

Composer Gwyneth Walker Lives Her Dream

Nationally acclaimed composer, Dr. Gwyneth Walker, has won numerous awards and honors, including the Cerf Lifetime Achievement Award from the Vermont Arts Council and the American Choral Directors Association's prestigious Raymond W. Brock Commission. Recently, her home town of New Canaan, Connecticut, declared February 25 to be Gwyneth Walker Day. In addition to that, she is a former Hive and Aloha camper and an Aloha counselor. The Alohas still play an important part in her life. Here is Gwyneth's story, derived from an interview and her website.

In Braintree, Vermont, a short drive from Hive and Aloha, Gwyneth Walker (H57-58, H60-62, *65) lives on a dairy farm, where she joyfully composes music. She has established for herself a unique life in an equally unique setting. Arguably the most prolific contemporary composer in America, she works solely on commission, with bookings at least three years out, and new requests continually arriving. The story of how she grew to be a world-renowned composer actually includes a few Hive and Aloha chapters, so we asked, and Gwyneth agreed to tell about Aloha in her life.

Gwyneth has loved music since the age of two, when she first became aware of a piano playing. She recalls, "My sister was taking lessons, and she played the piano that was beneath my bedroom. I was supposed to be falling asleep and I heard, directly under me, this sound! And it was so exciting that the next morning, when my sisters were in school, I climbed up on the piano and started making sounds. Every day, I got better at emulating what she had been playing, and then I started making up my own things."

When she was five, her parents decided to encourage this talent by giving her piano lessons. "The teacher wanted me to learn to play scales, and I was already making up my own symphonies. I had four lessons, one a week, and it was a battle of wills," she recounts. Finally, the teacher explained to her parents that she did not want to kill

For a fun and educational experience, pour a cup of coffee, settle in, and check out Gwyneth Walker's extensive and generous website, www.gwynethwalker.com.



Composer Gwyneth Walker at her desk.

Gwyneth's love of music by forcing her to play scales, so they should let her be. "Well, that's our Gwynnie," her parents thought, dropping the lessons so their daughter could resume writing musical compositions.

By age six, Gwyneth had taught herself "how to get those notes on the page", and she would invite her school friends home to play her symphonies on toy instruments. "My friends just fit right in," says Gwyneth. "They said, 'Ok, it's Monday. We go to her house and play her piece, and then we can go outside and play.'" In junior high school, her friends began asking her to make arrangements of popular songs so they could sing in harmony. She had

come to understand that music was something others asked her to do so they could perform.

Music followed Gwyneth to Hive and Aloha, where she loved the freedom to pursue so many varied and fun activities. She came to Aloha Camp at age thirteen, bringing her tennis skills as well, which had been honed at New Canaan Country Club (in Connecticut) and the Town Tennis Tournament. Gwyneth describes herself in those years as full of interests and energy, but essentially quiet and introverted, and as unsure about her future as any teenager. As



Gwyneth Walker with some friends at Braintree Farm.

her days and weeks at Aloha unfolded, she remembers many good hours of playing guitar and singing with Kate Merritt (H55-60,A61-64,*65,Trustee 1982-94,95-Present), as well as composing instrumental music and improvising on the piano in the Hale. She also played many hours of tennis. In 1962, the special end-of-summer trip for Aloha's tennis team, (equivalent to the long canoe and long pack trips), took them to the Vermont State Tennis Tournament. "It was fun!" says Gwyneth, who ended up winning both the Vermont State singles and doubles titles for girls 16 and under!

Of her many wonderful memories of campers and activities, what stands out in particular is her tent counselor during her second summer at Aloha, Margie Casselman. Now Margery Casselman Connor (A*61), she and her husband, David, live in Syracuse, NY, and Gwyneth has kept in touch with them all these years. It was Margie who recognized in Gwyneth a kindred spirit, a deep thinker, a lover of nature, who was somewhat reserved and quiet. She accepted Gwyneth for who she was and helped her to sort out what was important in her life, and how to follow her dream.

"Camp lets you be who you want to be," Gwyneth reflects. "I think kids at Aloha accept each other for who they are in summer, and that is different from their home self." She goes on to explain that at home, she struggled

like many girls her age in forming her own identity apart from family guidelines and expectations. "Camp is so helpful in allowing us to become ourselves, distinct from whom our family may have wanted us to be." At Aloha, she could be free to discover herself as an individual, and let her central values develop. Camp creates the environment to encourage the summer self, and the counselors' support helps it blossom. For Gwyneth, her summer of 1961 was pivotal.

Growing up in a loving family that valued education, Gwyneth's had encouragement for her musical pursuits from her mother, who was an opera fan. From her father, who was a physicist and inventor, Gwyneth gained an innovative mind and an aptitude for physics, which she later pursued at Brown University, before switching to music studies. From there she went on to pursue a Masters and Doctorate in music composition at the Hartt School of Music. She admits that her father hoped she would become a physics teacher, but her passion was music, and she feels that her years at Aloha helped her to strengthen her central, musical self.

When she was 15, Gwyneth discovered her family's Quaker ancestry, thus beginning her profound and intense devotion to that faith. "Being a Quaker does influence my approach to music," she explains. "For one thing, I'm practical. You hire me to do a job, and I'll get it done." And Gwyneth lives by the egalitarianism of her faith, looking for the inner light in every person, a part of the Divine. She strongly believes that community choruses and church choirs — and singers at Aloha Camp — are equally as important as professional musicians. Music benefits us all, and everyone deserves new musical works and encouragement to enjoy or perform them.



*Margery Casselman Connor (A*61) and Gwyneth Walker.*

This egalitarian belief is reflected on the shelves of Gwyneth's home, where she works diligently to keep a balance of choral and orchestral music, and to craft pieces that are accessible to lay musicians as well as professionals. Shelves are prominent in almost every room, displaying many of her over 160 works in tidy piles, all neatly labeled. There are also shelves of books, especially of the poetry she reads and rereads, as poems are the textual basis of much of her music. One wall of her living room features shelves of CDs, and, as you might guess, an excellent sound system on which to play them. She plays her arrangement of *Peace, I Ask of Thee, Oh Mountains* (a Camp song familiar to Ohana readers) while we sip Vermont Pure water out of Holstein cow glasses and gaze out her window at the abundant birds on her feeder and the rising fields, inspiration for numerous Walker compositions.

On another living room wall are pictures of her family, the New Canaan Congregational Church of her youth, and the tennis racquet that Billie Jean King used to conduct the premiere in New York City of Gwyneth's now famous piece entitled *Match Point*. This premier and Billie Jean's participation boosted Gwyneth's career as a composer, after she had courageously decided in 1982 to leave her coveted teaching

position at Oberlin College so she could concentrate on composing. Quitting her job was "scary, but I thought it would be scarier yet not to try to live my dream." Her home is ideally suited for concentration, and it reflects her intellectual, direct, and energetic personality, as well as her sense of humor.

She proudly points out the funky black-and-white tiles on her kitchen floor, reminiscent of cows. "It was that way when I came, and I've never changed it." Front and center on her couch is a pillow declaring "I ♥ Tennis". Admitting with a grin that she loves gizmos, she launches her Roomba, a computerized, roaming floor sweeper. A mat in her bathroom proclaims, "We serve the finest California wines. Did you bring any?"

Gwyneth's whimsical humor is found in many of her compositions. You hear the sounds of milking in one of her

most popular works, *Three Songs in Celebration of the Family Farm*, featuring a Holstein calf named Clematis. In *Match Point*, a musical tennis game, the conductor wears shorts and uses a tennis racquet instead of a baton, and bouncing, colored tennis balls replace the drumsticks. She recalls singing *The Banks of the Ohio* at Camp, in which a jealous man throws his girlfriend in the river because she won't be his bride. Traditionally, that is the end of the story, but Gwyneth thought that was odd, since most women can swim, especially if they've been to the Aloha Camps. So she composed an arrangement with an extra verse. The woman says, "Well, that's fine...that's enough of that relationship...I'm going to swim away", and she does, whereupon the unhappy man leaps in and swims after her. Since Gwyneth asks that choruses don bathing caps and goggles when performing this verse, the audience is usually in hysterics. One conductor declared, "This has to be the last

thing on the program, because there can't be anything after that!"

Last summer, Gwyneth generously provided an evening program at Aloha, sharing her music and her muse, and answering the campers' and counselors' probing questions. She actually is no stranger to Camp these days. When she moved to Braintree in 1983, she wasn't thinking about its proximity



to the Camps, so she was quite delighted to discover how easy and how beautiful the drive to Fairlee is. Driving by Hive on her first trip back, she could feel her heart lifting, as everything looked just the same. Now, she visits Aloha regularly, to hear the music, smell the pine trees, and enjoy her standing tennis game with Nancy Pennell. Gwyneth will certainly return this summer, perhaps with tennis racquet and guitar in hand.

Above: Gwyneth Walker with officials in New Canaan, Connecticut, who proclaimed February 25th "Gwyneth Walker Day" in their city.