



FLORIDA CENTER FOR
CREATIVE AGING
FLORIDA POLICY EXCHANGE
CENTER ON AGING
WITHIN THE
SCHOOL OF AGING STUDIES
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA



Larry Polivka, Ph.D.
Director
lpolivka@cas.usf.edu

Stefanie Thompson
Assistant Director
sathomps@cas.usf.edu

Florida Center for
Creative Aging, USF
FMHI, MHC 1326,
13301 Bruce B. Downs
Blvd.,
Tampa, Florida 33612
Telephone 813.974.1309
Fax 813.974.5788
www.fpeca.usf.edu

Cathy DeWitt
Editor

FCCA e-News

arts, humanities and aging

Stetson Kennedy, 88, Receives Florida Artists Hall of Fame Award

By Cathy DeWitt

At the Florida Heritage Gala in Tallahassee on April 6th, Stetson Kennedy was inducted into the literature division of the Florida Artists Hall of Fame, and honored at the Florida Senate with a special resolution. Kennedy, a native of Jacksonville, was chosen out of nineteen finalists to receive the state's highest cultural award, joining a roster that includes Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ray Charles. Even a recent bout with double pneumonia couldn't keep the 88-year-old author and activist from making the trip to Tallahassee. His long and fascinating journey to this place began with *Palmetto Country*, a book he wrote in 1942 at the age of 25.

This descriptive Florida narrative was on the public schools recommended reading list for decades, and in 1989 was brought back by University of Florida Press. At the ceremony, Secretary of State Glenda Hood presented Stetson with his award, calling him "a remarkable writer and researcher with a lifelong litany of literary works, {who} has demonstrated a deep commitment to using his talents for making the world a better place. He is perhaps best known for his exposure of the Ku Klux Klan and other highly placed Southern racists in his books, *The Clan Unmasked* and *The Jim Crow Guide*. These books were translated into several languages and used all over the world serving as tools in aiding the fight against racism." Her remarks were met with thunderous applause.



Stetson Kennedy receives award from
Florida Secretary of State Glenda Hood

To understand the enthusiasm of those who came from far and wide to see Stetson receive the Hall of Fame award, one has to understand that his research for these books was not done in a library. In the mid-twentieth century, Stetson did his research by donning a white robe and a hood, pretending to be an aspiring member of the Ku Klux Klan, getting himself invited to meetings, and finding out their plans. In this way he was able to actually derail some of their intended acts of terrorism. Then he took it a step further, infiltrating over twenty racist organizations in northern Florida and southern Georgia, finding out who the men behind the masks were and exposing them both on paper and in court. This was risky business in the 1940's and 1950's.

"As a career, I don't recommend clan busting," Stetson notes with dry humor. "There's no money in it, and not much thanks.

"Although there was this one time I was speaking to the Dallas branch of the NAACP...I was shaking hands with people after the talk when I felt this hug around my knees. I looked down and there was this little girl looking up at me and she said, 'I know what

See Page 2

FCCA e-News

Books by
Stetson Kennedy

*Palmetto
Country*



*The Klan
Unmasked*



*The Jim
Crow Guide*



*After
Appomattox*



*Southern
Exposure*

Stetson Kennedy from Page 1

you do. You spy on mean white folks and tell us what they're fixin' to do.' I thought that was a pretty good description of what I was doing at that time—infiltrating the Klan."

A former writer for the Palm Beach Post, Lou Salome, came all the way from New Hampshire for the ceremony and had this to say about Stetson. "I really think Stetson in any generation should be counted as a great American. He did as much or more than any one to improve working and living conditions for all people. He saw injustice and he said it's not fair and I'm gonna try to fix it—and that's what he did.



"He was a good journalist, a good observer—but deep down he's a man who cares about justice and fairness, and that's what propels him."

Stetson called his journey to Tallahassee a "round trip" of sorts, referring to the mid-thirties when he was a student at the University of Florida in Gainesville where the boys were, making the weekend trip to Florida State University where the girls were.

"It's been a long journey getting back here from those days in 1935 to 2005. I remember back then walking around the campus. I was walking the hills in the moonlight after seeing a film called "The Magnificent Obsession," thinking I needed an obsession of my own. I guess I decided to make it all of humanity, and I've been hacking away at that obsession ever since."

As Lou Salome and other friends and admirers of Stetson are quick to point out, Stetson's work against the Klan was only one part of his life. He was also a major organizer for the unions in Southern factory towns. This led to a lifelong friendship with folk artists and activists including Pete Seeger and especially Woody Guthrie, who was a frequent visitor to his farmland home on the outskirts of Jacksonville.

The day after the induction ceremony, Stetson was honored with a special Senate resolution presented by Senator Tony Hill. Senator Hill's resolution was followed with some remarks by Senator James (Jim) King. King, who was recently appointed to a position dealing with Florida Indian affairs, stated he was surprised to find that Stetson's activism was strong in this area as well. King called Stetson "... a fighter who has always recognized the intrinsic good of human beings, whether black, white or red," and said, further, that he was "Godsent to teach all of us—all of us—the compassion we must feel for one another."

At age 88, Stetson is still an activist in every sense of the word. He travels the state giving talks, signing his books, and continuing to educate and encourage people. On the morning of his induction ceremony, Stetson used his time to meet with Attorney General Charlie Crist to discuss reopening the unsolved murder of Harry D. Moore, a well-known black activist, and his wife, Harriet, that took place on Christmas night of 1951. "I let him know I was there to help cooperate with the investigation," he told me.

For Stetson Kennedy, the fight for justice and compassion is never over.