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## **A life cherishing the arts**

From Alabama to N.H., art has been William Eppes' life

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Peterborough – William David Eppes has spent a lifetime crisscrossing the United States and, for that matter, the world. He's worked in San Francisco, talked to actors and actresses in Hollywood, attended universities in England and taught at a college in New Jersey.

So how did this native of Birmingham, Ala., come to live in Peterborough, N.H.?

It's very simple, Eppes says. He heard about an opportunity through a real-estate agent and decided to act on it. Eppes moved to southwestern New Hampshire in the mid-1990s.

Sitting in his living room recently, Eppes looked ready to board a plane and head off to some tropical island. A peach-colored cap completed his outfit of khaki pants, sandals, and a shirt of purple, blue, and orange hues meshed. On this afternoon, he wore brown sunglasses, too. Even indoors, his eyes are sensitive to light. A black cane rests against his chair.

Though Eppes is shy about himself, and declined to reveal his age – he did say he entered college in the fall of 1935, which would mean he's probably in his 80s – he was quite eager to talk about Amber E. Coughlin of Fitzwilliam.

“Amber is just so attractive because of her multi-talents,” Eppes said, a Southern accent barely noticeable. “Oh, she's just got everything going for her.”

This year, Coughlin became the first recipient of the Eppes Arts and Humanities Award. The award, established by Eppes, is to be presented each year to a student majoring in one of the arts and humanities disciplines at Keene State College.

Eppes presented the award - \$1,000 and a medallion, designed by Keene State senior Donald J. Karz – to Coughlin at the college's spring honors convocation in May.

Presenting the award was something of a challenge for Eppes, who suffers from fibromyalgia and injuries he sustained in a car accident last winter. Although walking sometimes proves difficult for him, he was determined to do it for the awards ceremony.

“I ain't an old ham for nothing,” laughed Eppes, who credits physical therapist Matt Flynn with getting him back in shape for the event.

Judy J. Kalich, Director of Advancement at Keene State College, who worked with Eppes in establishing the award, said the college is grateful for his generous donation.

“He has enabled Keene State to bring greater attention to the arts and humanities.” Kalich said. “It’s wonderful to have an award that singles out a student who has clearly excelled in the college experience and who seems to have the potential to make an impact in the arts and humanities upon graduating.”

Eppes also donated an extensive art collection to Keene State last fall. The collection of more than 100 posters, prints and original paintings can be seen in various buildings around campus.

More than 17 pieces from the Eppes collection are displayed at the Redfern Arts Center. Included are film, theater and music posters from the 1950s to the 1980s. They promote events such as an Ethel Merman concert at Carnegie Hall and a museum exhibition on actress Katharine Cornell.

“It’s great to have these things up here because it’s reflective of what we do here to educate and entertain through the performing arts,” said William Menezes, the director of the Redfern Arts Center, in a written statement.

Eppes was also made a benefactor and historical consultant to the arts center because of his expertise in the arts, Kalich said.

“I’m just thrilled to death,” said Eppes of the award and his involvement with Keene State College.

### **A family history of good works**

But philanthropy is nothing new to Eppes. His family history details a long tradition of supporting education and the arts. The son of Talmadge DeWitt and Annie Lou McCord, Eppes grew up in Birmingham. It was Eppes’ mother who made a lasting impression on him to be charitable and support various causes.

“She would do anything for the arts and humanities – and she did,” Eppes said.

Eppes likens his mother to Erin Brockovich, of recent movie fame. The real-life Brockovich helped end the illegal dumping of cancer-causing chemicals by a company.

“Without the four-letter words (and attire), she was Erin,” Eppes said. “She was going to save those workers.”

Eppes remembers his mother’s favorite charitable activities focused on supporting public education, women’s rights and civil rights. Because any talk of equality for blacks was controversial and dangerous at the time in Alabama, Eppes’ mother faced numerous threats. Her name was even added to then-Gov. George Wallace’s “hit list,” he said.

But she didn't stop. When she died, Eppes remembers hundreds of people attended her funeral – three-quarters of them were blacks.

“I have never been so touched in my life,” Eppes said.

When he was 5, Eppes' life took an unhappy turn. His parents divorced, which Eppes says was considered at the time the worst social disease imaginable.

“You never get over being a divorced child,” Eppes said.

The divorce left a lasting impression on him:

“Never in my life have I contemplated marriage.” Eppes said, shaking his finger to emphasize his point. “The only time I support marriage is to have a child – but only one child.”

Following the divorce, Eppes enrolled in a public school. But instead of looking forward to attending classes each day, he began to dread it. Although it wouldn't be diagnosed for many years later, Eppes suffered from dyslexia – a condition that impairs a person's ability to read and write.

Learning to write became a chore. His teachers accused him of not paying attention. They slapped his hands and covered up pictures in books that helped him understand what he couldn't through reading.

“It just wrecked my life,” Eppes said of his early school experiences.

Perhaps his early education might have gone smoother, Eppes said, if he had been allowed to attend a private school – noting his family could have afforded it. But because his mother was deeply involved with public education, that was out of the question.

In an ironic twist of fate, it was books that brought Eppes a great deal of comfort as a boy. He often visited the Birmingham Public Library and the thousands of books housed in what he dubbed the “great palace of a building.”

“It was such an escape for me as a lonely child,” Eppes said.

The theater was, too. Eppes acted and performed in numerous plays throughout his early years. He loved to act and gained confidence in himself.

Even put on the spot decades later, Eppes could still deliver a line from the first song he ever sang during a performance.

“A frog never bothers anybody/just sits on the rock and croaks,” he sang, tapping his foot and snapping his fingers to the beat.

## **A near miss in Keene**

It was the theater that first made Eppes aware of Keene. In the summer of 1935, he and his best friend, Marsha, the daughter of a multimillionaire department store owner, heard about the Keene Summer Theater program and applied to become apprentices.

“We were both trying to get away from our families,” laughed Eppes, clasping his forehead with his hand.

They were immediately accepted. But just before leaving for Keene, Marsha discovered she needed a stomach operation. Eppes spent that summer in Montana with his family instead of in New Hampshire with Marsha.

He continued to follow the theater, though, and even thought about making a career out of it. His family thought differently. Facing strong pressure from them to go to college, Eppes put off his acting plans. It had already been decided that he would attend the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va., because of “the heritage bit.” Members of his family had attended the college since the 1700s.

But Eppes made a pact with his family. If he went to William and Mary, upon graduating he could attend an acting school of his choice. The family agreed.

In the end, Eppes decided not to pursue Broadway, but not because of his family. Actors, he realized, face a rough life.

“You have really got to have guts and stamina,” Eppes said. “I just couldn’t do it.”

Instead he did other things. He continued his education, despite the hardships he encountered from dyslexia. Once, he was required to take a genetics class – a decidedly un-fond memory.

“It was hell,” Eppes said of the term paper he had to write. “It crucified me.”

But he finished it and, with editing help, received an A. Eppes went on to earn a degree in library science from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.

He enjoyed his time at Vanderbilt. He met a medical student whose father was part of a prominent Chicago mob family and who drove around campus with a fitted liquor cabinet in her Cadillac.

“We got along like a house of fire,” Eppes laughed, his shoulders shaking. “She loved the theater.”

Eppes did postgraduate work at the University of Miami (Fla.), the University of Manchester (England), and Columbia University in New York City before earning a master of arts degree from New York University in 1959.

## **Academe beckoned**

Over the years he has worked at various universities and colleges. He's been a reference assistance, administrator and associate professor at Kean College of New Jersey. Through it all, he has enjoyed most the time he spent with students.

"I just love the students," Eppes said as he pointed to a painting a student made for him. The picture is one of many that line a red hall-way leading to the bedrooms in his apartment. Autographed black-and-white photos of theater actresses, including Sylvia Sydney, are among them. Eppes said he got to know many of them through his involvement with the theater and the time he lived in New York City.

He's also written several books. Eppes wrote "The Empire Theater" in 1978, and a piece on Gertrude Michael, a star during Hollywood's Golden Age. And throughout the years, he's contributed numerous articles to magazines and historical journals.

For now, this world traveler is content to stay in Peterborough while he finishes work on three unpublished manuscripts and listens to his new discovery – books on tape. Eppes is busy. He said he doesn't have any spare time and "desperately needs a secretary."

He's hoping, too, that when the new hotel in downtown Keene opens, he'll be one of the first customers.

"I would at last have a pad across from the Colonial (Theatre)," Eppes said. "And I could take my time to walk up to the library and visit with students."

Wherever his next adventure takes him, Eppes said he's ready: "The show must go on."