

# DELORES CHURCHILL

## WEAVING CONNECTS US



inding Dolores 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 Dolores, 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. Tidbits 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 Raven's Tail tunic, both woven by her.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
TOP: **Rattle Top 20**; spruce root and dyed spruce root; Bear Track design represents the 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 canary grass; Lightning design, Tsimshian

BY  
**LEANNE JEWETT**



A prime example of the value of her travels flows from a grant she received that 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 Kwäday Dän Ts'ínchi (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 that 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.







JOCK MACIEL

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 gift—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

ABOVE: Cresting Waves, red cedar bark with sun-bleached grass, in a private collection, 4 x 5"



LARRY MOZIEL

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 Athabaskan 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

ABOVE: Spruce Potlatch Ring; spruce root and dyed spruce root, weaving is Spiderweb design; Haida



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sharing intellectual property." Asked her philosophy on teaching the techniques and designs of Native basketry to non-natives, Churchill recalls the work of James M. Adovasio, an American archaeologist who is well-known for his work in perishable artifacts: "He said that when humans learned to make basketry and other weaving, it totally changed the way that human beings [lived], because they could get out of the caves, they could build, they could make thatched roofs, they could make clothing, they could make containers to pick berries. He felt that basketry and weaving made a greater impact on the human race than the wheel....it made me realize that basketry is in all human history and so I quit worrying about what people say and what people think."

Though fascinated by weaving of peoples throughout the world she has a special interest in her own Haida culture. "I like people to study the history of their own weaving and maybe bring back that [weaving] because I think those [connections] are important." When she was honored with a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Residency, she could have gone to France or Great Britain or Japan, but she chose Canada because that gave her access to the very large Haida Collection at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. There director Dr. George MacDonald recognized her contributions by making her a fellow.

Churchill has studied and taught weaving all the years that she practiced it. She sees it as connecting the past to the present and the present to the future. Reacting to one of several First Peoples Funds awards, she articulated her philosophy: "Weaving connects us to the past and teaching passes the weaving art on to the future. Each generation of weavers will contribute their interpretations and artistic expressions to the continuation and growth of this vibrant art form. My mother's and my students, and their students, will keep this art alive long after our names are forgotten. Weaving belongs to all of us."

THIS PAGE  
 ABOVE: TOP (left): Detail of weaving; (right) Churchill weaving of Naaxlin Apron, Diving Whale design  
 BOTTOM (left): Naaxlin Apron from The Field Museum in Chicago; (right) Diving Whale design painted by John Livingston

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
 LEFT: Churchill in 1978 with some of her baskets.  
 Tall basket at right: Bottom section red cedar bark with sun-bleached grass, pattern is lightning, Tsimshian technique; Section 2 (moving up); spruce root, sun-bleached grass and maidenhair fern; pattern is seasons on the mountain; Tlingit, weaving and design; Section 3, warp red cedar, weft canary grass; design represents a bird flying among the rocks with algae on the rocks; Salish weaving; Section 4, spruce root and dyed spruce root; Spiderweb design; Haida weaving

Center basket: First Tlingit basket that Delores wove; spruce root; Woodworm design.  
 Left basket: spruce root and dyed spruce root, weaving is Spiderweb design; Haida

On table in front of Delores: a bundle of spruce roots

TOP RIGHT: Churchill woven spruce root hat, with ermine embellishment, replicated from the hat discovered with Long Ago Person Found.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Caption for this image to come.



LEANNE JEWETT



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.

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