

## A True Friendship

By Dr. Sharon Greenleaf La Pierre  
(Copyright ©, All Rights Reserved 2014)

When I was much younger, I taught fibers and design at Community College of Denver, Red Rocks Campus, in Golden, Colorado. I had many older adult students in my classes, which I truly loved. They never let me get away with one thing. It was one of the most intellectually stimulating times in my life.

One of these students was Florence Beverly Gilman Meyer (1918 to 2006), who herself was an accomplished artist and teacher, as well as a graduate of the University of Denver in Anthropology. Florence reminded me of Margaret Meade in her looks and thirst for knowledge about anthropological, cultural, and artistic artifacts. She read incessantly. She laughed heartedly, but was soft spoken, and full of gentleness. We became very good friends and that friendship lasted until she passed away of Alzheimer's. Her daughter, Yara Meyer Fedde, helped me to piece the information together for this chapter.

For many years, Florence lived in a wonderful little house on the campus of Colorado Academy, a private school in Denver, Colorado where she taught art. She was an highly respected faculty member. However, she owned a buffalo ranch in Colorado which was operated by her son, Tory Meyer.



Florence and I traveled all over the world together. I would give her a call, and we would drive on an adventure to California, Utah, parts of Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, to name a few; Or, we would fly to South and Central America, Aruba, and the Galapagos Islands. We traveled for weeks as natives in these areas which included Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, Guatemala, going into the mountains hiking and exploring. Florence was a wealth of inspiration and knowledge, plus she could speak some Spanish. Although Florence was much older than I, we were fast friends.

I never knew Florence to say a bad word about anyone. She always tried to be constructive, understanding, and loving. When she told a story, she would tell a piece of that particular story that the person could relate to, while at the same time telling another piece of that same tale to someone else from a different perspective. It almost seemed like a different story, but it was not.

If one put all of the pieces together, one had the total story. Perhaps this was the teacher in her soul, trying to relate to each person's need or perspective. No one could fool Florence. She was not afraid to voice her opinion.

I never saw Florence in a pair of pants because she was very proper in her dress and speech. However, she was a pioneer woman who could shoot a gun, ride a horse, teach and make art, walk through the jungles starting from Denver, Colorado to discover ruins in Guatemala when she was young, getting malaria along the way, or swim in the ocean with wild dolphins off of the Galapagos Islands, or rescue and raise a baby badger (one of the most impossible and dangerous things to do) and release it back into the wild. We traveled to the same ruins in 1979, Tikal, Guatemala 30 years after she found them walking through the jungle. This time, we flew in a small plane and landed in a clearing with no regard for bandits as before. We ate lunch in the jungle with new friends and ran from a torrent of rain. It was always an adventure and full of excitement to travel with

Florence.



Nothing scared this soft spoken woman who was 27 years my senior. In fact, she served in the US Army in Alaska during World War II on a transport plane. She always encouraged me

to live life and take a risk. This was perhaps the greatest lesson I learned from her life experiences.



Florence was always there to attend my art openings or to support me when I gave a design workshop such as in Seattle, Washington. I learned from her. I cherished her wisdom, not always agreeing with her, but always loving her style. The picture of her above (on the left) is the epitome of who Florence was. It was taken in 1979 at Machu Picchu in Peru. We spent a day wondering through the ruins and discussing how “ancient aliens” must have been involved in the construction. It was NEVER dull and always fun.

Florence collected very old American Indian jewelry. She usually knew the artist or family who created the items and would have stories about their friendship. When we traveled, she looked



for special fabrics to sew her kachina dolls and embroider with Native designs. I have several of these wonderful creations which remind me of her. The photos below and above are examples of what she made and gave to friends. She literally made hundreds of these. They were not meant to be great art, but, rather, represented a piece of her soul that she shared with people. These little kachina dolls brought joy to everyone who was lucky enough to own one. For example, I clowned around a lot when we traveled, so I got the clown doll. However, my favorite piece is “Punch” from Judy and Punch. The legs and arms snap on and off.



When in South America, I remember we started to talk with a woman on the street who obviously did not have many material possessions. The woman commented on how lovely Florence’s hat was. I remember it was cold. Florence took the hat off and said, “Here, you may have this.” It was a great lesson in generosity. She was always willing to share, even when it meant giving up a hat, and she usually wore a hat as her signature piece.

Before Florence died and was still able to travel, Yara left her at my home to visit on several occasions. I will never forget returning home to find Florence and my husband sitting on the sofa holding hands and watching the classic movie, “Harold and Maude.” Florence reminded me of Maude with her total love of experience and lack of fear to drink it all into her

consciousness. I used to require my design students to see this movie in order to look at life from a different perspective.



When Florence passed away, her daughter organized a wonderful “goodbye” party and all of her friends came with objects which displayed their friendship. One woman brought a huge tray with lots of Florence’s kachina dolls. It was a cry-able moment. A table was set up so people could browse the items which represented different facets of Florence’s life, such as her awards, her accomplishments, her photographs and family history. On the table lay the albums of photographs from our summer in South and Central America. I never knew she put these together, which later became mine. Lots of people were at her final party. We knew of each other from Florence’s stories. And each of us thought we were her “best” friend, recounting our experiences and encounters. This is perhaps the best of all the gifts we celebrated about Florence...her unconditional respect for our differences and an appreciation of our unique personages. This is why this chapter is important. It reveals the life of one woman who inspired everyone around her with her gentle, loving ways, but strong and courageous attitude. No one ever took Florence for a silent simpleton. She was the ultimate teacher and friend. If I had to use one word to describe Florence, it would be that she was a remarkable “character.” What a legacy!

Florence and Sharon in  
Seattle, Washington, 9/25/1990