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Turning Over A New LEAF

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The bi-annual LEAF Festival at Camp Rockmont in Black Mountain is no longer a secret. Now on its 26th occurrence and 13th year, its loyal following continues to grow, thanks to a reputation for family-friendliness, consistently great music, and a fantastic setting on Lake Eden. What many people may not know about the festival, however, is that it carries on a tradition that began on the same site in the 1930s, with one of America's earliest avant-garde institutions, Black Mountain College.

The festival also reflects the life experience of its organizer, Jennifer Pickering. Called "one of the most dynamic bosses I've ever had" by LEAF staffer Steve Thompson, Pickering is a well-traveled, youthful-looking 41-year-old who grew up on the premises and still lives in a cabin there. "When I started, I wanted to design a festival for people who didn't go to festivals," Pickering says. "I wanted to create a sampler. My passion is the cultural roots. I love to travel and I'm really inspired by other cultures." That passion can be seen in the festival's musical lineup, which typically includes bands from Africa and South America as well as Southern Appalachia.

Of course, LEAF-goers could potentially spend a day without watching a single musical act. Artists and craftspeople sell their creations at dozens of booths. Practitioners of healing arts set up shop and give seminars, demonstrations and services. Some visitors might go for the dance performances or the poetry slam, while many families stay for the children's events and waterplay.

When Pickering organized the first LEAF Festival in 1995, however, many people told the then 29-year-old that her "sampler" format wouldn't succeed. What made Pickering choose to create a family-friendly world-music showcase, as opposed to the more common jam-band or alt-rock festival aimed at 18- to 24-year-olds? While the latter have popped up all over the nation in the past decade, with a half-dozen in Western North Carolina alone, far fewer festivals compare to LEAF.

Well, Pickering developed a passion for other cultures early in her childhood, growing up at Camp Rockmont, which her father ran before the operation was sold in the 1980s. The camp continues to operate there today, and the Pickering family still lives on property that was once part of the Black Mountain College.

Operating the camp was hectic, especially in the summer, so her parents enlisted the help of a maid, an African-American woman named Bertha. "From the start, I had a really personal relationship with African culture," she says. "We all have people who have impacted our lives, and for me, Bertha was the strongest."

At the same time, Pickering was meeting children from all over the world who came to the camp. One Iranian boy even stayed in her home with his bodyguard, in a spare bedroom across the hall from her.

Later, Pickering roamed. In 1988 she and her friend purchased global passes from PanAm airlines, which allowed them to fly anywhere in the world for one year, so long as they didn't backtrack. Years later, she traveled throughout Latin America on \$5 per day.

LEAF Festival reflects Pickering's interest in diverse cultures. This year, for example, headliners will include Southern U.S. hip-hop artists Arrested Development, Latin American notable Javier Garcia, African pop star Habib Koite, and country-folk icon Nanci Griffith.

For others, the setting is half the reason why they love LEAF. "It's sort of a magical place," says longtime attendee Bob Doss, of Madison County. "I can't tell you what makes it that way."

Perhaps it's partly due to sheer natural beauty. But the history of Lake Eden also involves legendary Black Mountain College. The experimental, interdisciplinary school, which operated from 1933 to 1957, helped lay much of the foundation for modern design, the Beat Generation and especially avant-garde art, music and dance. Faculty and alumni included Buckminster Fuller, who invented the geodesic dome; John Cage, who has been called one of the most influential composers of the 20th century; Cage's romantic partner, Merce Cunningham, an icon of modern dance; and Robert Creeley, who befriended Beat poet Allen Ginsburg and moved to San Francisco in the 1950s.

"My own personal belief is that every place has a feeling, and so much of that is what's happened there before, or what happens because of that place," Pickering says. In fact, the cabin that now serves as LEAF headquarters once housed Black Mountain College attendees, such as painter and teacher Josef Fiore. The large, boat-like building that still sits on Lake Eden's shore — nicknamed "The Ship" — housed the classrooms and offices. Pickering didn't fully realize the importance of the Black Mountain College until one particular day in art history class at Wake Forest University, when a slide photo of a The Ship lit up the classroom screen.

In many ways, the LEAF Festivals continue the traditions of learning, experimentation and celebration that were fostered by the diverse personalities of the Black Mountain College.

"She (Pickering) surrounds herself with people who are incredibly talented and into all these different things," says Steve Thompson, a LEAF-staffer for eight years who runs the performing arts stages. "I think (LEAF) is a community built of people who have many passions," Thompson said. "Some people are really passionate about one thing. Our passion is about all of these things."