

THE ROBESONIAN

Nancy Fields Strickland: Her unusual path to the Museum of the Southeast American Indian

Darlene White Natale For the Robesonian - June 21, 2023



Nancy Field Strickland, director and curator of the Museum of the Southeast American Indian in the Discovery Center that includes, a hands-on learning space.

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The Museum of the Southeast American Indian has many engaging displays that illustrate life of some of the regions first inhabitants.

PEMBROKE — She wore a striking beaded necklace for this interview that immediately signaled her cultural connection.

Nancy Strickland Fields was appointed Director and Curator of the Museum of the Southeast American Indian in January 2017. Fields is an engaging and passionate woman whose unusual journey to this post began during her childhood visits with family in Robeson County from her home in Charlotte.

“So as a kid, I was just obsessed with my history as a native person and especially here in Robeson County. Inexplicably, or maybe there is rationale to it, I just felt these sorts of stories in the shadows— I felt a presence in the shadows that I couldn’t tangibly put my finger on. But even as a little girl it felt very palpable,” Fields recalled. She said she was sensing a vibration in Robeson County, “There are other people. There’s another existence—almost like another plane,” she said.

Fields explained that the more she learned about who she was as a Lumbee Indian, her family, and the Native peoples in this area, her feelings became more defined.

While growing up in Charlotte with her mother, Fields said she was very fortunate to have participated in the Indian Education Program with Rosa Revels Winfree as her Indian education leader. It is a federal program designed to empower Native youth academically, culturally, and as individuals.

“Rosa actually was just a powerhouse of a of a human being, and she was awarded the Order of the Longleaf Pine by the governor,” Fields said. She said Revels was just incredible and reinforced to the group of students that they had a responsibility to their people.

“That this wasn’t just programming designed for us, to help us. It was to empower us to give back and very much in the spirit of service, and accountability to your people in conduct, and resourcefulness. And so those kinds of virtues kind of carried forward,” Fields said.

That Indian educational program nurtured her desire to work with native peoples, improve the quality of their lives, and learn more about their shared history. She said a charter school very close to UNCP still has a viable Indian Education program, the Robeson County Indian Education Office.

Fields said that in the late 80s and the early 90s she wanted to be a history teacher. "And my mom didn't really full on discourage me, but she said, 'I want you to do something more, you know.'" She said her mother's input provided a different sort of track on things. She said she found herself a single mom at 20, and her mother died within three years.

Fields faced issues of being a single mom, not making a lot of money, while doing administrative work with a lot of insecurities. "The reality of homelessness was always right around the corner. The reality of not having enough food to eat or gas in the car or just kind of paycheck-to-paycheck— like how was I going to make it without any resources and it was terrifying," Fields recalled. A friend she was working with heard of a job opening at Metrolina Native American Association in Charlotte for a fiscal officer.

FINDING HER WAY

She applied for the position and immediately hit it off with the Director, whose daughter had been a part of the Indian Education Program in Greensboro. She got the job, and through her endeavors, discovered that she wanted to do programming.

"This is it. Like this is what I wanna do. This kind of engagement with community, that's meaningful. And I did that for a couple of years, and we did really wonderful dynamic things and we did a lot of youth-focused programming, community-based programming," Fields said.

She recalls struggling to make \$7.25 an hour in the late 90s and early 2000s. At 29 years old, with a ten-year-old daughter, she was determined to make a change. On a trip with students to Washington, D.C., they visited the National Museum of the American Indian. She met a Lumbee man who told her about the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. He suggested she attend, get a museum studies degree, and come to the National Museum to work.

"And the way it just rattled off his tongue, so easy, right? And I was like, well, I have a home and I have a kid and I'm working in Metrolina, and I thought there's no way. And I knew that getting a degree was going to be instrumental in making more money and even pushing further into more of the work that I wanted to do. And so, it just stuck with me, and I talked to my boss, whose name is Letha Strickland, about it and she said, 'you should do it, what do you have to lose?' She's like, 'you're struggling. You should go after this.' And so, I applied, and I got in and I thought this is absolutely crazy!" Fields said.

Fields packed a U-Haul with the essentials, and she and her daughter journeyed to Santa Fe, New Mexico for the next steps on her arduous journey. There she identified what she wanted to do with museums.

"I learned about museum education and that was really my passion and being able to do the programming, working with kids, working with lifelong learners, adult education, those types of things." She said she met some incredible people who were transformative in her life and helped with her educational and my career goals. "Along the way, I connected with Helen Maynor

Scheirbeck (Deputy Director of the National Museum of the American Indian)," Fields said. Schierbeck, a Lumbee, said that she wanted Fields to come and work for her at the NMAI—the place where another Lumbee lighted the spark.

"I mean the National Museum of the American Indian is the Smithsonian. Now to get a job at the Smithsonian, you don't, no one can get you in, right?" Fields recalled. But Schierbeck convinced her to apply and told her if she got the position, she could stay with her in D.C. until she got on her feet.

"Very generous. And so, I applied. I got an interview. I went to DC and stayed with her and like, I think I graduated on a Friday. I was in DC the next week. I did a short stint with the Folklife Festival and then I was hired like a month and a half or two months later and that really started my career." Fields explained it was different from the typical track. "You know finishing up high school, and then having a child, losing my mother, facing some really extreme circumstances, really scary. I mean that still sticks with me today and then you know embarking on this journey."

Fields thoughts wandered back to her mother and her advice. "She thought I could do more than be a teacher. Right? And not that there's other models of teaching, but for a long time, that's all that we were allowed to be." Fields recollected that her mother settled in Charlotte to escape Jim Crow, Robeson County.

"It was very difficult for Native people here (Robeson County), my mother was a little bit more fair skin. So, she could go to Charlotte, and no one really knew that she was Indian. And she could experience life in a very different way that wasn't oppressive. It didn't involve hate. It didn't involve violence against her both as, as an Indian and as a woman. And there were opportunities for her as a woman in Charlotte, she became a hairstylist. And essentially, she was an independent, self-employed woman, which was incredible in the 1950s. And something that women here, for the most part, could not do," Fields said.

"And it was kind of a little bit of a fearful thing that I was so emboldened to be Indian, where she was forbidden to be Indian, it was dirty, it was bad, it was negative. You were worthless. All of dominant society is saying those things— are implying those things to you. So, I'm at the other end of the spectrum. And it was very unnerving for her. It was a lot, but she was happy about it," Fields said of her mother's ambivalence.

Her mother's health turned downward, and Fields moved back to Pembroke and lived with her sister to be nearby. Her mother was experiencing congestive heart failure and enduring dialysis and loss of limbs at the age of 61. One evening in an unguarded moment, her mother said she would be dead the next week.

"I always thought I would have more time. That I will be able to do more things that I would get to retire and get to experience life. And then I limited myself in the things I allowed myself to do.' And she's like, 'I just always felt like I would have more time and I don't.' And she said, 'I've been wrong about a lot of things that I've told you. All these big ideas. You have all of these places that you want to go all of these things you want to do, that I've kind of discouraged you about, if it's safe, and you have the money, do it. Take the big trips, you know, take leaps of faith about these jobs that you want to do or any of these things, do it live your life enjoy it,'" "

Fields remembers her mother telling her. She said that consent was the greatest gift she could have received.

She said her appreciation of history helps her at 50 to more fully understand. "But you know, racism is such an evil, dark thing. Oppression and colonization, all of these kinds of banners, are such really difficult things and the lived experience through those things really shaped a person. And that's what shaped her(mother's) life," Fields said. "So I see my life as an extension of hers, and my grandmother's and my great grandmother's, and on and on and on, who are buried in here all around me, you know, and that's that what I feel, I feel my ancestors, I feel my people all around me, I feel their love and their energy and I feel, you know, I'm just a link in a chain, right?"

Fields said her granddaughter is spending time this summer with her, and her life is going to be vastly different.

"It's just an extension of our experience. And it's all here. It's all here in Robeson County. And I think that we forget, you know, the many definitions of this place and the meaning of it. And, you know, there's common ground, of course, that we gather around the beauty of the river, the landscape, shared histories, separate histories. But it's all very empowering and just beautiful," Fields concluded.



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