



KATHERINE SIVA SAUBEL:

A NINETIETH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

Text by Beverly R. Ortiz, Photos by Ira Nowinski

THE DAY WAS OVERCAST. Later the rain would fall. But nothing could dampen the incredible heart, joyousness, and deep emotion that permeated the ninetieth birthday celebration of respected Cahuilla elder Katherine Siva Saubel, held at the Highland Springs Resort in Cherry Valley on Sunday, March 7, 2010. The celebration's large tent overflowed with the warm and spirited conversation of more than two hundred family and community members, friends, and colleagues who journeyed from across the state and beyond to be with Katherine on this special day.

The festivities opened with the uplifting and energetic Bird singing of Michael Mirelez from Torres Martinez, Steven Estrada from Santa Rosa Reservation, and Aaron Saubel from Los Coyotes. The three men studied under, and sang with, Katherine's late brother, Alvino Siva, comprising his original group. This was the first time they had sung together since Alvino's passing. About the Bird songs, lead singer Michael Mirelez later told me:

We were so happy and honored to sing for Katherine. We sang to make that day as special and joyous as we possibly could for her. This is what we use Bird for today. The beauty of the music and dance brings people together to create the kind of joyous moments that make life worth living.

Katherine's nephews Derek and Marc Zahler were the primary event organizers. Her nephew Kevin Siva cooked some of the food; potluck contributions and purchases provided the rest—all ample and nourishing, including beef, chicken,

and vegetable dishes. Katherine's niece, Barbara Noles, prepared the acorn, which was thick and satisfying, leached and cooked to jelled perfection. Alice Kotzen arranged for the huge sheet cake, which included the words "Happy Birthday, Katherine" in Cahuilla, written above a lovely photographic image of this remarkable woman. Raymond and Phyllis Rosetta traveled with their family from Santa Domingo Pueblo in New Mexico to make fry bread, theirs being among the best that Katherine has ever tasted.

The day's program began with a loving photographic tribute to Katherine's life and accomplishments. Max Sternjacob created this slide show with images and songs selected by Kevin and his wife Emili. The latter included Susan Boyle's melodious and inspiring rendition of the particularly fitting song, "Who I Was Born to Be," as well as a piano solo.

Kevin served as master of ceremonies during the program, welcoming and thanking everyone who came and helped organize the event. "One of the most amazing things about Katherine Saubel," Kevin told the assembled guests,

is that she has a tendency to be the first. She started writing, thinking, and learning about our customs, our traditions, our culture, and the use of our plants in food, when she was little. And she has dedicated her life to the process of recording and printing who the Cahuilla people are....She's the first Native American to graduate from Palm Springs High School. She's the first Native American woman listed in the Who's Who of Women in America.

Opposite: Katherine Saubel in October 2007 at the Malki Museum's fall festival. Photo by Ira Nowinski/Malki Museum.



Left: Bird Singers, left to right, Ed Duro (Torres Martinez), Aaron Saubel (Los Coyotes), Michael Mirelez (Torres Martinez), and Steven Estrada (Santa Rosa).

Below: Lowell John Bean, Susan Phillips, and Katherine Siva Saubel.



With characteristic verve, fearlessness, conviction, determination, and forthrightness, Katherine began standing up to the segregationist policies directed at her people when she was still a teenager. With Jane Penn (Wanikik Cahuilla), she co-founded the first union in Banning in the early 1950s. She then co-founded the Malki Museum with Jane Penn and others in 1964. The first non-profit, Native American-run museum on a California reservation, Malki expanded the following year to include an academic press. Katherine has served ably as president of Malki's board since its founding.

In 1993 Katherine became the first California Indian woman inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. In 2002 she received an honorary doctorate in humanities and philosophy from La Sierra University, a well-deserved acknowledgment of her life-long commitment to the teaching and preservation of Cahuilla culture and language, as well as of her efforts to protect ancestral cultural and sacred sites.

After summarizing some of Katherine's many achievements, Kevin joked, "This is her *first* ninetieth birthday." Kevin then introduced Katherine's granddaughter, Maria Adams, and asked Maria to say a few words: "She basically raised us kids since we were little," Maria shared. "I wouldn't be where I am today, I wouldn't have the life I have today, if it wasn't for my grandma and my grandpa [Mariano Saubel], who I miss very much."

Maria next invited Allen Sauvelpahkick, her father, to speak. With great emotion, Allen declared, "Everything she taught me when I was little comes out in my drawings.... We have a lot of artwork in our language, and the feeling that

you get from it.... I hope a lot of the younger children learn Cahuilla and don't let it die out."

About his grandmother, Steven Saubel added, "She's a beautiful woman, very intelligent, very strong, and I'm very happy she's still here."

Grandson Aaron Saubel focused on Katherine's unequivocal love. Emili Siva stated, "She's incredible, and she's full of miracles, and she moves mountains, and she speaks to the clouds.... She is probably the bravest woman I've ever met."

Paul Apodaca, long-time master of ceremonies at Malki Museum's annual fiesta, reflected, "Katherine is not only the Native source [of Cahuilla knowledge], she is also the academic source. She is not simply the subject to be interviewed by scientists, she is the professor whom we read.... Katherine has insisted that the Native voice always be the first thing heard.... Katherine is a true patriot who has helped to fulfill... the best goals of this country, of our sciences, of our cultures and all of our families."

Lowell Bean recalled his fifty-plus years of collaboration with Katherine:

I begin in 1959 when one of my professors, who was writing an article about the Cahuilla, sent his graduate student out to the Cahuilla to get him some information. I was on my way to Australia, and he said this will be good experience, where you'll learn to be an anthropologist. When I got out here and I met Katherine and Jane Penn, the

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first thing I was told is, “We don’t need an anthropologist, but we’ve got a lot of work for you to do, and if you’ll do it, we’ll teach you how to be an anthropologist.” Well, I’m seventy-seven now, and I’m still here, and I’m still doing it, and there hasn’t been much time at all that I’ve worked when Kathy hasn’t been at my side—my mentor, and my tutor, and, God knows, my critic. She doesn’t fool around with information. You do it right! And I thank Kathy very much for all these good years.

One by one, niece Betty Lou Hall, myself, Alice Kotzen, cousin Carmen Lucas, nephew Derek Zahler, niece Dr. Amara Siva-Manzarek, Robert Levi, Jr., and others all spoke about Katherine’s personal importance in their lives, and her numerous contributions as an author, activist, chairwoman of the Los Coyotes tribal council, commissioner of the California Native American Heritage Commission, and fluent speaker of Mountain, Pass, and Desert Cahuilla. Katherine’s national and international travels, focused on the teaching and recording of Cahuilla culture and language, were also recognized.

Katherine, in turn, expressed her profound appreciation for everyone’s participation in her birthday celebration. The party concluded with another stirring and dynamic presentation of Bird songs, during which some of the guests were moved to dance. During this last round of singing, Michael, Steven, and Aaron were joined by several other singers.

After the singing concluded, I sat with Katherine as she graciously shared her thoughts about the past, present, and future. As a light rain fell steadily against the tent, Katherine talked about the tremendous joy it has given her to be able to teach Cahuilla culture and language, and to preserve her knowledge in books and Cahuilla dictionaries:

It’s really nice to find some of the people who want to learn, and to know how it was a long time ago. My mother said the Creator made this for us....I found out when I was eight years old that if you lose your language, you lose your culture.

Katherine’s on-going wish is that more Cahuilla youth will come forward to learn their languages from her. Her message for them: “Be proud of who you are and never forget your language.” And her message to the broader world:

We were all created to live in this earth, and to care for each other, and to care for everything around us. Then it’ll take care of us. If we don’t do that, we’ll destroy ourselves....We should all live as good neighbors, and respect each other, and everything else [in creation]. ▼

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A version of this article was previously published in the Malki Museum Newsletter.

Saubel surrounded by family and friends. Back row, left to right: Katherine’s grandson Allen, granddaughter Maria Adams, great-granddaughter Brittany, son Allen Sauvelpahkick, great nephew Derek Zahler, and nephew Kevin Siva. Front row, left to right: Friend Ann Hamilton (Mountain Cahilla), grandson Steven Saubel, Saubel, grandson Aaron Saubel, and grandchildren. Photo by Ira Nowinski/Malki Museum.