

QUICKTAKES



A GRANDMOTHER'S GIFT

IN THE KOLDA REGION of Senegal in West Africa, old women are easily overlooked. They perform thankless chores. They are often illiterate, at a time when more and more children go to school. And as television and cell phones have spread their antennas deep into the bush, the old women have lost their monopoly on storytelling.

But Judi Aibel '69 is determined to put grandmothers back in the loop. "We have prejudices against old people when in fact they are so wise," says the California anthropologist and community health specialist.

For 20 years, Aibel has traveled the world, seeing firsthand the contributions of grandmothers in feeding, healing and watching children, settling family disputes and otherwise contributing to the health and well-

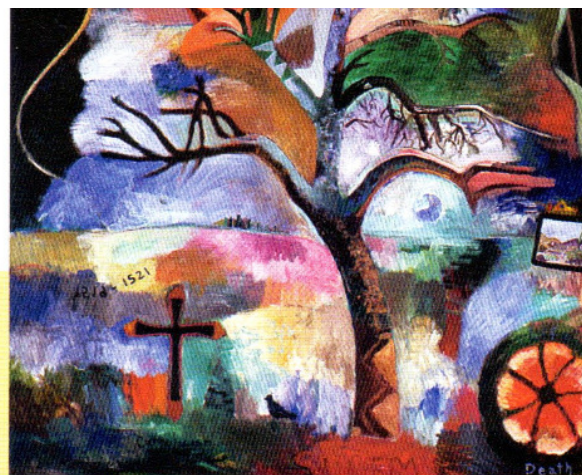
being of communities all over the world. Out of those observations was born The Grandmother Project (www.grandmotherproject.org), a nonprofit Aibel founded in 2005 to promote social change in the developing world by reaching out to grandmothers.

Aibel first got involved with elderly women in 1993 on a trip to Thailand, where she noticed that grandmothers played a crucial role feeding children while parents worked in the fields. That insight turned into a successful nutrition program that tapped the influence of grandmothers.

Aibel's intellectual journey has been guided by a strong sense of empathy. As an undergraduate at UCLA, she tutored kids in the Watts neighborhood on

Above: Judi Aibel listens to Djabouyel Mbalo near Sare Faramba, a village in southeastern Senegal. Djabouyel and her granddaughter, Didere, are bringing food to farmers in the fields.

Shorter's book includes the work of Yaqui artist Mario Martinez. Pictured here: *Talking Tree*.



Saturdays. She remembers vividly her bus rides into the ghetto. "I grew up in a pretty homogenous area in San Rafael. I found it challenging to enter a totally different world," she explains. "It increased my interest in sociology and anthropology and led me to join the Peace Corps." History classes with Africa scholar Boniface Obichere were also eye-opening.

These days, Aubel is using her blend of curiosity, energy and community activism to address female genital mutilation, often performed by the old women in a village. Her pilot project in Senegal is co-financed by World Vision/Canada, a humanitarian charity, and USAID. Experts estimate that the partial or total removal of external female genitalia affects 2 to 3 million girls each year, mostly in Africa. Its most extreme form, infibulation, can result in organ damage, incontinence, infertility, prolonged labor and death.

Working with a small team in 20 villages, Aubel brings together old and young men and women for two-day talk fests, punctuated by drumming and songs, so they can air their grievances and bridge communication gaps that have grown with the erosion of traditional village life. Female genital mutilation is mentioned only in passing. Participants are encouraged to reexamine harmful practices and rescue beneficial ones — such as storytelling nights, traditional dancing and singing — from the brink of oblivion. Aubel believes grandmothers are more flexible once they feel valued for their knowledge and experience. "People say: Female genital mutilation is horrible. How can you respect the exciseuse [the person who cuts the girl]?" says Aubel. "But if you don't, you don't have a relationship, so there is no possibility of encouraging change."

— Flore de Préneuf



Above, left: Hawa Balde and granddaughter Hawa Kande in Sare Kouna. Above, right: Binta Sabaly braids granddaughter Yoba's hair in the village of Kandia.

THE DANCING TRUTH

A SEEKER MEETS an ancient Yaqui shaman named Don Juan Matus in the desert. Mystical truth is shown to the hero through hallucinogenic drugs. And the mysteries of the universe are revealed.

What a trip.

Too bad it probably never happened. Not the drug part, anyway.

So says David Delgado Shorter, associate professor in UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures, about the generation-defining, bestselling, iconic — and controversial — stories by Carlos Castaneda '62, M.A. '64, Ph.D. '73.

Castaneda's books have sold 8 million copies in 17 languages since *The Teachings of Don Juan* was first published in 1968. But they spawned a firestorm of protest and criticism because of discrepancies, inaccuracies and other suspicions of exactly when, where and how Castaneda learned of the information in his books.

That's what Shorter suspects may have happened with the nonexistent Yaqui drug connection.

"Castaneda's books became benchmarks of New Age thinking and his

representations fueled critiques about the way anthropologists and New Ageists link native people with drug culture," he notes. "The Yaqui are fascinating because they were the alternative way of understanding the world at a moment when there was a general suspicion of the government and the Western way of being ... but no psychotropic plants are indigenous to Yaqui areas."

Shorter grew up close to and among native people in New Mexico and has lived with the Yaqui (or Yoeme, as they call themselves) off and on for 15 years. He also is the author of a book about the Yaqui's way of knowledge, the recently published *We Shall Dance Our Truth*. And he underscores that while the drug link is unfortunate as well as inaccurate, there is, in truth, much to admire about Yoeme ideas about life.

"They maintain active relationships with

plants, animals and the land in a way that's inseparable from how they know themselves," Shorter explains. "*We Shall Dance Our Truth* is primarily about that way of knowing the world. Academically, it's about understanding how that way of knowing the world affects how you represent yourself to others."

In fact, how "the other" is represented in general in American society is a keen interest of the Bruin scholar. At UCLA, he also teaches a course on aliens, psychics and ghosts.

"The way people think about ancient cultures is the same way they think about the future, and myths, other times and other spaces," Shorter concludes. "They are all easily misrepresented as well."

Far out, indeed.

— Jack Feuer

Go Native

See photos from David Delgado Shorter's adventures with the Yaqui, discover his research and learn more about his new book. Visit www.davidshorter.com.

