

Interviewer's Note:

Fran Houston has lived on Peaks Island since 2003 and has been writing her monthly Island Times column, For the Love of Peaks, for almost that long. Before coming to Peaks, Fran earned an electrical engineering degree from the University of Tennessee and worked at Martin Marietta and Kimberly Clark. She also spent a year in the woods in a cabin with neither running water nor electricity. Living with bipolar disorder, chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia, Fran has nevertheless been able to document the stories of the people she calls her "lovies"--elders whose love for the Island she shares.

When I learned that Fran was planning to end her column and move on to other projects, I wanted to give her a chance to tell her own story. So I handed the microphone to Fran and asked her to talk about her life, her love of Peaks, and her work.

RK: You've been writing the "For the Love of Peaks" column for how long?

FH: Let's see. 2003 is when I did the exhibit. I got excited in the fall before then by an exhibit by Jerry Robinov called "Faces of the Mind." He took fifty black and white photographs and had these people write stories of their experience with illness, schizophrenia, bipolar and depression. And it was like a flame lit me up from the inside out because here I have been loving these old people and sitting at their feet and listening to their stories forever. And I think within a week or so I went to Kristen Chalmers of the Gem Gallery and asked her about this. And then as it went along, I asked MaryLou Wendell and Kevin about advertising for the show...you know, getting people interested in the show and offering their stories by having a column.

RK: So could you back up a little and talk about how you started interviewing these people?

FH: Well, first Priscilla Webster asked me to sit with Virginia Paton. And I sat with the Judge. And with Doug MacVane. So I, you know, I began to see the history of Peaks Island through their eyes. See the love of the island through their eyes and feel it—feel it inside me.

RK: How did you find these people?

FH: They would either find me [or] I would find them. I would be at the café. I would ask. It was all a flying-by-the-seat-of-my-pants. When I did the exhibit, it was only fifteen people. And everybody said, "Where's the book?" Oh, man, then I had to do a book.

RK: You've been on Peaks for eight years.

FH: I've always wanted to live in Portland. I came here to dog sit in July. Generator shack [for the Ferris wheel] opened up. What a great way of living in Portland. I took pictures through the plastic in the wintertime and in the summertime I boiled to death because it had no insulation.

RK: And so you've been writing the column since 2003. What was that process like?

FH: Each story was different. Some are year-rounders forever, some are summer people, some have long histories, some have short histories. The common thread is an intense love of the island and that is why the name of the book.

RK: Did you have any trouble getting people to talk?

FH: No, as an interviewer, I keep my mouth shut. I didn't want me in it. I wanted it to be them. I had three hours to work with a day. I was sick. I'm still sick. You know, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, mania and depression. I struggle all the time.

RK: So you had to find a way of kind of using your strength when you had it for this project.

FH: Friends helped me. Friends held me up.

RK: What else would you say you've learned from these elders? What have they given you?

FH: They taught me how to live life. Me, at fifty years old—I have a chance to live my life differently. I can live in the moment. I can honor my flesh and its limitations. I can be awake to what is real. I can speak my truth. I can love like I've never loved before. I can be kind. That is what they taught me. And that is what I want to say to other people. Wake up now and not wait until you're eighty years old to do that—to tell your story. Make your story now and then tell your story now, not wait until later. Life is precious. You can't wait till tomorrow to tell somebody that you love them. Throw away your to-do list. That is not real—that is not what matters most.

RK: What do you see yourself doing next?

FH: I have like seven books to write. I want to write [about] my German mother. My great grandfather was an original Edison pioneer. He worked on helicopters and trains and he was bipolar, like me. So I have that and a life centered book and my dog book, my children's book.

RK: Want to talk about your website, too? I know that's something that's ongoing.

FH: The website is www.wildhair.me. Its mission is to empower the differently abled to achieve creative endeavors...for them to do art of any sort—it doesn't have to be produced—but for them to just engage creatively. "Imperfection is perfection."

RK: And you see yourself staying on the island?

FH: Yeah. Yeah.

RK: I know what you mean about feeling connected to a place.

FH: One day...one day I actually went outside and laid down flat on the earth, stuck my face in the grass until I had wrinkles of the blades on my face and I could smell the green. I'll never forget.

She considers herself a satirist, a humorist, of sorts. The out of sorts and socks kind. And laughs and snorts like a horse warmly. She invites you to friend her on facebook, see her poems on her notes, and her photography. She can be seen walking through the streets of Portland with her pen and pad in hand, writing ever furiously and happily ever after.

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