

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



27 / Kate Kopischke, peacemaker, Salt Lake City, Utah

I have mentioned this area in New Mexico more than once. A deep, deep and narrow dead end ravine along Polvadera Creek and Cañones Creek, two spring-fed streams coming down from the high mountains in north-central New Mexico that run year through, Cañones Canyon seems to attract a lot of creative creatures. You won't find the place if you haven't been told about it. The village of Cañones at the canyon's mouth counts maybe 40 inhabitants, all descendants of Hispanic settlers who arrived in the mid-1700s. "Anglo" professors of medicine, documentary film makers, anthropologists, philosophers, a world-famous performance artist--they all built homes there; as well as an Hispanic author and poet of national fame. I have met most of them, went to their parties, took care of some of their properties when they were gone; and when someone gave me two beautiful Arabian horses, I grazed them in Cañones Canyon, where they spent their days as peacefully and undisturbed as all who live there, hidden far behind the narrow passage that keeps intruders away. At the opposite end of the canyon a couple of rough trails lead into the mountains, where the hunting is good and --as I was told--no few planes from down Mexico way stealthily drop their loads of contraband drugs, practically on schedule.

Kate Kopischke is one of the unique people I encountered in Cañones Canyon. When we first met she wasn't yet forty, an athletic beauty with an athletic as well as sensitive brain, mind and soul. She and her then husband had a second home in the canyon, an adobe round house above one of the creeks in a setting that makes me shiver as I think of it and write this, far away in Kansas. Kate herself made me shiver, too, or were it hot flashes I got? What sense of humor, what spirit... At 24, she spent a year chronicling the Machiguenga in the Amazon "while cutting her teeth in the jungle of journalism." She

helped launch a newspaper in Botswana to document the rise and revolution under Nelson Mandela. She was a conflict solver in the state of New Mexico (mostly for land use and water right issues). And for five years she has doused diplomatic fires across the globe as a professional mediator working for what I see as one of the few decent departments of the World Bank, the Office of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman, where she was burdened with the heavy task of cleaning up each time after the Bank's culture of arrogance created a new mess. Today, she is Salt Lake City's first lady, soon to be married to its second term mayor Ralph Becker, a bicycle riding, mountain hiking, downhill skiing, white river kayaking, sustainability preaching, progressive Democrat in a state habituated by many morons—sorry, my typo, I mean Mormons. “Whip-smart and sophisticated, she also is a down-to-earth Midwestern girl, most happy in the backcountry or bushwhacking for social justice. Her casual way belies her Type A resume. She probably could run Utah's capital city all by herself, but has no interest in public office,” as wrote the Salt Lake Tribune. But Kate shares Ralph's passion for news and progressive policy.

On every campus she has graced Kate edited the school paper. Born in Wyoming, she studied journalism and anthropology in Nebraska where she became an eternal Cornhusker “foobaw” team fan, although she didn't keep up with the unique “Nebrayeska” accent and pronunciation shortcuts. No “gobi gred!” or “yule cat chon” or “rest runt” coming from Kate's sweet lips. She also studied in Wichita, Kansas; one of her WSU professors eventually became a Cañones Canyon neighbor. Her studies of intercultural communication at the University of New Mexico changed her life: she went on that academic expedition to the Amazon. “Imagine, living with people who don't have any involvement in the money economy, development, Christianity.”

Kate came back to write for New Mexico dailies, a magazine, and The Associated Press. Then, after a trip to southern Africa, she and a friend decided to start a newspaper to record Botswana's hope. “I ended up voting in Mandela's 1994 election with my black African friends who had been part of the struggle,” she says. She lived in Johannesburg and Cape Town. “It was a most magical time to be there.”

Later, she became the big time globe-trotting troubleshooter. “Fascinated by Mandela's penchant for solving intractable problems,” Kate embraced mediation training back home in Albuquerque and first landed a conflict resolution job with the Policy Consensus Initiative. Then her mediation skills whisked her out of the Southwest and into oil, gas, mining, and agribusiness conflicts around the world. As an Ombudsman for the World Bank, Kate has headed environmental and corporate abuse investigations from Kazakhstan to Borneo to Kenya to Ecuador. “I have worked with public leaders all over the world who put money in their pockets,” she says. “It's appalling that a government can fund a civil war, but not put people through school.” She left the Bank because in the end it “wuz jist a thorn inner side,” as they say in Nebraska. “I flew and lived first class, was chauffeured around in Landrover convoys, was rowed up an endless river into the rain forest jungle like any colonial era *Memsahib*--often to solve disputes about lesser sums of money than my own travel expenses must have amounted to.” I have pressed Kate to write a book about her global experiences. So far, no luck—I don't know, maybe she had to sign a confidentiality agreement before they let her leave her “fishal” life. I keep on hoping that some day...