

# THE THIRD CHAPTER

AN UNUSUAL INHERITANCE LEADS TO AN UNEXPECTED THIRD CAREER IN CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND FILMMAKING.

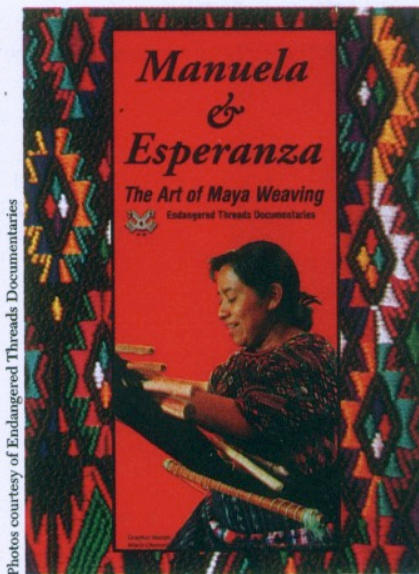
BY PAUL VITALE

**I**n her latest book, *The Third Chapter*, sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot challenges seniors to pursue passion, risk and adventure in the 25 years of life after 50. My wife, Kathleen, and I have been following Lawrence-Lightfoot's suggestions, though the ceiling of 75 may have to yield!

For almost 30 years I served with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Ecuador, Brazil, Peru and Washington, D.C. Before

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*Paul Vitale was one of the first Returned Peace Corps Volunteers hired by USAID, joining the Foreign Service in 1966. He served in Quito, Rio de Janeiro, Lima and Washington, D.C. After retiring from USAID in 1992, he joined the University of Oregon's Department of Planning, Public Policy and Management as an adjunct professor. In 2001 he and his wife, Kathleen, returned to their home state of California, where in 2004 they co-founded Endangered Threads Documentaries, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization that documents endangered indigenous art forms.*



Photos courtesy of Endangered Threads Documentaries

retiring from USAID, I was detailed to the Peace Corps to develop an urban program strategy. Somehow, in the midst of moving around Latin America and raising three children, Kathleen also pursued a career in journalism, photography and publications, retiring from IBM about the same time I left USAID.

We then moved to Eugene, Ore., where I became an adjunct professor at the University of Oregon. There Kathleen picked up a video camera for the first time, bought an Apple computer with video-editing capabilities, and produced several art-related documentaries for the Uni-

versity of Oregon's Asia Art Museum.

In 2001, when Kathleen's mother, Rachael Gould Mossman, died, we inherited the family home in Vallejo, Calif., as well as a 700-piece collection of hand-woven textiles from around the world. While looking for a repository for the collection, Kathleen came in contact with scholars and museum personnel at the family's alma mater, the University of California at Berkeley, who wanted the collection.

## FOCUS

During the yearlong process of documenting the collection for the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Kathleen was encouraged to develop a film on indigenous weavers in Guatemala for an upcoming museum exhibition. About the same time, I filed the paperwork necessary to establish a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit named Endangered Threads Documentaries.

### **An Adventure in Cultural Preservation**

ETD's purpose is to produce educational films about endangered indigenous art forms, especially weaving in Guatemala and Ecuador. I continue to handle the endless paperwork, the orders, the logistics in the field and all things administrative and diplomatic. Kathleen is the CEO, as well as the lead photographer/videographer and documentary editor. More than a dozen volunteers, including two interns, have pitched in over the past six years.

In pursuit of footage, we have spent 145 days of the last five years in Guatemala, visiting 55 communities and filming more than 100 indigenous Maya between the ages of 8 and 80. We also spent a month in Ecuador filming weavers. All the documentaries — three completed to date and one scheduled for release in early 2010 — are available through our Web site at [www.endangeredthreads.com](http://www.endangeredthreads.com).

In 2005, ETD released "Splendor in the Highlands: Maya Weavers of Guatemala," which introduces viewers to 22 weavers from indigenous communities. That film was used to attract donors and grants to fund production of "A Century of Color: Maya Weaving and Textiles," a survey of styles and designs of Mayan clothing over 100 years in Guatemala. The documentary takes examples from the Hearst Museum's Gustave Eisen Collection made in

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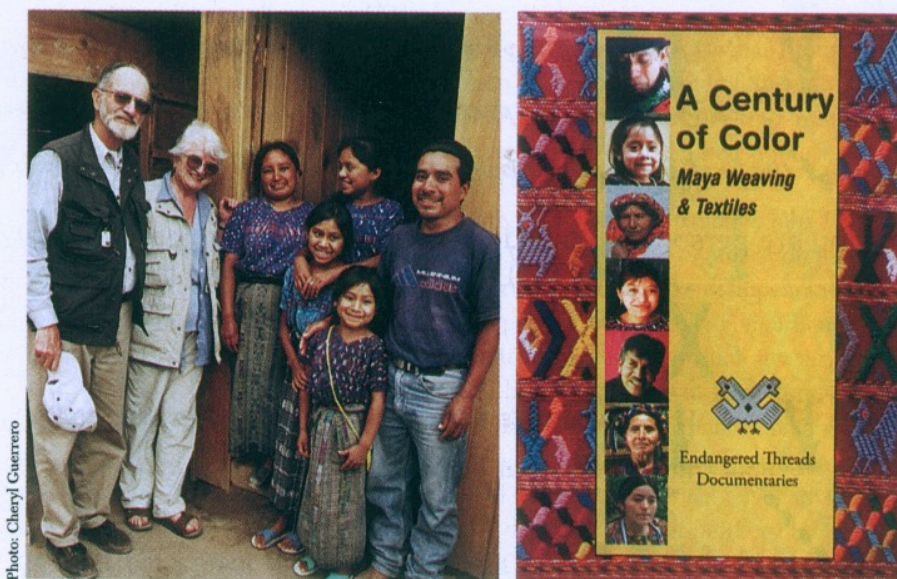
1902 and follows through to present-day footage of huipils (blouses), skirts, belts, pants and headdresses.

The 56-minute film shows the resplendent color and ample talent of Maya weavers. Tying and dying techniques in the ikat style provide some of the more unusual footage. "Century" premiered in 2007 at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco in a special program for the museum's Textile Arts Council. It was also screened at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in New Mexico and at the Hearst Museum in Berkeley.

The current Mayan textile exhibition at the Hearst Museum, "Traje de la Vida" ("Suits for Life"), includes a continuous 30-minute loop of "Splendor in the Highlands" and ETD-produced loops on "Scenes of Guatemala" and "Languages of the Maya."

### **Recording Secrets of the Past**

Our latest documentary, "Manuela & Esperanza: The Art of Maya Weaving," premiered at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archeology and Anthropology in April 2009, in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition, "Painted Metaphors: Pottery & Politics of the Ancient Maya." Endangered Threads Documentaries also



*Above left, Paul and Kathleen Vitale in Panajachel, Guatemala, with the Panjoj family. All females in the family are weavers. Above right, "A Century of Color" DVD cover.*

## FOCUS

produced a continuous loop for the exhibition on backstrap gauze weaving, an ancient Mayan textile art form still practiced in rural Alta Verapaz, Guatemala.

"Manuela & Esperanza" focuses on two backstrap weavers, one in Chichicastenango and the other in San Antonia Aguas Calientes, who accepted the challenge of weaving a huipil on-camera during a three-month period. The two master weavers expertly share secrets of the art of backstrap weaving at its finest and most colorful. They also offer touching insights into their own lives and hearts, as they struggle daily to support their families and keep their culture alive.

"Splendor" and "Manuela & Esperanza" were both selected for screening at the American Anthropologists Association's Society of Visual Anthropology's Annual Film Festival. All ETD documentaries are produced with both English- and Spanish-language narrations, and

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are therefore useful in a wide variety of educational programs.

We've received grants from the Puffin Foundation of New Jersey, the Augustino de Rossi Foundation of Massachusetts and numerous donations from private supporters. In addition to the Web site, our DVDs are available through gift

shops at the Smithsonian, the Hearst Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum, among others.

Our next project, "Saving the Weavers: Small Assistance Programs for Women and Children in Highland Guatemala," will be released this year. Work is well under way for subsequent documentaries on picb'il (ancient gauze weaving) in Guatemala and Mexico, agave fiber (maguey/cabuya) weavings of Guatemala and Ecuador, and the knotting of wide borders on flecas (shawls) found in a region around Cuenca, Ecuador.

Long live Chapter Three! ■