



Kay Gott Chaffey, left, is pictured with HSU dance leader Barbara Mason. from “Celebrating Dance”

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Kay Gott Chaffey joyfully dances at a local beach. Chaffey sometimes took her modern dance classes to the beach, where they became models for Tom Knight’s photography classes. from “Celebrating Dance”

During her life, Kay Gott Chaffey boldly flew the great blue skies, adventurously traveled the world and gracefully soared across dance floors.

Along the way, Chaffey — who lived in Humboldt County for more than 50 years — influenced many people around her, leaving a legacy that will surely live on for years to come.

Chaffey — born July 18, 1920 in Idaho — died Aug. 21, 2017, in Oregon. A family organized memorial service took place Sept. 30 in Medford. And now, her Humboldt County friends will be holding a celebration of life Nov. 5 from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Arcata Veterans Memorial Building, 1425 J St. Everybody is welcome.

“This is open to everyone, because there are so many people ... she influenced — such a wide range of people,” said Donna Clark of Eureka, who

first met Chaffey in the early 1970s at what was then known as Humboldt State College.

Beginnings

Chaffey — who learned to fly airplanes before she learned to drive a car — attended the College of Idaho after high school before dropping out to enter the Civilian Pilot Training Program so she could get her pilot's license. In 1942, with World War II escalating, Chaffey — now a licensed pilot — was recruited for the Women Airforce Service Pilots program. According to her obituary in the Times-Standard, Chaffey flew 17 different types of fighter planes during the remainder of the war — from P-51 Mustangs to B-25 Mitchells.

“Basically what they did, they flew the planes that were being produced in the factories to the bases and, in some cases, she even trained the young male pilots,” Clark said. “She was really passionate about that. It was a really important part of her life.”

Once the World War II ended, Clark said, Chaffey returned to college, obtaining a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree. Along the way, she — and others in the WASP program — received a Congressional Gold Medal of Honor for service during the war.

Humboldt State

In 1950, Chaffey was hired as a physical education assistant professor at Humboldt State College, where she taught health education, archery, tennis, badminton and related classes.

Then, Chaffey was asked to teach a dance class.

“She realized she needed to expand her knowledge, so she headed to Mills College (in Oakland) over the Christmas holiday to start training,” Clark said.

Chaffey went on after that to attend other workshops and classes with master teachers throughout the country, including dancer/choreographer Eugene Loring and Vyts Beliajus, a founding father of the folk dance movement. Over the years, Chaffey taught modern, ballroom, square and folk dance at Humboldt State — always making sure to give students a well-rounded education.

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“What she did, which was so great, she'd talk these people ... into bringing their dance companies to Humboldt,” Clark said. “We started getting outside talent that normally would have never have found their way up here ... She recognized that fact that students here didn't have the financial ability to just run off to the Bay Area ... so she would really do her best to bring people up here or to sponsor kids to go expand their horizons.”

In 1963, Chaffey met her husband, Keith, who was a local schoolteacher. The two shared a love of dance and enjoyed traveling together. And, when they went on trips to Peru, Sweden, Italy and other locales, Chaffey always collected textiles and folk costumes from the countries she visited, according to her obituary. Then, when she returned to her classes at HSU, she'd share the items with her students to further enhance their understanding of the customs and cultures related to the dances they were learning.

“She always brought things back for the students to see ... She always incorporated letting us know about the culture, the costumes and the traditions. It wasn't just learning the dance, it was being immersed into everything.”

Shortly after arriving at Humboldt State, her obituary says, Chaffey started a local tradition that folks still enjoy today. She introduced her students to maypole dancing.

“She would have this May Day festival on the Quad, where we would have maybe six maypoles and we'd be just dancing around,” said Clark, who attended Humboldt State from 1970 to 1975.

“When I arrived, I had no confidence in my ability to do anything physical at all. I was a confirmed klutz,” said Clark, a botany major who was encouraged by a persistent roommate to go check out one of Chaffey's dance classes.

“I was totally entranced. I signed up for beginning folk dance the next quarter — and I just kept dancing from there,” said Clark, who still dances today.

“This is such a huge part of my life. It was such an amazing gift,” she said. “Because of Kay’s influence ... in the Peace Corps — I was in Malaysia — I joined up with some other volunteers and we had square dance classes for Malay people in our area.

“When I came back,” Clark said, “I started looking around and I started doing contra dancing and ballroom dancing, and then I found they still had the folk dance club from HSU, so I started going to the folk dance club. Eventually, we realized we had all aged out and we only had a few students that were actually coming, so we decided to just have a natural evolution and ... we re-formed as a club on our own.”

Folk dancing

The Humboldt Folk Dancers was born.

“I’ve been active in Humboldt Folk Dancers ever since,” Clark said. The group meets Fridays at either St. Alban’s Episcopal Church or Redwood Raks in Arcata and also performs annually at the Humboldt Artisans Crafts & Music Festival at Redwood Acres in Eureka.

“We dance to recorded music the second through fourth Friday ... at St. Alban’s at Sunny Brae,” Clark said. “The first Friday of every month, we have live bands play for us at Redwood Raks. We have different groups — Chubritza, the Ethnics and various combinations of musicians that play for us. That’s a testimony to Kay.”

She added: “There are so many people who went on to continue to dance that are still dancing, including myself.”

Other interests

Chaffey — who lived in McKinleyville — had many other interests and affiliations as well. She was an active birder and a member of the local Audubon Society. She was a member of the 99s, a local women’s pilot group, and kept up her pilot’s license for years after World War II.

“Because she maintained her pilot’s license even after the war was over,” Clark said, “she was recruited again to fly relief missions during the ’64 flood.”

After retiring from HSU in 1982, Chaffey also started writing, penning four books and nearly completing a fifth. “Women in Pursuit: Flying Fighters for the Air Transport Command” was published in 1992. “Hazel Ah Ying Lee, Women Airforce Service Pilot” went to print in 1996. She wrote “Celebrating Dance: Three Decades at Humboldt State” in 2000 and “Flying the ’64 Flood” a few years later.

In 2004, Chaffey — then 84 — moved to Medford, Oregon, to live at the Rogue Valley Manor retirement home.

“She (and Keith) had planned to move there together, but unfortunately, he passed away,” said Clark, who visited her friend at her new home.

“... Within months of moving, everybody knew Kay,” Clark said. “She did talk about her pilot days and people were crazy for her.”

Remembering

Clark returned again to Medford last month to attend a family memorial service for Chaffey, who passed away in August at age 97. And, members of the Humboldt Folk Dancers remembered their mentor and friend Oct. 6 with a folk dance celebration and maypole dance.

Still, the dancers knew Chaffey affected people well beyond the local dance community — and were eager to give everyone an opportunity to remember Chaffey and celebrate her life.

“We wanted to make it more available to the whole community, because she wasn’t just important to those of us who dance, but also to these other groups,” Clark said.

The event — set for Nov. 5 from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Arcata Veterans Memorial Building — will begin with social time.

“We’re requesting (everyone) bring finger food. We’ll have pictures and other mementos around the room for people to look at,” Clark said. “We’ll have a slide show of her pictures that her family is letting us use.”

About 3 p.m., there will be a toast and then guest speakers will talk about how Chaffey impacted their lives.

“Wes Chesbro was a dancer with Kay way back when he was student. He agreed to speak,” said Clark, noting that at least one of Chaffey’s nephews will probably be talking, too.

The last hour or so, the event will open up for dancing.

“There will be a gathering together of local musicians,” Clark said, “playing some of Kay’s favorite music — and we’ll folk dance.”