

Sunday Obituary: Clatskanie writer Kate Taylor was a queen of chess



Bill Wagner / TDN file

In this 2008 file photo, Clatskanie Chess Club adviser Kate Taylor studies Joseph Christen's possible moves as Ben McMillan, left, and Connor Thorud think about possible responses.

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Kathryn Rose "Kate" Taylor, who turned the town of Clatskanie chess-crazy, was a woman who brought about change and had fun doing it.

"She had a great sparkle about her," said book editor and humorist Margie Culbertson, who considered Taylor "a kindred spirit."

Culbertson said she was "just stunned" to learn of Taylor's death April 3 at age 54 at her home in Clatskanie.

Her death from a massive heart attack was "completely, suddenly a shock to everyone," said Taylor's sister, Chris Syverson. Taylor's husband, Warren, has been undergoing chemotherapy for lung cancer. The family - which includes Taylor's four children and five grandchildren - had been focusing on his illness, Syverson said.

"It's just really changed our perspective on everything."

She said her sister was "very creative," funny and frequently surprising.

When she turned 40, Taylor decided to shed her birth name, Donna Louise Colvin, in favor of her nom de plume.

"She always decided she would be a writer under a different name," Syverson said. "When she turned 40, she said, 'Heck with it, I'm changing my name!' It was a huge adjustment for the family."

She wrote a weekly Web column, "Snickerdoodles," inspired by observations of family and other people she knew, Syverson said. Some of her work appeared in magazines and newspapers, including The Daily News' Second Half.

In one Snickerdoodle she asked her son Michael what he wanted for his 13th birthday:

"Well ..." he said, "I'll give you a hint. It has batteries, a trigger, shoots liquid and has a refillable chamber."

She gave him a Swiffer WetJet.

In a Second Half column in 2004, she described her traumatic change at learning she was about to become a grandmother: "Within hours I developed an overwhelming urge to crochet something. Within weeks, my arms got shorter, newsprint shrank and I started sitting really low in the car and driving badly."

A story about her brother-in-law's mishap with a walleye won the 2003-04 "Best Very Short Humor" category in an international humor writing competition Culbertson sponsors on her Web site, "Humor and Life, in Particular." The story, "Something Fishy," appears in "Laugh Your Shorts Off," a collection of humor published in December.

In Taylor's story, a walleye suddenly leapt out of the water and smacked a hapless fisherman right between the eyes:

"Wally had attained the ultimate revenge for a walleye fish," she wrote. "Because there he was, thrashing wildly, suspended from the end of Bob's nose. The walleye Northland Lipstick jib with the double barbed hook had certainly done its job! ... Wally and Bob had become one, leaving Bob with a wriggling nose ring of giant proportions."

Her sister said Taylor was a clown in earlier years, which developed into face painting. That led to face reading — what characteristics such as eyebrow shape tell about personality — and she wrote a book on the subject.

Taylor taught face reading and Web design in Clatskanie schools, but she is known most as the woman who turned Clatskanie kids on to chess.

"Oh my gosh," Syverson said. "It just kept getting bigger and bigger."

Taylor's son Mike, then 9, started the club in 1999 at the suggestion of his parents, who were tired of his always pestering them for a game. Eight years later, Taylor told The Daily News that roughly 600 of Clatskanie's 1,000 students played chess.

In 2006 Taylor secured a \$3,000 grant from America's Foundation for Chess to place chess equipment in Clatskanie classrooms and to teach educators how to weave the game into curriculum at the elementary school. The program has since grown to include second- through eighth-grade students.

Six years ago she co-founded the Oregon Scholastic Chess Federation, with a goal of bringing chess to every child in Oregon.

"I won't even venture to guess how many children she touched," Syverson said. "I'm sure others who are involved will carry on, but I don't know if they'll do it with such panache."

Friends and family have been leaving flowers all week at Checkmate Park in downtown

Clatskanie.

A celebration of her life will be held at 4 p.m. Monday at the Donavon Wooley Performing Arts Center at Clatskanie Middle/High School. Nonperishable food donations for Turning Point will be accepted at the service.

For more details about her life, see her obituary in the April 7 Daily News.

Kate Taylor on the Net:

<http://www.kathrynrosetaylor.com/index.html>

<http://clatskaniechessclub.tripod.com>

<http://www.humorandlife.com/index.html>

http://www.tdn.com/news/article_83636176-2401-524a-b3e3-8230e5c31e16.html

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