

Remembering Grace Paley

By YVONNE DALEY



Vermont Arts Council

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IT ALWAYS SEEMED appropriate that the road to Grace Paley's house in Thetford Hill went straight uphill. Paley never shied away from struggle.

She had been diagnosed with metastasized cancer long before being named Vermont State Poet in 2003 (serving until 2007). But just as she retained her optimism about the innate goodness in each human despite decades of protesting against war, nuclear proliferation and a whole host of social injustices, she continued to accept requests to speak at schools, libraries, writing groups, bookstores, nursing homes and village greens across the state until a few months before her death at age 84 in August.

Paley loved bringing poetry to the people. She considered it a political action.

Inevitably, even when she was in considerable pain, she'd appear bright-eyed, that wonderful halo of white hair surrounding her beautiful face, and quickly engage as many people as possible in conversation about their lives, their reading or writing, their concerns — and their struggles.

"People say about me, she lives between Vermont and New York," she once said. "What is this living between? You can't live between. I live in Vermont and I go to New York."

She loved both places. It was her husband, writer Robert Nichols, who brought her to Vermont. His family homestead was in Thetford and the two traveled here from New York City regularly until moving full time to that home on top of a hill in 1988.

No one would ever mistake Paley for a native Vermonter. Her voice — both in person and in her short stories — remained rooted in the Bronx of

her childhood and the Greenwich Village of her parenting and organizing years.

Vermont, however, made its way into her poetry.

At the time of her selection as state poet, Alexander Aldrich, ex-

ecutive director of the Vermont Arts Council, said the selection committee had been unanimously impressed by the accessibility and surprising depth of Paley's work. Aldrich noted that Paley's poetry not only reflected Vermont values but also expressed her deep appreciation of the state's natural beauty and the character of its residents.

It wasn't surprising.

Paley was a people collector, a story collector, and Vermont provided her with wonderful material. She was enchanted by both the notion of and the practice of town meeting. She likened the recycling center to the union hall. And she loved that humble cabin where she had entertained so many good friends and watched her grandchildren play with fire trucks among the stacks and stacks of books on the living room floor.

I visited her there after the publication of "Just As I Thought," a collection of essays, musings, letters and other writings spanning her long life as political activist and writer. The phone was ringing off the hook with requests for interviews.

"Let's go rake," she said. So, out we went into the late winter yard. Nichols was busy repairing a birdfeeder that, like the rest of the yard, had been battered by winter. It wasn't Vermont at its loveliest. But, using just the tip of the rake's tines, Paley gently uncovered a daffodil poking up through the debris.

"Ah, another survivor," she said. ❀

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