

Introducing the heart and soul of the Center: Aurelia Kennedy.

Horace the visionary investor and prospector, Payson the principled visionary leader and philosopher...what else was needed to form the NOC community? Look no further than to Aurelia Kennedy, the most beloved member of the team. She brought extraordinary values and energy to the NOC, and it brought out of her the love of community, the grounded ability to serve others, mainly through food, a compelling humility, and a true love of all kinds of people. Her rich life demonstrates goodness, care-taking, selflessness, and good-spirited fun. The following is a compilation of anecdotes, observations, and responses to questions as we look back at how Relia arrived at the Center and what she brought to it.

Note: interspersed in this conversation are clarifying notes by the editor/interviewer, John Burton. This interview took place in November, 2012, when Aurelia was 79 years old. Payson listened in and made the occasional “clarifying” remark.

Aurelia: My job in Atlanta before we came to Wesser was as a first grade teacher in a black school in downtown Atlanta, Morris Brandon. Even before that we had started a nursery school for rich and poor, black and white in a church next to Atlanta University. We had kids all the way from Julian’s daughter (Julian Bond, famous civil rights activist) and niece to kids from the projects. It was called Atlanta Cooperative Pre-school Nursery—started in 1965 or so, before Martin Luther King was shot. The parents had to take turns, do something with the kids, teach them a song, read to them. I started it with Martha Fordyce and Ruth Neff (sp?) and several black women, including Julian Bond’s sister, who was married to an attorney named Harold Moore, who defended Angela Davis. Mrs. Moore was important, along with Vincent Harding’s wife, who was vocal and helpful. We would have monthly meetings with the women, mostly talking about black power; that totally consumed them. Another well-known person was a singer, Bernice Reagan. She started Sweet Honey in the Rocks, an a cappella women’s group. Her daughter Toshi was in our school and is now a professional singer. Bernice was assertive and angry. Stewart (ed. Payson and Aurelia’s youngest child) went to this school, and he could sing with the best of them.

There was a big gap between the poor whites and middle class blacks, and those whites were never integrated into the leadership of the school.

We had always been interested in civil rights. Payson went to Selma in a protest march. At the same time I had a girl scout troop in Sandy Springs, and I was so involved in this I went and found two black girls to join the troop, and off we went on a weekend trip to the mountains, hiking, panning for gold, etc., just having a big time. When we got back I got a call from the Girl Scout office informing me I was no longer acceptable as a Girl Scout leader! I had a very vivid dream about that—I was in a long flowing dress with a tail out the back and ladies in high heeled shoes were stomping on my dress! It was so clear to me what that dream was about!

From there I went to Morris Brandon, having finished my degree at Georgia State. I had dropped out of school to marry Payson at age 19—he was much more attractive than what Agnes Scott had to offer! I got married after a summer teaching canoeing at Merrie Woode, September of 1954. I had gone to Small Craft School to get certified as a canoeing teacher. Fritz Orr and Hugh Caldwell were in charge

of canoeing at Merrie Woode and they wanted me to go on the trips because I could teach and I could cook and I was fun to have on the trips.

John: How did you get connected to Merrie Woode in the first place?

Aurelia: Fritz Orr (owner of Camp Merrie Woode) went to our church. My parents were looking for something for me to do in the summer, because they didn't want me running loose, so Daddy got me a job with Fritz, first at their day camp out on Nancy Creek Road, where I was a horseback instructor. That is where I first came across a singer and guitar player who really inspired me, Bud Jones from Calacoosa, Georgia, and that convinced me I wanted to learn how to sing and play like that. That is where I started to learn the guitar.

Ramone Eaton used to come up and visit Fritz at camp, and we could sit and listen to their wild stories. The senior canoeing staff would take wooden canoes to the Nantahala in those days. Ramone said he had taken one other lady through the Falls, and I would be the second. I can remember him standing up in the back of that wood and canvas canoe, scouting as we approached the rapid, and it was very thrilling! That was 1954, before I got married, and that was my last summer there.

John: Fast forward to the late 60's. Payson and Doug and Claude were real active...(Payson Kennedy, Doug Woodward, Claude Terry).

Aurelia: And I would go on trips with them, and whatever boat they had just abandoned is what I got to paddle. First an aluminum canoe, then they made fiberglass C-1's, then kayaks, and so I got the C-1's. We would go on weekends, and we would pay the girls to take care of the boys and pay the boys to be good. We would go to the local store and buy fishing boots and pants—I don't know what would have happened if we had tipped over.

John: Horace buys the property...

Aurelia: Yes, and he wanted us to run the operation as an adjunct to the day camp and the family club in Atlanta, a recreation center for those folks. And we would pile everyone in the car and drive to Pennsylvania and race, and then pile everyone in the car and drive back home—and teach school or go to classes the next day. We went to Petersburg, Virginia to race, and met the Holcombe's there, Jim, and Norm and his wife Barb. The first race we went to was the Angels Falls Devils Jump on the south fork of the Cumberland River in Kentucky, probably around 1967 or 1968. That was where we first saw these guys going hut, hut, and switching sides like machines—but we still beat a lot of them! The first Southeastern Championships was 1969, and we started having races on the Locust Fork and the Hiwassee and the Chattahoochee. The girls, especially Cathy, were into it, and so was John. John and Doug Martin paired up in C-2, at age 12, and did great. They were big buddies, started building the log cabin up on Flint Ridge.

They were planning to hike from Fontana to here in 2 days, and spend the night on the trail, but they got scared and couldn't handle camping in the dark so they kept going and showed up at the restaurant as we were cleaning up about 10 o'clock at night! They were brave enough to hike all day but not to camp out in the dark. Of course, they were 12 years old!

Horace bought the property in the fall of 1971. It was winter of 1972 before we got involved, and the Boy Scouts came up to work that first summer—and we all did everything, except keep the books. We all worked in the restaurant, and that led to some great mayhem.

John: You loved to cook but had no restaurant experience, right? Yet, you were the most likely to run the restaurant.

Aurelia: And it took me awhile to realize I really loved it, that it fit the helper person that I am, #2 on the Enneagram.

John: I'll never forget the joy I would see in you whenever you placed a big plate of food in front of someone.

Aurelia: I took what I had done in the family and multiplied it times 8. I also called on my Girl Scout experience of getting people to come in and help. Those things got me started, and then we would hire people who were supposed to know how to run restaurants. I thought I was a good judge of people and character, but once we started with restaurant people, I realized I didn't know a thing! We would have managers who typically would survive until Memorial Day, then the crowds would hit and they would quit. One of the things I realized, in addition to making people happy with food, was how much I loved working on a team—it was just incredible.

John: Payson ascribes a lot of the focus on community to you: that it was most fundamental to what you wanted to create here, a guiding principle.

Aurelia: Right—I thought it would be good to have a group of people of similar values who wanted to work together. And a big piece for me was making time (I don't know how I did it) to go visit with the local folks, Roy, Gene, Larce, Grady and Candace, and all. (ed. note: Roy Dills, the rest were Mashburns!) I loved going to their homes to visit, go on wildflower-gathering hikes, listening to their amazing stories of life in the “hollers” where they had lived all their lives. The guys liked to talk about hunting. Roy Dills was the best story teller. He was very poor but had figured out all sorts of medicinal remedies from herbs and flowers and roots he gathered himself. He would often say “I just don't understand how your husband lets you go off with me into the woods, alone.” I said “he trusts you, Roy, and besides, I have my dog with me”—a big collie. By the way, Roy was over 70 years old, a grizzled veteran with a twinkle in his eye and stories to tell.

A story he told me was about Gibson Cove. Old man Gibson lived up there with his daughters, and they were cross-eyed. “Them girls would get out in the full moon and just howl, they wanted a husband so bad!” He also talked to me about “woods colts”, about kids who were conceived in the woods.

Then he told about the old lady who was bringing a load of corn to be ground into meal down the road to the little mill near where Dennis and Karen (ed: Dennis Harrison and Karen Litton, long-time NOC staff) have their house now, where it flows into Wesser Creek. There was a big old tree with a limb hanging out over the road, and there was a “painter” (panther) sitting up on the limb. The panther then jumped down onto the back of the mule towing the wagon and raked its claws over the mule's back and spooked it so bad it broke away from the cart and made a dash for home. The woman was just terrified, and she and the wagon just sat there. Her husband knew something was wrong when the mule showed up at home alone, and he came down and saved her. That's only a little more than a mile from NOC.

Then we started playing music, with Doyle and Mildred and Gene Mashburn. Gene could really play unless he got drunk, but we had a great time making good ol' country music, which evolved into "pickin' on the porch" for many years at the Center.

Hallie Roper worked as a dishwasher for us—she was a simple soul. She tells a story of the ordeal of hiking over to Silvermine from Wesser Creek, and getting caught by the dark and being stalked by another panther, which was threatening the baby.

John: So the connections that were made to the local folks were largely due to your personal interest in getting to know them and learn about their history and culture, right?

Aurelia: Yes, that's right. I was really interested, and loved to hear their stories and what their lives were like. I loved singing with them—that was the closest meeting of NOC folks with the local folks. Doyle could sing 200 songs without looking at a piece of music—but they were all in the key of G.

Larce worked in the store, and Doyle drove a school bus, so our kids got to know him the best. He would pick up dead animals for Frances to skin—she was going to make a quilt out of animal hides.

Payson: We were living in the stone house and they (the kids, Cathy, Frances, John, and Stewart) had the rooms upstairs, with no heat (cackle). I guess she was going to make a quilt out of all the hides to keep warm up there! (cackle again!)

Aurelia: I taught first grade for 2-3 years up in Andrews. I tried to get hired in Bryson City, but apparently I didn't go about it just right. I applied and interviewed, but they said "we're not going to hire you because you interviewed with the wrong person", somebody who had broken the rules. Seems absurd, but that's the way things worked around here!

John: Talk about the Usumacinta trips. Payson and Horace went on the first trip, but you didn't go.

Payson: You taught up in Andrews through the 75-76 school year, so you didn't go on the first trip, but you did the next year.

Aurelia: That's when I stopped teaching. Running those trips was great fun. I was nervous, sure I was going to get malaria or whatever. But, I believe in "feel the fear, and do it anyway". That has always worked for me, including the big move from Atlanta to here. We loaded everything into the Ford van, and I drove the little orange Volkswagen, full of plants and girls, in the night! My girlfriend Martha Fordyce had to come to the house and say "you are leaving, and you are leaving tonight, so stop stalling", because I was freaking out, convinced "I can't do this!!" It was pretty scary. I really liked teaching school in Atlanta, we had a really nice house with nice furniture, we were stable, and we would do fun stuff on weekends. Pulling the trigger on the move was a bigger deal for me than for Payson, because he was so caught up in the idea of what it could be. At that point I was following, much less convinced that it would ultimately work. It took several years for us to make a profit, and I kept teaching so we could make ends meet. I really wanted my children to be able to go to college.

It took me longer than one summer to embrace running the restaurant. I gradually figured out that I liked doing it, I was good at it, and it was needed. I was the one concerned about quality and what kind

of menu we had, what kind of experiences we wanted our guests to have with food. I did not like cleaning other people's motel rooms, but cleaning the kitchen was different!

John: So you guided on the Nantahala some that summer, right?

Aurelia: I don't think I did much, because I didn't have time. I also guided on the Chattooga on weekends in spring and fall. Looking back, I don't know how I made myself go down those big rapids.

John: So you were a Section IV guide, taking people through the 5 Falls?

Aurelia: Yep, that's amazing, isn't it? (ed: with a shake of the head, but something akin to a confident twinkle in the eye!).

John: No, it's not amazing, except that most people who have worked at the Center over the last 25 years don't know that. They think of you as the food service queen.

Aurelia: And they would have been frightened to think of me as a Chattooga guide!! (chuckle)

John: But you had an extraordinary wealth of experience in paddling over a number of years. Merrie Woode didn't allow just anyone to go down the Nantahala, you did a lot of racing on unfamiliar rivers; you led groups of kids all over the place. I think that is one of the "lost treasures" of the NOC story—how much a part of the big river adventures you were from the beginning, which then morphed into some incredible adventure travel trips, to Guatemala, Nepal, all over the world!

Aurelia: When I was teaching school and we had four kids, if we hadn't gone off on all those weekend trips I would have gone nuts! It was just so wonderful to get out into the woods—and I had to do at least two a month for my mental health!

John: I suspect one of the things you are most proud of is the 4 kids.

Aurelia: Yes. They are different, but they are healthy, with good values, and are hard-working, really fun to be around.

John: I want you to think of a story, an anecdote, that defines what the Center meant to you or to staff or guests. Like the story Gordon tells of saving the guy on the Chattooga. That woke him up to how what we do, how we do it, can be very powerful for someone, can be life changing, at any moment!

Aurelia: Hmm, that might be hard.

Payson: Remember what Baxter said to you, so many years later, about his first meal, telling you, 40 years later, what he had to eat and how much it meant to him the way you fed him after a long day of hiking. (ed: Bill Baxter is one of the pillars of the Swain County and "old NOC" communities. After wandering in to Wesser with his buddy Gary Duven in the late 70's, and working as a guide for many years, he became perhaps the premier builder of fine homes and commercial, tourist-related businesses in the region. He has built dozens of homes and all of the major buildings at the NOC in Wesser and at Nantahala Village, among many others.)

Aurelia: It was at his 50th birthday party. He said "I just have to tell you about the first time I met you. We were coming off the trail, it was dark and cold." He and Duven didn't know you were supposed to

carry a light pack, and they were carrying the kitchen sink, packs that weighed 65 pounds. They came in after we were closed—those were the days when we made the River Runner’s Special for staff and sold it to guests as the special. I told him he could have meat loaf and mashed potatoes and gravy but he would have to wait till I heated it up. That was what he remembered 35 years later!

John: At the highest level, I would say that your commitment to serving people was a hugely important part of the legacy of the NOC. We are a river-running company, but we influenced more people through food than we did through activities—and by and large created wonderful memories and positive associations with thousands of loyal guests.

Payson: When you go out of your way, when you do something special, it creates such powerful experiences for folks. Same as when, yesterday, Jerry Harrison talked about going out of his way to get a cup of coffee for a couple of frozen hikers who missed the restaurant. That’s what is memorable.

John: And that is not random, not an accident. Here is Jerry Harrison, part of the next generation of leaders at the NOC, and he was attracted here by you and that legacy. He “got it” at an internal, gut level, that this is something he wanted to be a part of, and it let him display that character trait of service and doing something special for people. That incident displays the value system that attracts people.

Aurelia: I don’t know how many needy people come through here now, but in the old days we had many people who really needed some form of sustenance they couldn’t pay for. I had a rule about what we could give away, so we didn’t give away the farm. We would offer a cup of coffee or glass of milk, whichever they wanted, and a PB&J sandwich or a baloney sandwich. In those days we served baloney sandwiches to the clinics!! (ed. note: said with horror!).

John: Tell me about Florrie and Allie Funk and Joe Cole.

A—Allie was in charge of the horses, and I remember one day she took off her shirt and hung it in a tree, and I had to remonstrate with her about not going bare chested in the woods! She was a free spirit. Florrie was a bit more down to earth, worked in the restaurant. I can’t remember exactly how they got here.

Payson: Their father was a prominent doctor in Atlanta, and they had a vacation house north of the Center. Allie did the horses before Steve Brown—they were the only two who ever ran that operation. Then Florrie fell in love with Tom Gonzalez, and they got married and I think they have children. So both Tom Doyle and Tom Gonzalez, the two (Georgia) Tech students who came up here at first, married women they met here.

Aurelia: If you could count the people who fell in love here and married here and had children, it would be hundreds!!

Payson: Al and Betsy Quant and Sue Firmstone were key, quality folks who came very early. Betsy kept the books.

John: I’ll never forget arriving here in September, 1975, (9 months into the year) and one of our first meetings was you, me and Betsy. She came in with the checkbook and said, “OK, guys, let’s go ahead

and decide what accounts and categories we want to set up so we can start allocating all these checks we've written." And I thought to myself "whoa, we really are starting from scratch, aren't we!"

Payson: The first three years the only financial record keeping of any kind was the check book. We had no financial statements until Dauphine showed up that winter of 1975-76. (ed. David Dauphine was a linchpin of the early days: expert paddler, value-driven, well-educated, and our first real financial specialist.)

John: I remember it was a huge deal when we bought the "one-write" system where the check amounts showed up in one column and could be spread out into various allocation columns. We had to suck it up to spend the money to buy the checks and ledger paper and folding binder. (ed. I just looked this up on the internet and found: **"The startup package system includes: 300 Single Carbon Band Checks, 25 Journals, 200 Envelopes & 1 Folding Board"** for \$235. I think when we bought it in 1976 it was probably \$49 and it took us a few days to decide to spend that much).

Payson" That 75-76 period was when we really made a quantum leap forward in the quality of people who came on, and we got our first financial statements from Dauphine. That was a big deal. You, Bunny, Bechdel, Kastorff, Eustis, KB, Ray and Jackie, Dauphine, Patrice, had all come in the last one or two years, and we made our first profit.

Aurelia: What amazed me was not long after that, we were in Kathmandu setting up a tent and some guy came by and said "Hi, Payson and Aurelia, I met you at the Center." And another time in an obscure Tibetan city, we would go to the kitchen, since we didn't speak Tibetan, we would point at what we wanted them to stir fry with our noodles. We were seated then with two French girls, who said "oh, you're from NOC! We went there and had the most wonderful bread!" We had always been proud of our famous little loaves of bread served on a small board with a knife and butter.

Payson: I always enjoy going to the dentist, Dr. Vollmer in Andrews, because he never fails to tell stories of taking his staff to Rivers End for meals and how they enjoy the food and service. He also points out how he likes and admires the architecture and style of buildings we have put up here, that fit in well with the natural environment.

John: When did the restaurant get named "Rivers End"?

Aurelia: That was when we built the second restaurant, so around 1986. Now that we had two restaurants, we needed names to identify them. And I think Maggie Clawson came up with the name "Relia's Garden." We were searching around for a name and she came up with it. Joe Huggins wrote a really nice piece that was on the back of the menu.

Aurelia: I have always felt like this was Payson's idea and I am in support of it!