

## *Senja Antilla worked in Japan and in a Tibetan monastery as an English Teacher*

**By: AMANDA DOTSON**

Senja Antilla was born in Raymond to Ralph and Dorothy Antilla, She graduated from RHS in 1974 with a class of about 74 students.

“I have many fond memories of my school year and growing up in Raymond,” she said. “Though my memory was not what it was then, I do remember that in high school I was voted class cut-up and spent a fair amount of time in the corner, but we all had fun!”

Senja says her two favorite teachers were Ms. Karjala (later Mrs. Halpin) and Mr. G. Holmes. “Ms. Karjala was a good teacher and her creative writing classes were fun; Mr. Homes was very patient and allowed us to have our good times, also! I do remember Andy Anderson very well. He was a good man, a strict principal.”

Antilla says she has many memories of growing up in Raymond. “I loved when we often went to Wash-Away Beach (North Cove). I was known for swimming in the ocean until I became numb. I am still an avid swimmer. I remember hiking in the woods with my father and siblings and playing in the woods with neighbor children. I had many good friends and now many good memories.”

Senja has done and seen many things since she left Raymond after high school. She spent a few years in Seattle before moving to Alaska to work in a king crab cannery in Dutch Harbor. She later attended the University of Alaska in Fairbanks for a year before transferring to the University of Hawaii where she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Development. She lived in various places in Hawaii and then moved to Santa Cruz, Calif. where she became a professional massage therapist and educator for many years until she became disabled from the career due to tendonitis.

After retiring from massage therapy, Senja returned to school and earned a Masters Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) and then taught in Japan for several years.

Senja stayed in Japan until the Kobe earthquake, which persuaded her to leave.

“My 100 year old house (which had a heavy tile roof, thin walls and was placed on soft soil) that I was renting collapsed in the back, the stairway fell in, and the windows and doors were jammed; it was very difficult to get out.”

Antilla’s house was near the epicenter. “I just looked at the Japanese shrine in my room and prayed, ‘let this not be it.’ At the time my mind was stable, but my body was shaking.”

Senja eventually made in out of the house and stayed a week after the earthquake before flying to Hawaii to recuperate.

After leaving Japan, Senja spent time in South India teaching English at a Tibetan monastery.

“My time at the Tibetan monastery was wonderful. The monks were very sweet,” she recalls. “The opportunity arose when I was in France on a meditation retreat and met my teacher’s brother, whose monastery had a program that invited people to come and volunteer to teach English.”

“There was no formal dress code I needed to follow except to dress conservatively. In India it is customary for women to cover their arms and legs. I chose to wear traditional Tibetan Chupas (a long dress with a blouse underneath) that I had tailored in the village, out of respect for the culture and the monastic community.

“It was difficult living,” Senja said. “Sometimes there would be no water or electricity. There is no place like India unless you’ve been there, you can’t really imagine. Things get done very differently, slowly there, or just not done at all! I love India very much. It’s rich in culture and spirituality; progressive in some ways, but ancient in others--- an amazingly interesting, exotic place.”

Senja’s students were all Tibetan monks from the age of 7 to adult. She taught five classes every day, Monday through Friday. The younger students were born in India and spoke Tibetan and Hindi and her older students were new refugees from Tibet.

“They were a total joy, very kind. We had many laughs as I brought lots of games and teaching supplies. I remember a water balloon we had that was great fun!”

Senja now lives in Sarasota, Florida with her partner, Len. She works as a professional organizer. “I love to organize and file it is what I do best and am having a great time doing it,” she said. She also enjoys making beaded jewelry, shell work, yoga, and swimming and snorkeling. She also studies Holistic Health, Feng Shui, and Tibetan Buddhism.

Senja says she returns to Raymond regularly to visit family and friends. “I have always felt fortunate to grow up in such a nice, rural, small town,” she said. “I had a wonderful childhood playing in the woods and going to the beach. This set my appreciation for the outdoors. Besides my family, I have many good friends that I still keep in touch with who keep me abreast with the latest home town news.”

Senja’s advice to this year’s graduates is to “find your passion and follow it; this will lead you on the path of happiness and fulfillment.”



RHS Alumnus, Senja Antilla, 1974