

# DEATH STILL HEALING HANDS TRIBAL DOCTOR'S SKILL KNOWN STATEWIDE

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Thursday, March 13, 1986

Author/Byline: RICHARD MAUER Daily News reporter ; Staff

Edition: Final

Section: METRO

Page: B1

What they remember most about Della Keats , besides her laughter and good nature, are her hands.

They were so strong they could move the powerful muscles of a man who worked all his life. They were delicate enough to feel the walls of an organ inside a person's body. They were so exacting they could move an umbilical cord wrapped around the neck of a baby inside a mother's womb. And they were expressive, telling a story all their own as she spoke.

Keats , a natural healer, the Eskimo tribal doctor for the Kotzebue area, and a lifelong teacher, died Tuesday at age 79 after a bout with cancer.

"To me, she was indescribable," said Auggie Hoffman, a longtime friend and companion on many of her village trips. " Della is one person who will be hard to replace."

Keats was known and trusted for years in the villages of the Northwest Arctic. In the past decade, her fame spread throughout the state. More recently she became a sought-after speaker at national gatherings of nurses, osteopaths and other health professionals. The University of Alaska honored her seven years ago by putting her name on its summer math and science program for Native students interested in health careers.

But to her friends, associates and patients in the Kotzebue area, she was just Della, or Puyuk, her Inupiaq name.

"From the time she was 16, she provided health care to the people of her region," said Kathy Johnson, director of the University of Alaska-Anchorage Native Health Career Program. "Some of that was before the Indian Health Service came into being. She delivered babies, she did minor surgery. If she found someone on the tundra with a gash, she'd sew 'em up. She developed methods of turning breached babies."

Keats attended her first birth at age 16. She was the only woman at her family fish camp when the call came from upriver that a woman was in labor. Keats raced to the woman, and, following her instructions, delivered the child.

Later, Keats turned her skills to her own family when one of her sons was born prematurely. Doctors offered little hope for his survival and Keats had little knowledge about premature infants.

"She took a box and suspended it from the ceiling in her hut, where it was out of the drafts," said Johnson. "She spent three months taking care of him. She was exhausted. The only person who relieved her was her mother.

"The baby is in his 50s now," Johnson said.

For years, she has taken up to 16 arthritis sufferers on twice-yearly trips to Serpentine Hot Springs on the Seward Peninsula. Hoffman remembers one man who had spent decades of traditional medical treatment for his legs, all to no avail. After a trip to Serpentine with Keats eight years ago, his suffering stopped, she said.

While Keats worked for no pay in her early life, she spent years on the staff of the Maniilaq Association of Kotzebue, the non-profit arm of the Nana Regional Corp.

"I love to teach the people," she said in an interview several years ago in a book published by the Alaska Women's Commission. "I don't want to keep something secret by myself. I'm an old lady now, but from the beginning, I always ask anything that I could learn. Momma used to tell me to teach people what I've done. I tell them not to forget what they learned from their grandparents."

Maggie Greene, the director of Maniilaq, remembers what it was like to be helped by Keats .

"When I was carrying myself, I think I was in my ninth month, I was having pressure carrying my baby. I went to the hospital here and told them about the problem I'm having, but they didn't help. I went to Della , and what had happened was my baby's elbow was pressing down in my back area. She just moved the baby's arm to a better position."

Greene said Keats ' hands were always moving. It was something that struck audiences at her nursing seminars, and will continue to draw the attention of people who watch the videotapes she has left behind.

"They were strong, too," Greene said.

Hoffman always wished she could do what her friend could do. Keats would try to show her. She'd tell Hoffman, "Feel here. Feel the stomach."

But it didn't work. "All I could feel was skin," she said. "My hands just didn't have the touch she had."

Keats learned from elders and medical books, but experience and her own sense were her main guides. When asked where her knowledge and wisdom came from, she'd say it was from her good lord above.

"And I believe that, too," Hoffman said.

Keats believed a good sense of humor, a smile and proper living were the essentials of good health. "She seemed in total harmony in life," Hoffman said.

She was less happy about her marriage, which she told friends was arranged by her family.

Her people will remember her for the guidance she gave. "She was never afraid to speak up," Greene said. "We'll picture her happy face, her laughter."

Even at the end, on her deathbed in the hospital in Kotzebue, she was trying to make others feel better.

"She accepted it really well," Greene said. "Della was one strong lady, until the very end. Her family was with her, her friends, a number of us who had worked with her, and it got to the point where she was comforting us. She was that kind of lady, a real strong lady."