

A Brief Reflection on the Life and Career of Trudy Griffin-Pierce (1949-2009)

John W. Olsen, University of Arizona

It's difficult to determine when, precisely, Trudy Griffin-Pierce began to make her significant impact on anthropology at the University of Arizona. She arrived in Tucson in 1970 as a graduate student, having just completed a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree in printmaking at Florida State University. Like most first-year graduate students, Trudy navigated the complexities of a new curriculum and social environment in an unfamiliar institution while trying to determine the specific nexus of interests and opportunities that would ultimately define her career in anthropology. Fortunately for all of us, including Trudy herself, she quickly realized that the happy combination of her Native American heritage, exceptional artistic talents, and warm, outgoing personality resonated in positive ways with the UA scholarly community and she settled in to what was to become her life-long devotion to the university, Tucson, and, through her husband, solar astronomer Keith Pierce, Kitt Peak National Observatory.

When I became Head of the then Department (now School) of Anthropology in 1998, Trudy had already been an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Arizona for a full decade, offering a rich suite of undergraduate courses in both anthropology and art history with titles including "Native Peoples of the Southwest," "American Indian Art History," and "Ethnology of the Southwest." During the fall semester 2001, Trudy stepped up to the plate and voluntarily developed a senior capstone course for Anthropology majors that she coordinated and refined for nearly a decade until the time of her death. Looking back over archived student evaluations of these and Trudy's other courses extending back to the late 1980s, I am struck by the consistent common themes that emerge, none of which are in the least bit surprising. Students remarked on Trudy's accessibility, her supportive and compassionate approach to mentorship, and her ability to contextualize her own life experiences and scholarship in ways that others could readily appreciate and learn from.

If I were forced to select just one adjective to describe Trudy – choosing a theme that permeated all her conscious endeavors – it

would be artist. Obviously, Trudy was a consummate graphic artist in a variety of media ranging from serigraph and pen-and-ink to dress-making and mosaic design. But, in Trudy's case, the term "artist" may be applied in the broadest possible sense of one who practically applies science in the creative endeavor. She was a wordsmith of epic proportions – no mere writer; one who consistently maintained a daily chronicle of her life throughout her adulthood that runs into many tens of volumes. This magnum opus – Trudy's legacy, in many respects – is much more than a mere diary which, for most of us who even bother, is often a sterile, business-like recording of daily events. Trudy, on the other hand, essentially created a longitudinal auto-ethnography that is at once reflexive and interpretive; a narrative that bears witness to Trudy's emotional and intellectual evolution as an individual, contextualized against the backdrop of fin de siècle America.

At the time of her death, Trudy's written works in progress, destined for publication in a variety of professional journals, document the broadening of her own realm of intellectual inquiry to include increasingly biocultural topics. Draft articles at various stages of completion include titles such as "Beyond the Scalpel and the Silver Bear: Bridging the Chasm between Biomedical Research and 'Biocolonialism'," "Cultural Barriers to Research with Elderly Native Indians," "When Anthropologists and Native Americans Work Together," and "The Unique Challenges of Alzheimer's Disease Research with Native Americans and Alaskan Natives," among others, which collectively describe a breadth and depth of inquiry that were at once a logical extension of Trudy's long-standing interests in Native American ethnomedicine and an expansion of her scholarly pursuits into new spheres.

Although I would have far been too embarrassed to have admitted it to Trudy's face, in this more distanced and reflexive context, I can unabashedly state that one of the highpoints of my professional career was sharing with Trudy in 2008 the fact that, as department head, I was made aware of her promotion to Associate Professor with tenure several days before she herself received official notification. The expression on her face, which could only be described as beatific, was quintessentially Trudy and yet, even at the time, I knew I was witnessing a very special event; the physical manifestation of Trudy's realization that she had accomplished a major life goal. From that moment until the very last time I spoke with her just a week or ten days

before her death, every interaction I had with Trudy centered on the future. With tenure and promotion to Associate Professor in hand, she was planning the next stage of her professional career – and coming to grips with Keith’s passing – in the healthiest possible way: by focusing on her ongoing contributions to her chosen profession and her various communities.

We are all diminished in various ways – professional and personal – by Trudy’s untimely passing and each of us who knew her carries with us impressions of her influences on our ways of thinking and interacting with others. That we miss Trudy, deeply and profoundly, is an objective reality. What we can take comfort in is the fact that her legacy is so firmly established in both the material and non-materials realms, through the enduring objects and documents she produced and the emotional and intellectual impacts she leaves behind.