

**Della Keats – Self Taught Traditional Healer**

**Call number of interview: 85-124**

**Series title: Chinook Radio Programs, KUAC FM at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.**

**Radio Host: Paula Schuler**

**Episode title: Della Keats – Self Taught Traditional Healer**

**Date of interview: There is no date and time stated for the recorded interview. Recording is broken up into two sessions for Chinook Radio Broadcast. The recording takes place in the home of Jane Pender in Fairbanks, Alaska.**

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**Date of summary creation: May 29, 2014**

**Summary:** The two broadcasted sessions are personal recollections of a Noatak Eskimo woman by the name of Della Keats. Della is considered to be a traditional healer in the Arctic and throughout Alaska. Della became a self-taught traditional healer via means of a book she obtained during her early childhood school years, through her life-long personal experiences, and by working side-by-side with traditional doctors. Della has saved many peoples' lives, saved hundreds of babies, and even has the ability to prevent some miscarriages. Della recounts some of the events that took place in her lifetime, the joy she feels when she has saved someone's life, and her travels across Alaska to help others in need. For these travels, Della had to come up with her own sources of funding. Nevertheless, later in her life, some of her medical travels were funded by the Norton Sound Health Corporation, and by Manilla, the non-profit arm of the NANA Corporation. In the second half of the broadcast, Della goes deeper into detail describing how she can prevent miscarriages, correct breach babies inter-utero, and how she can unwrap a cord from a baby's neck prior to its birth. Lastly, Della talks about the birth of her son who was born 4 ½ months premature and weighing in at approximately only three ounces, and what she had to do to help her son survive.

**Transcription:**

**0:00**

**Wind blowing, Seagulls cawing in the background**

**0:12 Woman opens (Narration is back and forth between a woman and a man. Both parties are unknown).**

Chinook its a warm wind, it's a changing Wind. Chinook, a program for and about Alaska Natives. Chinook Echoes is looking back into Native Heritage, how things are and how they got that way. Chinook Patterns is information. Issues that affect

the patterns of Alaskan life. Chinook Profiles: Portraits of people, places, events, but mostly the people who are Alaskans.

**0:55** Paula Schiller

Welcome to Chinook Profiles, I'm Paula Schiller. This program begins a special series. I'll be talking to Della Keats, one of the most revered women in the Far North. She is a traditional healer. The first time I saw her was while she was giving a talk to the Tanana Chiefs Conference Health Aides. Her favor preceded her, and the conference room was packed with eager listeners. The next time I met her was at Jane Pender's house in Fairbanks. We sat in the Pender living room, half of which is for people, and the other half, well... it's for the birds.

**1:24** High Pitched Noise in the Background (begins around 1:20)

**1:32**

**Paula:** This is a little off of the subject, but what kind of noise was that pinging noise?

**Jane:** That is a noise that is made by Pheobe, who is an African Grey Parrot. And as near as we can figure out... (noise being made) that sound... is a bell sound. Which she learned, because one of the things she does for fun, is to hit her beak against the metal water dish, and it makes a ringing sound, and that's the only thing that we can figure. (Jane laughing) that makes her do that.

**2:10**

**Paula:** That... that parrot is in the home of Jane Pender who just introduced the parrot, and Jane is also going to introduce us to Della Keats who is a traditional healer and Jane could you just tell us how long you've known Della and what traditional healing is about?

**Jane:** Well, Della and I have been very good friends and closer than friends for about 20 years. And, uh... we have traveled together up the Kobuk River and up the Noatak River and to Point Hope; and we have camped out together, and we have talked together, and we have cared about each other for all of this time.

**2:53**

**Jane:** Della is probably the most respected woman in the Arctic World. In the Alaskan Arctic World, and possibly beyond our borders also. She is a traditional healer, a person who knows a lot about the way the body works and how to cure things that go wrong, and how to prevent problems.

**3:22**

**Jane:** For many years, she traveled everywhere in the Arctic at her own expense. Um, sometimes that was pretty difficult because she didn't have all that amount of money. But, she had learned how to deal with many of the problems that... that happened to people, and they would call her to come to them, and very often they didn't have enough money to send to her, and so she would somehow raise it and go to them.

**3:54**

**Jane:** In more recent years she has been associated with the Norton Sound Health Corporation which has helped to subsidize her somewhat; and Manilla, the... the NANA, um... the non-profit arm of the NANA corporation also has been of some help to her.

**4:15**

**Jane:** She utilizes herbal remedies, and manipulation, and her own thorough knowledge of anatomy in order to bring about her... her cures. She works very closely with public health service doctors and she is very often the first one to see an ill patient. And when she is unable to help, she can very often persuade people to come on into the hospital. Which is sometimes quite a problem, uh not really for Eskimo people, but for everyone. They need someone like Della to help them make up their minds.

**5:01**

**Paula:** Is what Della does, a gift... a gift that only she can possess or is it something that can be learned?

**Jane:** Well, I personally think that Della possesses a gift, but she is also succeeding in teaching it to other people, she's passing on her knowledge. I... but she has an extraordinary skill I believe.

**5:28 (Voice Over Narrative of Paula)**

The skill that Della Keats possesses is not hard to sense when you watch her describe how she heals people. She unselfconsciously shows how to replace dislocated joints, and how to turn unborn babies around in their mothers' wombs, but, to only listen to her is a little frustrating. For one, English is not the language of her thoughts or of her healing. She works with her hands and feelings. But oddly enough, she began her life's work from knowledge learned from a book she read while she was a little girl in Noatak.

**5:57**

**Paula: How did you learn about healing people?**

**Della:** Well, the first place I didn't think that... that I learned. I have a book when I was in school. About a physical, about our body. So then, the book was so interesting to me. And I...

when I got it, I never forget it, I put it in my mind, and then when somebody need help, like injured people, or burned, or something else; I could try to help them the way I learned from the book. Nobody teach me. There's no one to teach me, I got it myself, by my own experience.

**7:03**

**Paula:** Why do you like helping people?

**Della:** I sure like to help people, even right now. I'm getting old alright. But, I appreciate to help... like my own body. My neighbors everywhere, even I don't know the people. The people are just like me. I hate to see how people heal, I hate to see it.

**7:40**

**Paula:** When... do you remember the... the first... person you helped?

**Della:** Right. I deliver a woman. Cause nobody have to help her around and uh... we were heading down to the boat, and we were in the camp, and her husband have to come and get me for helping her cause she's having a labor; even I don't know how to deal with the baby, so I... I got it a little from my book that time.

**Paula:** How old were you.

**Della:** Well, uh... I was 16.

**8:24**

**Della:** And the first one, a man came to us too by that time, and um... he got this big black ring right by front of his... uh... wrist, and I take care of it. Good thing I was learned from my book, and I stopped the blood bleeding. He would die, and I save him, the first man I save. He would die if I wasn't there.

**9:00**

**Paula:** Did you....

**Della:** Take back to village, yeah.

**Paula:** Sew his arm?

**Della:** No, I didn't uh.. put stitch to it, but my needle is over there. I would sew it put stitch to it, my... my own hair. I would put stitch, but nobody to help me, nobody... I call for help alright, while I was holding it.

**Paula:** mm...hmmm

Della: To bring my needle case over there. Nobody come in, so I wrapped it. With um.. good thing I brought um... [muslin ?] white cloth. So um... I don't know how many yards I use, maybe three yards, I use... after I use... I use [super ?] sack, flour sacks to it and wrap it and finally I have to tie it right on the upper bone of where his, of his arm right on the middle.

**10:00**

**Paula:** To stop the blood.

**Della:** To stop the blood, holding it. And then when he um... kind of get faint, we have to take back to village. We could take a one day. His own dogs and his partner's dog. Three mens was with me, and I take him back. Put his feet to my, next to my belly, you know let him... get him warm. Holding, watching him same time and I save him. The teacher there, he changed the bandage, dressings. But he said he's doing pretty good, and didn't get infected and it stopped. And he's alive for long time, for long, long time. Finally, he died when he get old.

**11:04**

**Paula:** Were you ever afraid you might not be able to help somebody?

**Della:** Right, on if I get really nervous I'll... we would let him die. I have a feeling to help him. Tried to help him, good thing I read from the books. He would die right there, loose blood you know.

**Paula:** You, you know more than what you read from in books though.

**Della:** Right, uh... everything by my own experience, by uh... I do... and pass it, everything. I learned... by my own.

**11:52 (Voice Over Narrative of Paula)**

From her own experience, beginning at 16 with the delivery of a still-born baby, and the saving of a man's life. Since then, Della has delivered hundreds of babies, and saved many lives. Her techniques are simple, natural and according to the many doctors who are her friends and allies, based not on superstition but on sound medical principles. We'll hear more from Doctor Della in another edition of Chinook Profiles. I'm Paula Schiller, and this has been a production of KUAC FM at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

----- **END OF FIRST BROADCASTING** -----

----- SECOND BROADCAST BEGINS -----

**12:26**

**Wind sounds.... Seagulls cawing in the background.**

**12:38**

Chinook its a warm wind, it's a changing Wind. Chinook, a program for and about Alaska Natives. Chinook Echoes is looking back into Native Heritage, how things are and how they got that way. Chinook Patterns is information. Issues that affect the patterns of Alaskan life. Chinook Profiles: Portraits of people, places, events, but mostly the people who are Alaskans.

**13:20**

Welcome to Chinook, I'm Paula Schiller, and this is the second part of the series with Della Keats. Della is a traditional healer, she's from Kotzebue but she's famous throughout the Arctic for helping people both in body and in spirit. She grew up in Noatak and learned about the human body from a book. She delivered her first baby at the age of 16 and now she is almost 72 and has not only delivered hundreds more babies, but she has learned how to prevent miscarriages, turn babies around to avoid breach birth, and even to unwind the umbilical cord from around a baby's neck before birth, thus solving the most dangerous childbirth problems, without aid of x-rays or any fancy monitoring equipment. She does it by feeling. As she put it, she has good hands.

**14:03**

**Della:** I deliver I don't know how many maybe hundreds.

**Paula:** A hundred babies?

**Della:** Right. Twins... babies, and I save the mothers... lot of time. I help... that was beating was gonna have a miscarriage. When I touch the baby and set it right, I save 4 babies.

**Paula:** How?

**Della:** They were bleeding to loose it.

**Paula:** Oh...

**Della:** And I stop the bleeding, and put the baby way it use to be. When each um... way down in, inside the pelvis, a woman easy to get miscarriage. And when you happen, this is the way I

always help pulling the wombs up from here, from here, and then when you able to touch it, ya... hook it up and pull it easy.

**Paula:** Pull the baby back up?

**Della:** pull it easy back up, and uh... push, push the intestines, large intestines down there so it won't go back down. I save three, three babies, they even named of my Eskimo name.

Paula and Della laughing together.

**15:48**

**Della:** I could even turn a baby, that, that a mother carrying it upside down.

**Paula:** You can turn the baby?

**Della:** Turn the baby down. Sideways, wrongway.

**Paula:** hmmm....

**16:08**

**Della:** I could take the cords right around the neck before the baby was born. Right now, when I get back home, pregnant ladies will check, again maybe. I always check the baby. It's better when you check it when it's uh... 6, 7 months. When it's around 3, 4 months, I always get to touch the baby alright, but anyway, when I try to save the baby, I'll save it.

**Paula:** mm....hmmmm

**Della:** Its kind of pretty hard to touch a woman when their baby is not really normal. I hate to bust the water. You have to work on it careful.

**17:19**

**Della:** I myself have premature baby.

**Paula:** You did?

**Della:** 4 months, 15 days. Too bad I didn't take a scale with me when we go down to the camp. Maybe it was about 3 ounce.

**Paula:** A baby 3 ounces?

**17:43**

**Della:** A baby. It was so----- small. Cause it in just dar (?), this is so big to him. Less than 8 inches, maybe around, around 6 inch. Cause when he was three months old, I measure his, uh...

the girth try to make a mukluk. So it was too big for him. He's still and he's here, when he was three months old, and his leg right here.

### **18:23 (Voice Over Narrative of Paula)**

Here Della was showing me that the entire foot of her baby born 4 ½ months premature was smaller than her thumb from it's tip to first knuckle, and that the baby's leg was smaller than her index finger. I can't imagine another woman being able to keep such a baby alive, in a tent, above the Arctic Circle in 1931.

### **1843:**

**Della:** I keep him alive by my own experience. I put it right, right on the middle of the tent, or the house, make a little box and use hot water bag for the mattress. Not real hot, not real cold... cool. But you have to watch that, look after it every time. And put um... wrapped him with um... down quilted little blanket, lined with a flannel seat (?), never use um... clothes. When I put clothes to it, always get cold easy. And put it in a box, and put the air over here and keep it in a box all the time, and you have to turn it all the time cause when he stay too long, his head always kind of get crooked after (unknown word?) standing.

**Paula:** Cause it was so soft.

### **20:04**

**Della:** Soft. Everything soft. You have to hand it good. And I fed him with a dropper (she pronounces as: dlobber). I have no way to give him bottle. Never think of. I have to fed him from my breast. I squeeze it to a teaspoon.

**Paula:** mm... hmmm

**Della:** And then use a dropper and fed him. So he have to wait for long time till he's wiry (?), and use boiling water to drink every day. Use water every day, give him with a dropper.

### **20:58**

**Della:** Little tiny baby I have. Right and you know what, right now. He's working down at school, and he's maintenance right now.

**Paula:** He's all grown up.

**Della:** Not too big all right, kind of salt (?). I was so surprised how I get him alive. But the only thing I get tired. Tried to let him move all the time with a syringe. Give him syringe all the time with rubber, just squeeze it.



**Paula:** Oh.

**Della:** Always let him move. Can't move himself, and when I get tired, I take him to hospital. Doctor was so surprised at it and he advise me to give teaspoon of butter. Take the salt out from the top, give him a butter every day. So I did. Now he could start moving himself. I'm afraid when he get big, he will used a syringe all the time (enema-?) all the time. That's what I thought. I was so scared. I don't want him to loose his intestine, his large intestine. That's what I thought myself, and I take him to hospital, and he advise me to drink two classes in an hour. To make my breasts weaker, I have a rich breast. His stomach can't work too much.

**Paula:** hmmm...

**Della:** He was so small. Anyway he's alive. (Della laughs, Paula follows suit). He's around uh... he was born 31, now uh.. age 40...48.

**23:08 (Voice Over Narrative of Paula)**

Della Keats, traditional healer. For Chinook, I'm Paula Schiller and this has been a production of KUAC FM at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

----- **END OF SECOND BROADCASTING** -----

----- **END OF RADIO BROADCASTING** -----