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Smithsonian honors father

MBC professor's father famous for promoting equality around world

By Alice Mannette/staff
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Daniel Métraux's father told him stories, amazing tales of foreign lands. At age 6, wide-eyed and eager to please, he'd sit on his father's lap and hear about how he used to carry Daniel around Haiti, "When Duvalier (the former President) bounced me up and down on his lap I'd laugh," Daniel said. Then they laughed together.

"He always had a good sense of humor," Daniel said. "Once a vending machine ate his quarter, so he put up a big sign on the machine saying 'thief'. He was the ultimate absent-minded professor."

Daniel would watch his father come and go, from New York to Paris, from Buenos Aires to Easter Island, all the while hoping for him to land at his doorstep in Greenwich Village. Wearing black velvet britches and a newly pressed shirt, the young boy would open his mother's door and greet his world-renowned father, Alfred Métraux. But the visits were sporadic. The emotional distance widened.



Mike Tripp/The News Leader

Daniel Métraux, professor at Mar the books written by his father an Wednesday. His father, Alfred Métraux in an open book on the desk.

The Exhibit

"Alfred Métraux: From Fieldwork to the Smithsonian"

An exhibition on Daniel Métraux life and work.

- Where: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History
- When: Scheduled to open in [unclear]



Like his father, Daniel Métraux became a scholar and champion of human rights. He heads the Asian Studies department at Mary Baldwin College, has written 14 books, and enjoys imparting knowledge on new generations. But unlike his father, his marriage is long-lasting, his commitment to his children strong.

Alfred Métraux

Alfred Métraux was born in Switzerland, but grew up primarily in Argentina. He was fluent in many languages and became an anthropologist at a very young age.

"My father was one of the pioneers and principal catalysts of fighting racial prejudice, extreme poverty and defending human rights," Daniel Métraux said.

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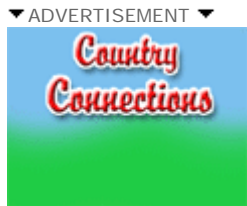
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INSWEB



A noted field anthropologist, Alfred Métraux studied South American Indians, Haitians, West Africans and Easter Islanders. He brought world attention to their plight, published books and papers describing their social structures and demanded that the world recognize that one race is not better than another. Later, he served at the Smithsonian, and in 1946 he became the first director of the Department of Social Sciences at UNESCO, a branch of the newly formed United Nations.

"His job was to look at the whole question of racism. He wrote that there was no sociological or biological reasons for differentiating the races," Daniel Métraux explained. "His writings set the tone for the whole UN campaign against racism. He was part of a very small team that wrote the Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration was the first condemnation of apartheid."

Daniel Métraux continues the legacy, although the regions he studies, the Near and Far East, are different. His latest work on Burma exposes the country's inequities.

"He's very dedicated to helping people of other countries," said Lauren Gaspar, an MBC student. "He has been one of the nicest people I have ever met. He inspired me to be a better person. He helped me pick my career path, and he's helping me make connections in Washington, D.C., where I want to live."

Mother and Margaret Mead

Daniel Métraux was inspired by his mother Rhoda Métraux, a distinguished anthropologist, and her life-long friend and co-author, world renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead, best known for her studies of child-rearing, personality and culture. Daniel Métraux and his mother, along with Mead and her daughter Catherine, lived in a brownstone in New York City.

"Margaret Mead was a second mother to me. She basically brought me up. In some ways she was as important as my mother," Métraux said, emotions welling up in his throat. "She was a good person, very loving and kind. She was also full of spunk and fun."

The Smithsonian

When Daniel was 14, his father died.

"My father was a loving, good person, but he was so absorbed with his work that family always came second," Daniel Métraux said.

Next fall, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History will open a groundbreaking exhibition, featuring the studies and collections of Alfred Métraux. Métraux's works, some of which had rested in boxes in Daniel Métraux's home, have been resurrected, the personal diaries read and the pictures sorted and labeled. Through this process, Daniel Métraux is being introduced to his dad. This time their connection cannot disappear.

"Daniel is now discovering his father's greatness," said Wilton S. Dillon, senior scholar emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution. "What he's provided the world is going to be a great story to tell. It's the first time that the Smithsonian will have featured the life of an anthropologist. He will be brought into world-wide consciousness."

But it's not just anthropology, the Smithsonian will integrate the human sciences with art, bringing in literature, paintings and sculpture. Alfred Métraux served as an ambassador between diverse cultures, his groundbreaking work transformed the consciousness of both scholars and organizations.

Mike Tripp/The News Leader

In his office, Daniel Métraux, proposes for a photograph near a pc Métraux on Wednesday.

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"Like his father, there's a lot of anthropology behind his work," said MBC senior Kat Wood. "They were both very involved in the community in different cultures and the education of these cultures."

Familial bond

Being raised by Margaret Mead, his mother and father, Daniel Métraux knew he had to try his hardest and help the plight of those less fortunate.

"Daniel had the benefits of three noted anthropologists, his mother Rhoda Métraux, his father, Alfred Métraux and his God-mother, Margaret Mead," explained Wilton. "He was exposed to people who in many ways were at the avant-garde. Daniel owes a lot to whose genes he carried and those who nurtured him."

Daniel's son David, 27, will not have to retrace his father's steps. He walks with him each summer as they travel the paths the elder Métraux forged, each year visiting a different region and rekindling their familial bond. Last year they visited Peru, this summer the two hope to walk amongst the statues of Easter Island then reunite again next fall at the Smithsonian exhibition, "Alfred Métraux: From Fieldwork to Human Rights."

"We'll have a map at the exhibition, showing all the places in the world he visited. He was a pioneer," Wilton said.

After the exhibit leaves Washington it will travel to Paris.

"Alfred Métraux is not as well known in the past as he will be in the future." he said.

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