

Honoring the Life of Kundry Willwerth

April 28, 1932 - June 1, 2017

— Gudrun Willwerth & Lynn St. Pierre

Kundry was born in Heidelberg, Germany as the second and youngest child in her family on April 28, 1932. Her father was a doctor and her mother a nurse who ran a medical practice out of their home. Kundry and sister Christina grew up as children of anthroposophists and members of the Christian Community.

Kundry was seven years old when World War II broke out. Recovering from tuberculosis, she spent the war years in the country at her nanny's family farm and was sheltered from what was going on. After the war, she attended a preparatory high school that taught Latin and Greek and even Hebrew. Graduating Gymnasium, she took a year

at the seminary of the Christian Community but ultimately decided against becoming a priest. Her parents hoped for her to study medicine, but Kundry was ready for new adventures. At the age of twenty-one, she traveled to the United States and went to university in Missouri. She fast-tracked through college with high mathematics skills and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1954. When money ran out and she could not continue with a Master's degree, she took a job in applied mathematics in Washington, DC, where she lodged at the YWCA. On a sightseeing tour of the city with one of the other girls from the "Y," she met the tour leader, Lyn Willwerth. Because he had grown up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and had learned Pennsylvania Dutch from his classmates, he spoke German. This opened the way to a connection between the two. In 1957 they became engaged and they were married in Germany the next year.

Kundry and Lyn settled in Auburn, Alabama, where Lyn was pursuing his postgraduate studies. Their first child, Gudrun, came along a year later in 1959. They then moved to Chicago where their next two children were born: Adam in 1961 and Ilian in 1962. Their fourth child, Roland, was born much later, in 1973, when they were living in Spring Valley. Meantime Lyn and Kundry were active in the Anthroposophical Society and the Christian Community. From Chicago, the family moved to Sacramento, California, where Kundry got her first teaching job in the Waldorf kindergarten. This became the start of her life's work in Waldorf early childhood education. A further move took them back east to Spring Valley, New York, and early childhood work at Green Meadow Waldorf School. Kundry brought her creativity and innovations to her classroom. Instead of graham crackers and milk for snacks, she cooked soup and baked bread with the children. She got rid of all the toys and used stones, pinecones and pieces of wood as building blocks. She also had some frames built that the children would cover with colored cloth to make houses,

ships, dollhouses and whatever else they imagined and created together. She once said that all children really need is blocks and a sandbox and they will be able to play endlessly. Today her way of holding a Waldorf kindergarten is the norm.

The family lived in Spring Valley for nine years, and there Kundry had berry bushes and her first large vegetable garden. She preserved the produce, making jam and syrup with the children's help while Lyn read aloud to them all, sitting around the kitchen table.

In 1977 Lyn and Kundry bought the farm on Webb Road in Cortland, New York, close to Ithaca and Cornell University where Lyn worked in the agriculture department. What prompted this move? Lyn wanted to farm and Kundry wanted culture. They worked the farm and vegetable garden and pressed cider from the apple trees each autumn. Kundry processed the milk from their cows, making butter, yogurt, and cottage cheese, which they sold at the farmers market. Kundry continued growing the garden through all their years in Cortland, and after Lyn's death in 2009 she started a CSA, growing vegetables and berries for herself and five others using biodynamic methods. She invited the Waldorf school to help make cider each fall.

Nearby colleges in Cortland and Ithaca meant that there were always concerts and plays to attend, especially when family and friends visited. Music was an important part of Kundry's life. She played both lyre and recorder. Daughter Gudrun can still see her mother practicing the lyre while the family's baby parrot sat on her head or on the lyre frame and plucked at the keys. The family always played recorder at Christmas, and Kundry played in a recorder ensemble during her last years. But singing was perhaps the most important musical expression for Kundry. Inspired by a visit with family in Germany, when Kundry and Lyn came home, they established a morning ritual of singing folk songs in two- or three-part harmonies before breakfast. They also sang in the car on road trips and at Christmas and Advent. Lyn and Kundry

always sang in the community chorus and church choir wherever they lived. Kundry continued to sing until the end.

Lyn and Kundry also started a puppet theatre called Magic Garden Puppets. For several years they performed at the Renaissance Faire in Sterling, New York. Other yearly performances were a Christmas performance at the 1890's house in Cortland, and at the Ithaca festival each June. Kundry made the puppets herself and put a lot of effort into making faces with great detail and figuring out how to make them move as realistically as possible. In this she found creative expression as a true textile artist. Besides puppets, of which she designed various types, she created banners for the puppet shows and tapestries for all her grandchildren. She also experimented with quilting tea cozies, felting, making dolls, and knitting animals. Her last project was a set of knitted egg warmers made to exactly resemble various breeds of chickens.

Kundry started a small Waldorf kindergarten, Hillside Children's Garden in Ithaca, out of which the Waldorf initiative movement in the area was born. She published a book of translated pentatonic songs and another book of her circle games, both of which became part of the curriculum in the Waldorf kindergarten teacher training.

A big moment came in 1992, when Kundry attended the international early childhood conference in Dornach, Switzerland, where she wanted to take a practical workshop. She

chose Klara Hautermann's Ellersiek gesture workshop in German and fell in love with the games. She wanted to bring them back to her classroom, which meant translating them into English. Thus began her twenty-five years of dedication to translating the large body of work created by Wilma Ellersiek. She completed five books and most of the sixth book on elementals, which will be completed by colleagues. Over the years, Kundry gave countless workshops and training courses not only in the United States but in Germany, Mexico, Brazil and Switzerland. Kundry presented at numerous kindergarten conferences around the United States and continued teaching and training teachers until her final year. Kundry prepared and mentored two teachers in the Ellersiek work who became "certified" by the former International Ellersiek working circle in Stuttgart, Germany—Heather Van Zyl from Australia and Lynn St. Pierre in the United States.

Kundry passed on June 1, 2017. Her life and her life's work have inspired thousands of Waldorf educators who had the privilege of working with her. She lived her long life full of the arts and in service to the Waldorf early childhood world. She was remarkable with her bright light, endless energy, strong will, and terrific sense of humor. Her work lives on in all of us who work with young children and have been inspired by her joyful, playful presence. She will be with us and with the children always. ♦