James Miles

A Turning Puff

During a tribal meeting in northern Minnesota, where several reservations gathered to discuss important issues, something unexpected happened in Kathy's life. As tobacco was passed around in the traditional fashion, Kathy found herself invited to participate in the ritual. Unsure at first, she hesitated, not wanting to overstep or disrespect the customs of the community. But the chief, Wayne, reassured her, explaining that it was a gesture of inclusion, similar to sharing a drink in another culture.

Though she wasn't a smoker, Kathy was transported back to a time when her father, a musician and occasional performer on television, had shown her how to roll a cigarette for a cowboy-themed show. He'd taught her how to pinch the tobacco, open the strings with her mouth, pour it into the paper, and roll it tightly. What had once been a light-hearted lesson between father and daughter became, at that moment, a bridge of understanding and respect with the Chippewa community. Rolling the tobacco and sharing in their tradition was more than just an act—it was a gesture that opened doors, allowing her to connect with other tribes in ways she hadn't anticipated. This simple, seemingly insignificant skill became the key to acceptance, paving the way for deeper conversations and collaborations across the reservations.

Growing up in a small town near Pittsburgh, Kathy had a relatively carefree childhood filled with music, family, and a sense of belonging. Her father, a musician, exposed her to the arts, and she recalls fondly the joy of being part of his performances, whether in church or on local radio. But even as she enjoyed these privileges, she was determined to break free from the small-town mentality and pursue a life of meaning. She describes herself as someone who always knew she was destined for something more, someone who could make a difference.

This desire to make a difference led Kathy to join VISTA in the late 1960s, a program that had been inspired by the success of the Peace Corps. She was initially trained to work with Southwestern Native American communities, but in an ironic twist typical of government assignments, she was sent to the freezing landscapes of Minnesota to work with the Chippewa tribe. Despite the harsh conditions, Kathy found this year to be the most formative of her life.

On the reservation, Kathy encountered both the beauty and the struggles of a marginalized community. One of her most vivid memories involves a mentally unstable woman who repeatedly abandoned her children. Kathy and her fellow volunteers once had to search for the woman after she had left her three young children alone, the oldest being just five years old. This incident shook Kathy to her core, and she recalls how close she came to losing her temper, ready to confront the woman in a way that might have made the situation worse. It was her friend, Pat, who helped calm her down, reminding her of the importance of compassion, even in the face of such negligence. It was an eye-opening moment that taught her about the complexities of human behavior and the need for support systems, not just for those who are struggling, but for those who are trying to help.

Kathy's time on the reservation gave her a deeper understanding of happiness, one that went beyond the superficial pleasures of her youth. She realized that true happiness comes from community, from the relationships we build, and from the ability to rely on those around us. It also comes from the satisfaction of knowing that you've made a difference, however small, in someone else's life. Kathy left the reservation with a greater sense of purpose, knowing that her work wasn't over, but had only just begun. Her experiences there shaped her views on justice, equality, and the importance of education, especially for marginalized communities.

Kathy married a man she deeply loves and together, they built a life centered on their shared values of compassion and making the world a better place. They raised two children who, much like their mother, have inherited her positive spirit and drive to improve the world around them. Kathy

beams with pride when she talks about her son, who works for a nonprofit organization that installs clean water systems in small villages across Central and South America. His work provides fresh water to communities that otherwise might not have access to such a basic necessity, continuing the legacy of service and advocacy that Kathy began many years ago.

Still Kathy carries the spirit of that young VISTA volunteer with her. She remains easy to talk to, full of energy, and always ready to share a story or offer advice. Her life has been marked by a pursuit of understanding—whether it was her desire to help the children on the reservation, or her later work as a teacher and advocate for children's rights. For Kathy, happiness is about more than just personal fulfillment; it's about creating a better world for those who come after us. And in that sense, her year on the Chippewa reservation was the cornerstone of the person she is today—compassionate, wise, and always willing to stand up for what is right.