

## **As the Executive Director** Marion Cott

### **GROWING UP IN TEXAS**

When I was growing up in central Texas, there were things I could not imagine I would ever be: an ordained Presbyterian elder, a registered lobbyist in the State of Kansas, a founding member of the Kansas Western Swing Hall of Fame.

And, certainly, never, ever Executive Director of the Kansas Humanities Council.

After I had this job for a while, my Daddy told me in his best Texas twang: “Marion Beth, that job is the best damned thang that’s ever happened to you.”

I certainly agree with my Daddy. After my husband Ken and our daughter Amanda, this job is the “best damned thang” that has ever happened to me.

### **MAGICAL MOMENTS WHEN WE GOT IT “JUST RIGHT”**

There have been many magical moments during the 34 years when all of us working together got it “just right.”

When we connected the humanities to our daily lives in ways that offered new and meaningful insights into what it means to be human.

I’m talking about those programs that give people insight into community life or public issues, or human behavior that would not have been possible without the funding and encouragement of the Humanities Council.

I want to share a couple of my “just right” memories with you, but since so many of you have been engaged in the public humanities business almost as long as I have, you can think along with me and remember your favorite moments.

### **EXAMPLES OF “JUST RIGHT” MOMENTS**

#### *Ethics and Health Care*

In 1995, KHC anticipated the national health care crisis and created *Health Care and Human Values* a year-long, statewide program that provided a forum for ordinary Kansans to give voice to their concerns about health care and to think about the values they would want to inform health care in our country. Through use of book discussions, a speakers bureau, and a reader filled with scholarly articles, the Council and the people of Kansas talked about values and ethics, life and death, grief and renewal. The project was funded with a \$100,000 Exemplary Award from NEH. We got it “just right.”

### *World War I Program in Leavenworth*

A year ago, I attended a program at the University of Saint Mary in Leavenworth, which was the first in a series of programs about World War I. About 80 or so people attended, including townspeople, college students, and retired military men. The topic that evening was the United States' entry into World War I.

We viewed an exhibit, saw some excellent documentary film footage, and heard a presentation by an historian. He talked about President Wilson's decision to enter the war, the public's reaction, and the role of the media.

The elephant in the room was, of course, the war in Iraq. However, not once that evening was our current war or our current president mentioned.

But, as we talked with the historian and among ourselves, and as we discussed leadership, propaganda, America's role on the world stage, military preparedness to conduct war, it was clear that we were doing exactly what we say in our mission statement we want people to do: to use the past to better understand the present and envision the future. That evening, for sure, we got it "just right."

### *Larned and the Santa Fe Trail Rendezvous*

The Council's first grant to the Santa Fe Trail Center in Larned for the Santa Fe Trail Rendezvous was in 1980. I'm pleased to say that the partnership has continued and grown over the 25 years we've been together. It began as a small program, put together and mainly attended, by "Rut Nuts." (trail buffs) As KHC got better at what we do, and the Santa Fe Trail Center benefited from their own experiences, each year the Rendezvous improved. Two months ago, I attended the 2006 Rendezvous. There were 180 people registered, from 37 Kansas towns and 8 states. It was an excellent humanities program. Highly qualified scholars, lively dialogue, an engaged audience. Example: A woman came up to me after one an historian's talk and said proudly, "Oh, his talk was so intellectual, but I understood every word of it!" The Council has a major role as a teacher and mentor of public humanities programs. The Rendezvous is an example of when we got that role "just right."

### *TALK Book Discussions*

Other examples include the many, many programs the Council has sponsored through our TALK book programs. "I didn't like the book ( usually referring to Their Eyes Were Watching God) before the scholar talked about it, but now I just love it. The discussion has really helped me better understand the experiences of Black people. Thank you." We got it "just right."

Or, the father, an inmate in Hutchinson, who participated in our Read To Me program and wrote, "Before this program, when my son would visit me, we used to just whack each other with the books in the visiting room. Now, he sits on my lap and I can read to him. It feels so good. Thank you." Again, we got it "just right."

### *Chautauqua*

Of course, there have been those wonderful times under the Chautauqua tent when we all suspended disbelief and engaged in lively discussion and debate with the famous and infamous from our past.

One summer in Phillipsburg, when the characters included the Founding Fathers, a farmer in a baseball cap (locally called a gimme hat) stood up and asked Alexander Hamilton a question about the nature and purpose of government that rivaled anything found in the Federalist Papers.

Or, in Hiawatha, when the writer Kate Chopin was on stage telling us about *The Awakening*, and Edna Pontellier's (the heroine) own awakening to her sexual desires and passions. It was a fairly warm June evening and all 500 people were cooling themselves with Chautauqua fans. As the story unfolded and the description became more and more sensuous, I noticed the audience was so caught up in the story – perhaps remembering their own awakenings? – that the Chautauqua fans had all but come to a stop. When the scholar completed the monologue, there was a collective intake of breath and the fanning resumed full speed!!

Or, the time in Fort Scott, when John Brown was on stage and chastised the people of that community for their support of slavery during the Bleeding Kansas era. A man in the audience took great exception to Brown's characterization of his hometown and jumped up to take Brown to task, which he proceeded to do rather vigorously, until his wife tugged at his shirt and said, "Sit down you ole fool, that's just a man pretending to be John Brown."

We got it "just right."

## **ODD AND CURIOUS MOMENTS**

There have also been some odd and curious moments:

One very cool, rainy September Saturday morning about 7 am I was driving south on highway 75 to attend the first annual Buster Keaton Celebration in Iola. Not another car in sight, when I came upon some road construction. A one-way bridge governed by a traffic light. It was red when I got there. Being a good citizen and not wanting to meet a semi mid-way across a one-way bridge, I stopped. Waiting for the light to turn green, I looked to the right at the light pole in the ditch and there on the temporary metal box that ran the traffic light, someone had scrawled in large black letters: "John D. Rockefeller is a mean ole man." Click went the automatic door locks. I've never come up with a fully satisfactory explanation for that message. The closest I've come is to think that one of our Speakers Bureau scholars gave such a scintillating talk about the Gilded Age that a member of the audience was inspired to spread the truth about this particular Robber Baron.

Then there was the surreal experience in Abilene! (I have your interest now, cause not many people can use "surreal" and "Abilene" in the same sentence!) KHC and the Eisenhower Museum partnered to present "America in the 50s," a two day symposium about politics and popular culture during Ike's presidency. There were historians and members of the Eisenhower administration. But the most interesting person to attend was Alan Gingsberg, the Beat Generation Poet, author of *Howl*. He read *Howl* to high school students bussed in for the occasion, and though prepped by their teachers, it's my impression that *Howl* (even 20+ years ago) seemed fairly tame to these kids. That evening, we were invited to a buffet dinner at the home of Calvin and Betty Strowig. He was a former state legislator from Dickinson County, and a member of the Museum Board of Directors. After I filled my plate, I walked into the living to find Alan Gingsberg, seated on the couch in the Lotus position! Our hostess, a rather proper matron of a certain generation, was chatting along with Gingsberg as though all of her guests regularly assumed the Lotus Position !

Those stories and others I could share do not compare with the cold, windy, evening I spent standing under a street light in Colby with the then mayor of that fair city, trying to direct board members to the house where we were going for dinner that night. I understand that the calls to the mayor's office the next day were numerous and questioning: "Did I see the mayor with one pant leg pulled up doing a kind of can-can, while a really tall woman looked on in disbelief?!" (Ask Warren Hixson for more on that story).

## **THANK YOU**

I want to thank each of you and others who could not join us this evening for your support and participation in making this job the very best job in the State of Kansas. Thanks also to the speakers for their kind words and the scholars and friends who (to quote Mark Twain) have "entertained and educated us all at the same time."

Especially I want to thank my board members - present and past – for your encouragement and advice, your support and indulgence – as I learned the job -and your criticisms, both stern and sweet, needed on more than one occasion.

I want to thank each of you for teaching me about the humanities and for showing me the value of community – both the physical community of Kansas and the community of ideas and principles to which we are so firmly committed.

As executive director, I am keenly aware that my success depends on the quality of the KHC staff. I would like members of the KHC staff – past and present – to stand and be recognized with a round of applause. Especially I would like to recognize Roberta Gingerich, who was the first staff person I hired, and who taught me most of what I know.

Finally, I would like to salute the future of KHC. Please join me in a welcoming round of applause for Julie Mulvihill, the next KHC executive director.