is a special place.”

In retirement, ministering only on occasion and on an individual basis, she’s now writing poetry and calling it “the children of my old age.” She thinks it comes from within herself. She births each and every verse. Struggles but tries not to struggle, to let it come to her. She once put aside a poem after two weeks, then sat by the fire and wrote it down in 10 minutes. And it was good. It said what she wanted to say.

It goes without saying she finds something Pentecostal about the process. The spirit entering at a certain point and dwelling within. Some day she will bind each and every poem in a single volume. All in good time.



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Libba Tracy, left, and Mary Soyenova combined their talents to produce the mural on the outside wall of Black Mountain Center for the Arts.

Mural kicks off Bring Back the Monarchs campaign

By Barbara Hootman
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BLACK MOUNTAIN — Artists Libba Tracy and Mary Soyenova combined talents to produce the monarch butterfly mural on an outside wall of Black Mountain Center for the Arts.

The mural sets the stage for two weeks of “Bring Back the Monarchs” awareness events sponsored by Black Mountain Center for the Arts from Sept. 18-Oct. 3, which is peak monarch migration time.

Tracy is an artist who lives in the flyover zone of the monarchs in Black Mountain. She was inspired by a New York Times article a year ago that outlined the pending collapse of the migration of monarch butterflies, which travel some 2,000 miles to winter in Mexico.

She has combined her love of art and nature in the “Bring Back the Monarchs” awareness event.

“I was touched personally by the article, and it seemed I had just been waiting for a project that I could combine my love of art and nature and make a difference,” Tracy said.

Tracy and Soyenova traced the design on the center wall. It is a recreation of a watercolor painting of Tracy’s. It shows the monarch butterfly with all its beautiful color combinations, and the ghost butterflies who have perished.

“The mural is a wonderful way to wake people visually and alert them to the critical nature of the vanishing Monarch butterflies,” said Gale Jackson, executive director of the



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The finished monarch butterfly mural is the prelude to the “Bring Back the Monarch” awareness campaign set for September.

Black Mountain Center for the Arts. “The mural is a way to use art to inform and attract people to participate in the two week awareness event coming up at the center. It also leads people to the exhibit in one of galleries that is part of the project.”

Soyenova, a sign-maker, volunteered some 18 hours of her time and talent to help Tracy with the mural.

“I was asked if I would help, and after hearing about the project, I said yes,” she said. “This is Libba’s project. I just assisted her.”

According to the World Wildlife Fund, fewer monarchs migrated in 2013 than in any year since researchers began keeping records some two decades ago. The biggest influence in the decline is loss of habitat and reduction of milkweed, the monarchs’ primary food source, along North America’s western shores.

“The migration is definitely proving to be an endangered biological phenomenon,” said Lincoln Brower, leading entomologist at Sweet Briar College in Vir-

ginia. “The main culprit is now GMO herbicide-resistant corn and soybean crops and herbicides in the USA, which leads to the wholesale killing of the monarch’s principal food plant, common milkweed.”

This situation with the monarch butterfly is reversible even at the critical stage that it has reached. Tracy believes awareness is the key to success, and is passionate about making the public more aware about the vanishing Monarchs.

“This can be turned around for the butterflies,” she said. “People need to know about the situation and that the butterflies are vanishing, and by planting milkweed seeds, and stopping the use of pesticides and herbicides they can help save them.”

Robyn Gonzalez, another Black Mountain mural artist, stopped by to watch the painting of the mural.

“I love it,” she said. “I get the message of the mural immediately, and it is beautiful.”

The Black Mountain Center for the Arts is at 225 W. State St. To learn more, call 669-0930.

NUTRITION

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grown quickly to fill the needs of those without proper food resources in the Valley. It distributes produce that is “repurposed” or salvaged from farmers’ fields, grocery store shelves and food grown locally through the Gardens that Give Program.

“We receive donated fruits and vegetables through the partnerships with MANNA FoodBank, The Dr. John Wilson Community Garden and other local growers that allow us to provide the food to our clients at no cost,” Casparian said. “We also seek funding to purchase additional nutritious necessities like whole grains, beans and nuts. Our clients leave the market with enough fresh food to make healthy meals for three to four days.”

“When we first started, we were holding one market a week on Tuesday before the Welcome Table at St. James Episcopal Church (in Black Mountain). There were about 25 people who came for the produce that we provided. Then it quickly grew to 75 families and then to 160 people benefiting.”

“Before we expanded Bounty and Soul’s resources to another market, some 200 individuals were coming to get produce once weekly.”

Bounty and Soul opened a second market at the Blue Ridge Apartments in Black Mountain, where 75 residents benefit weekly. For those who cannot come to the market but need help with food, a bag of produce is packed and delivered to them.

Now there are three Bounty and Soul-sponsored produce markets in Black Mountain weekly. The Blue Ridge Market is open 1:30-2:30 p.m. Mondays at the Blue Ridge Apartments, for all of the residents. The Open Market operates 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Tuesdays at St. James Episcopal Church at 424 W. State St.

The Children and Friends Market is 3-5 p.m. Tuesdays at the Children and Friends Enrichment Center, 3126 U.S. 70, for the parents and children at the day care.

Making a real difference

Diane Moore has come to the Open Market at St. James Episcopal Church for close to a year.

“The fresh produce makes a big difference to me,” she said. “I am diabetic and live on a fixed income. It really helps out. The food dem-

onstrations have a lot of good information. I have learned things that I wouldn’t have ever even thought about.”

Liz Dohy, director of Children and Friends, says the market is making a difference in children and their parents’ nutritional lives.

“The weekly market is going really well,” she said. “The children are getting hands on experience with healthy eating and get to help pick out foods to take home. There is lots of one-on-one talk about good nutrition.”

“Our kids refer to the market as going grocery shopping. The market is making a difference in the parents’ lives. They get to have a supply of fresh fruits and vegetables that they might not have been able to afford. We are really glad to have the market at Children and Friends.”

A core of 18 volunteers makes Bounty and Soul capable of providing so many people in the Valley with fresh produce.

“They are a phenomenal group, and some of them have been with me since day one,” Casparian said. “I couldn’t do this without them. They are literally the fiber of Bounty and Soul. They load and unload trucks, display the food, help participants select food and assist in educating them about proper nutrition.”

Along with the markets, Bounty and Soul also provides cooking demonstrations, health and wellness classes and easy to follow low-budget recipes.

“I hold a cooking demonstration for as few as five people,” Casparian said. “Usually, there are around 50 people now since the class has become popular. What we do makes a difference. We are inspiring and empowering people to make better and more sustainable choices.”

“We develop community among our clients. They are never made to feel that what they receive is charity. As a result so many of them step up and volunteer and give back from themselves.”

Bounty and Soul also partners with Feeding America’s Back-Pack Program and helps local children and their fam-

ilies get the nutrition and easy to prepare foods they need for a weekend.

Jenny Curry attended the Open Market at St. James Episcopal Church and says it made a big difference in her family having fresh produce.

“I have twins who are almost 18 years old, and they have illnesses that require fresh foods,” she said. “My daughter can’t eat any packaged foods. I couldn’t have bought the fresh vegetables that both of my kids have to have without the help from Bounty and Soul. It is absolutely a wonderful program.”

Expansion plans

Bounty and Soul wants to expand its original goal to reach more people and bring the health and wellness movement to more communities in need, while continuing to serve the needs of people in the Swannanoa Valley.

Bounty and Soul has acquired a truck and is in the process of retrofitting it to be able to take the fresh market on the road. Most of the \$25,000 grant received from the Diocese of Western North Carolina-Human Hurt and Hope Fund will be spent on the project.

“We plan to set up mobile markets in areas, rural and city, that have limited access to fresh food options,” Casparian said. “We aren’t just providing healthy food. The Bounty and Soul Mobile Fresh Market will build nutrition awareness and community in a supportive interactive environment at each destination.”

The most recent community outreach program initiated by Bounty and Soul is the U-Grow Garden pilot project. Its purpose is to educate and assist gardeners in growing their own food. Master gardener Bob Wardwell and Dana Hardeman Oglesby, a student at Warren Wilson College are serving as mentors to the two U-Grow Gardeners currently participating.

Casparian hopes that Bounty and Soul can serve as a model that can be implemented in communities everywhere there is need for healthy food and nutritional resources.



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Volunteers unload Bounty and Soul food donations.