

# University of Alaska Scholars Honored

Below are profiles of the three University of Alaska scholars who were recognized for their distinguished service to the humanities at the 2010 Governor's Awards for the Arts and Humanities. The awards represented a partnership of the Alaska State Council on the Arts, the Alaska Humanities Forum, the Fairbanks Arts Association and the Alaska Arts and Culture Foundation.

## DR. GORDON PULLAR

Department of Alaska Native and Rural Development,  
University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

In 1985 Dr. Gordon Pullar toured for the first time the Smithsonian Institution's Kodiak collection housed in the Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. He was astounded by what he observed: carved wooden masks, traditional clothing, model kayaks, and other cultural items that spoke volumes of a rich heritage many had thought was forever lost.

"I had never even seen pictures of these types of items nor did I know anyone in Kodiak that had," Pullar recalls. "There were many Kodiak Natives that thought that our culture was dead and that we had nothing to show for it."

Viewing the collection inspired Pullar, a Sugpiaq Native, to help establish the Alutiiq Museum, a renowned Kodiak institution housing 7,500 years of Alutiiq heritage, artifacts, history, and traditions.

Pullar is a key activist in the artifact repatriation movement

as well as a staunch advocate for perpetuating and celebrating Alaska's Native cultures.

Although born and raised in Bellingham, Washington, where his mother had moved from Kodiak to attend college, Pullar harbored an interest in his Alaska Native cultural identity from an early age.

"I hoped to attend college directly after high school but could not muster the finances to do so," Pullar says. "I first worked cleaning cars in an auto dealership and did other jobs, one of which was the unpleasant task of cleaning chicken coops at a large chicken farm for which I was paid \$1.25 an hour. I was very relieved when I was able to land a steady job at the local paper mill."

Pullar's dreams of attending college and finding a job in a professional field remained with him. He worked nights at the mill, hit the books by day, and obtained a BA in Anthropology from Western Washington University in 1973.

After a labor dispute closed down the paper mill, Pullar landed a job with the Small Tribes Organization of Western Washington. Though it paid less than factory work, the new job afforded him the opportunity to learn more about Native issues. Pullar never looked back.

In 1981 the University of Washington recruited him for a new Tribal Administration graduate program. His mentors were Roberta Wilson, an Oglala Lakota scholar originally from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and Pullar's uncle, Karl Armstrong, Jr. "Karl was very involved in the land claims movement in Kodiak and was one of the founders of the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA)," Pullar explains. "I considered him an important mentor and he taught me a lot about the American political system as well as Alaska Native politics.

After obtaining his Master's degree, Pullar moved to Kodiak and served as president of KANA in 1983. It was during his tenure at KANA that he first visited the Smithsonian Institution. Later he became the chair of the Smithsonian's Arctic Study Center Steering Committee.

Pullar also played an instrumental role in the success of the Larsen Bay repatriation case, in which the remains of an estimated 1,000 Alutiiq excavated in the 1930s were returned to Kodiak in 1991 from the Smithsonian Institution for reburial.

Pullar began teaching political science at the University of Alaska Kodiak campus in 1989 and has been teaching Rural Development since 1993, serving as director of the department from 1996 through 2009. Grateful for the attention received from mentors during his formative years,



## 2010 Recipients of the GOVERNOR'S AWARDS for the Arts and Humanities:

- **Sonya Kelliher Combs**, Anchorage, *Individual Artist Award*
- **Tom Manning**, Juneau, *Arts Education Award*
- **Barry McWayne** (posthumous), Fairbanks, *Individual Artist Award*
- **Nome Arts Council**, Nome, *Arts Organization Award*
- **Gordon Pullar**, Anchorage, *Humanities Award*
- **Paul Rosenthal**, Juneau, *Lifetime Achievement Artist Award*
- **Bill Schneider**, Fairbanks, *Humanities Award*
- **Ron Spatz**, Anchorage, *Humanities Award*
- **Martha Lalla Williams**, Anchorage, *Native Artist Award*

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Pullar says that he relishes most the role of mentor he has played in the lives of his students.

For example, Pullar was invited some years back to a conference on Inuit studies in Copenhagen. He sent in his stead Sven Haakanson, Jr., then a student from Old Harbor. The young scholar later obtained a Doctorate in Anthropology from Harvard, is currently the director of the Alutiiq Museum, and was awarded the famed MacArthur Foundation “Genius Award” in 2007.

“I have gained a lot of satisfaction from seeing the successes of many of the Native students I have advised since working at the University,” Pullar relates. “These students have attained high level positions with corporations and organizations that make me tremendously proud. When one of them refers to me as a mentor I nearly burst with pride. They are the ones that accomplished what they set out to do and I am privileged to have had small roles in their journeys to success.”

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## DR. WILLIAM SCHNEIDER

Curator of Oral History, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library,  
University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

**D**r. William Schneider is best known for his work documenting the oral histories of Alaskans. These personal stories help define the many communities he has visited during nearly four decades devoted to preserving Alaskan history and heritage.

It all began, Schneider says, with a visit to Beaver, a community founded as the river terminus for freighting mining supplies up to the gold mining operations at Chandalar Lake, about 180 miles north of Fairbanks, near the Brook Range.

Although a small community with less than 100 residents, Beaver’s multicultural population included descendents of Japanese, Eskimo, Gwich’in Athabaskan, and Koyukon Athabascans. The tiny Alaskan town piqued the young anthropology student’s interest and became the subject of his doctoral dissertation for Bryn Mawr College.

“I was trying to find out how Indians and Eskimos came to live together in the community,” Schneider recalls of that first visit in the early 1970s. “People were very clear with me that they did not want to be put under a microscope but that they were interested in their history. I decided to try to learn the individual histories of the people who came and settled in the community. This launched me into collecting personal histories as a way to understand the community.”

Schneider was appointed to the faculty of the University

of Alaska Fairbanks in 1980. He created the University’s Oral History Program the following year. The collection has since grown to hold more than 10,000 audio and video recordings relating to Alaska’s rich history and heritage.

Schneider was a Fulbright scholar in South Africa in 1997 and received the Alaska Historical Society’s Contribution to Alaska History Award in 2003.

He is also the author or editor of numerous publications considered invaluable to the field of Oral History. “Oral tradition is built on multiple telling and cumulative processing by listeners who hear the story in different ways. It is constructed both over time and each time a story is retold,” he writes in *...So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*.

“Loss is inevitable, but artful use of the past to speak to the present doesn’t end when an elder dies. In fact, the way we generate personal narratives and the way we use them to create meaning for the moment is as important as their preservation for the future.”

One of the most innovative projects that Schneider helped create is Project Jukebox, an online trove of Alaska history, captured through film, maps, photos, audio recordings and more. What began with a project on digitizing audio in the mid 1980s has evolved into an interactive program that brings history to life.

With a few clicks of the mouse one can see and hear information about topics such as Denali Mountaineering, Reindeer Herding, or the Dalton Highway. Click on Pioneer Aviators of Alaska to watch a biplane land on Lake Iliamna in the 1930s, or a Sikorsky Dragonfly helicopter navigating Anaktuvuk Pass in 1950. Taped interviews abound of legends such as Frank Whaley explaining the origins of the term “bush pilot” or Bob Reeve recalling countless adventures during the early years of Alaska aviation.

The Alaska Humanities Forum continued its support of Project Jukebox with a \$7,000 general grant for 2011.

“There have been lots of growing pains but the Web has given us yet another dramatic way to make the programs more accessible to a worldwide audience,” Schneider explains. “We are always cautious and recognize that we are not preserving ‘culture’. We are preserving the record of expression that is so vital to understanding cultures.”

Schneider says he is most proud of his work with graduate students and helping to broaden the concept of oral history. “I hope I have created more understanding of how people create meaning through stories and personal accounts,” he says.

Karen Perdue, President and CEO of the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association, has worked with Schneider to collect oral and film histories on mental health services in Alaska.



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“As we have seen our elders/founders/pioneers pass away, we are often thankful that Bill has been there to record their impressions and preserve them for students, scholars and the general public,” says Perdue. “Someday when we look back on Bill’s body of work and contributions, we will say Alaska is a much better place because of the foresight Bill Schneider had to capture our thoughts in our words.”

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## RONALD SPATZ

Dean of the University Honors College, Professor of Creative Writing and Literary Arts, University of Alaska, Anchorage.

**C**reative Writing and Literature professor Ronald Spatz is best known as the executive editor of the preeminent literary journal *Alaska Quarterly Review*. Yet during his acceptance speech at the 2010 Governor’s Awards for the Arts & Humanities, the founder and dean of the University Honors College made clear his passion for excellence in higher education as well.



“Alaska, like the rest of the nation, is now at a critical juncture,” he said. “We absolutely have to get it right on education. Alaska’s students must not only graduate, but they must be able to compete nationally and internationally if they... are going to help our nation maintain its leadership in the world.

“Alaska is missing key funding for honors education, the undergraduate research and scholarship training students need to get to the next level. We have to be able to provide more access to excellence. We must find a way to fund opportunities for our next generation of leaders.”

Spatz, a 1973 graduate of the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, joined the UAA faculty in 1980 and assumed increasingly responsible roles as director of the university’s M.F.A. and B.A. Programs in Creative Writing and as department chair. In 1980, Spatz and another new faculty member, James Liszka (now UAA Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Philosophy, as well as AKHF board chair), co-founded *Alaska Quarterly Review*, which has since become “one of the nation’s best literary magazines,” according to *The Washington Post Book World*.

Accolades garnered by the journal are legion. Most recently, *The Best American Essays 2010*, published last September, honored three essays that originally appeared in *AQR*. The collection, edited by renowned author Christopher Hitchens, includes “The Elegant Eyeball,” a piece by ophthalmologist John Gamel that was published in the Spring & Summer 2009 issue of the biannual journal. The

*Best American Essays 2010* also lauds two other works that were first published in *AQR* – “In a Moment” by Nancy Lord and “Memento Metro” by Priscilla Long – as Notable Essays of the year.

The *Best American Mystery Stories 2010*, edited by top-selling thriller novelist Lee Child, includes “Maynard,” a short story by Mary Stewart Atwell from the Fall & Winter 2009 issue of *AQR*.

Last October, *The New York Times Book Review* raved about *You Don’t Look Like Anyone I Know*, a memoir published by *AQR* author Heather Sellers. Her book had its genesis in “Tell Me Again Who You Are,” a work of creative nonfiction that first appeared in the Fall & Winter 2006 issue of *AQR*.

The Fall & Winter 2010 double issue of *AQR*, its fifty-third, features “Storm Pattern,” a 42-page essay by science writer Don Lago that, according to an online review from the 49 Alaska Writing Center, “weaves together multiple narratives to explore the idea of the beginning of the universe.”

One storyline tells of the astronomer Edwin Hubble visiting the Grand Canyon in 1928 to check out the site for an observatory; because little is known of this visit Lago creatively recreates it. Another thread tells of the Navajo “storm pattern” rug design, which is said to represent the Navajo creation story. A third part of the weave is Lago’s own story of visiting the same places, researching the origin of the rug design and eventually purchasing one of the rugs.

“Not particularly interested in astronomy or Navajo rugs? I guarantee you will be after reading this essay—or that you will at least experience your mind expanding outward, like the universe, when you follow Lago’s exploration into ways of thinking about the beginning of the world—and to connecting principles and images across time and cultures,” reads the 49 Writers review.

“The universe’s long quest for patterns became brains searching for patterns in events, patterns on the earth, patterns in the sky. The master weaving that began with the creation of the universe became the weaving of a rug symbolizing the creation of the universe.”

Last summer, the 49 Writers blog posted a lengthy interview with Spatz in which Alaskan writer Deb Vanasse asked him what distinguishes *AQR* from other literary journals. “*Alaska Quarterly Review*’s character and national/international focus separate it from the pack,” Spatz replied. “*AQR* is Alaska’s flagship literary magazine. It is informed by Alaska – the place and people and cultural traditions. It has connected Alaska to the larger literary world for 28 years.”

Spatz is also the founder of LitSite Alaska, UAA’s innovative online learning community that, along with its companion website for children, *Alaska Kids*, promotes “literacy, cultural diversity, and well-being throughout Alaska.” ■