Finding Delores Churchill at home in Ketchikan, Alaska, is no mean feat. She’s a busy woman. One of two recipients to be honored this year with an NBO Lifetime Achievement award, she took time out between a trip to Juneau and one to Anchorage for a telephone conversation about her life and work.

That she’s a spirited individual was immediately evident as she confirmed the spelling of her name as Delores, explaining that when she became an American citizen she changed it from the more common spelling of Dolores, because she had discovered that Dolores meant something like “mother of sorrows,” which certainly does not reflect her lively and optimistic manner.

Churchill is an internationally recognized master basket maker who weaves with yellow and red cedar bark, but is especially renowned for her spruce root work, her teaching, and her deep knowledge of Native basketry. Tribits of history and technical information from articles and books constantly pop up in her conversation, the result of her years of weaving, her travels, and her large personal library. She expresses gratitude for the various grants and artist residencies that have allowed her to travel extensively to study basketry, and to bring that knowledge back to her people.

This Page

Above: Churchill wearing a spruce root hat and Australian merino flannel T-shirt, both woven by her.

Opposite Page

Top: Rattle Top 2D; spruce root and red cedar root. Bear Track design represents the Bear Lodge where the roots were harvested; the red represents the strawberry plants that were growing nearby; the spiral on the lid is to indicate “our native world is in a spiral.”

Bottom: Tsimshian Bottle; red cedar and cowry grass. Lightning design, Tsimshian.

By

Leanne Jewett

A prime example of the value of her travels flows from a grant she received in 1982 allowed her to study in the British Isles: in London, Liverpool, Oxford, and at different museums in Great Britain. “I had the key to all the collections. I could go and study wherever I wanted to at the museum. It was a great privilege.” It was there that she came across a hat with a six-strand ending that nobody was doing anymore. It took her two or three days, but she was able to teach herself that ending. When she returned home, no one was using the ending, so she didn’t teach it. Years later, though, when a receding Canadian glacier revealed the ancient human remains known as Kwaíday Dán’i’chi (Long Ago Person Found), she was excited to learn that the spruce-root hat found with him had that same six-strand ending. Later, she found through DNA testing that she shared a common ancestor with Long Ago Person Found. “Then I felt like my ancestors are telling me I’d better start teaching that ending, so I have been teaching that ending.”

The daughter of the respected and nationally recognized Haida basket weaver Selina Peratrovich, Churchill didn’t gravitate to basketry until she, as an adult, took a basket making class from her mother at the community college, after which she became her mother’s apprentice.
For the first four or five years of the apprenticeship, her mother burned Churchill’s baskets rather than let what she judged to be inferior work be shown. Asked if that discouraged her, Churchill says no, because her husband thought they were great. Finally, one day when she had finished a basket, she took it next door to show her mother. Her husband followed her in and told Peratrovich that he wanted that basket. Her mother said okay, and from then on allowed Churchill to sell the baskets that she made.

Her mother passed on the traditions of their Haida culture throughout Churchill’s life, which included an abiding respect for the land. Churchill recalls that as a child she learned to cover the areas where they had dug roots so that the disturbance was minimal, and to thank the trees for their gifts—practices that she passes on to her own students.

Shortly after she became her mother’s apprentice, she tells of how she learned of another Haida tradition: “We had gone harvesting spruce roots and so I was going to do an art piece. I wasn’t splitting my bark or my roots yet myself. I was using her roots. So one day I went over... to get some spruce roots from her, and she said, ’Why are you taking my roots?’” Churchill explained that she needed them for her project. Her mother then said, “No, if you want roots you go by yourself. When you come with me, I’m teaching you.” And so Churchill learned that in Haida culture, when you become an apprentice to a master artist, you have to collect material for the master artist as long as she is alive.

Undaunted, Churchill continued working with her mother and other Native basket weavers, including those of the Tlingit and the Tsimshian people. She explains that the Haida work objects upside down, but the Tlingits and the Tsimshians weave right side up. Because that made more sense to her, she asked Flora Mather, a fellow student, to teach her in exchange for gathering material, which Flora could no longer do. That’s how she learned Tsimshian weaving. She learned Tlingit weaving when another fellow student, Esther Littlefield, came to her and said: “My grandmother came to me in a dream and told me that I’d better quit weaving upside down and that I have to weave right side up.” Churchill’s mother then gave her permission to teach Esther Haida weaving right side up. Over the years she has studied Aleut and Athabascan basketry as well as Northwest Coast design and Chilkat weaving. In addition to baskets she weaves hats, robes, and other regalia.

Churchill’s mother had sometimes been criticized for teaching traditional basketry to outsiders. “I think that the people were really upset that she was
Churchill’s legacy lies not only in her own notable work, but in her broad and generous dissemination of knowledge and skills. At 87, besides teaching at the University of Alaska Southeast at both the Juneau and Sitka campuses, she frequently travels to teach basketry and to consult with museum curators. She proudly points out that while in 1984 there were only three spruce-root hats displayed at the Sealaska Heritage Institute biennial gathering—two of her mother’s and one from a museum—at the most recent gathering there were hundreds of hats, all created as a result of her and her mother’s teaching. Committed to passing on her knowledge, this fall she will take part in a mentor-apprentice spruce-root weaving program sponsored by the Sealaska Heritage Institute in their efforts to foster new spruce-root weavers who will in turn teach future generations.

Churchill has been honored by many organizations for her work. She holds an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Alaska Southeast, was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Artist residency, an Alaska State Council on the Arts travel grant, a fellowship to study Haida basketry in London and Canada, and a Sealaska Heritage foundation study grant. In 2014 the film Tracing Roots featured Churchill in her journey to understand the origins of the spruce-root hat discovered with Long Ago Person Found.

She is currently working on a book about how the Haida lived when she was a child, how they used baskets in everyday life when gathering bird eggs, digging clams, or picking berries. And, of course, she is writing about making baskets—the various stages, multiple endings, and preparation of materials—a lifetime of knowledge. Knowledge that, but for makers, scholars, and teachers like her, would be lost.