

# APPRECIATION PASSAGE OF A GLOBAL NOMAD

**NORMA M. McCAIG, 1945 – 2008**

*By MIKKELA THOMPSON*

**N**orma M. McCaig, creator of the phrase “global nomad” and founder of Global Nomads International, died on Nov. 10 at her home in Reston, Va., after four years with bone cancer. With her passing, Foreign Service and military brats and all other Third Culture Kids “lost their mother.” As one young person said at her memorial service, “I know that I am a global nomad because Norma told me I am. She gave us a name and a place we can call home.”

A regular lecturer at the Foreign Service Institute, the author of the *Journal's* early articles on raising globally mobile children, and someone actively involved with the Foreign Service Youth Foundation, Ms. McCaig was a vibrant force in the diplomatic community.

Yet as I sat at her memorial service on Nov. 16 at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Reston, with her art on display, listening to her friends and family talk about her personal life, her spiritual life, her artistic life and her professional life, I realized how little I knew about this diminutive redhead. Norma was always much more fascinated with everyone else's story — and how to connect people by sharing their stories.

## **A Pioneering Vision**

Norma M. McCaig was born on July 25, 1945, and moved to the Philippines at the age of 2 with her father, a pharmaceutical executive (as she'd joke, “my daddy peddled drugs in

Asia”), mother and brother. At the age of 13, the family moved to Sri Lanka. Norma attended boarding school at the Kodaikanal International School in India, and then finished high school back in the Philippines before returning to the U.S. Norma translated her childhood experiences into a lifetime of promoting international understanding, with a pioneering vision of a cross-cultural identity and organization.

In 1984, she created the term global nomad, both because she did not want to be called a kid and because she wanted a more elegant, and expansive, designation for herself and others like her. This gift of creative terminology is just one of her many contributions to the field of international cultural intercourse, which include “cultural chameleon,” “passport culture” and other phrases now whizzing around on the World Wide Web.

Along with sociologists Ruth Hill Useem, who coined the term “Third Culture Kids” in the 1960s, Dave Pollock and Ruth Van Reken, all authorities on growing up internationally, Norma McCaig was a pathbreaker, an energetic champion for the globally mobile community. She was the first to recognize the importance of helping global nomads on “re-entry” into their home country, and envisioned a global nomad club at every college and university. She encouraged many universities to recognize and allow students to designate themselves as global nomads on their applications. This includes the children of Foreign Service personnel as well as those from military, missionary and business families.

“Norma McCaig not only changed our world; she changed my life,” writes Van Reken, co-author with Dave Pollock of *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*. “I first met her in 1987, when she dared to cross sector lines and attend a conference about missionary kids (in

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Quito), even though she had been raised as a business kid. She shared her dream for Global Nomads, an organization that would be for adults who had grown up in any internationally mobile background. Norma borrowed against her own retirement account to make that conference happen in December 1988 ... [It was] the first time adult TCKs gathered together to explore mutually our convergent journeys.”

The Foreign Service community knows her best from her articles in the *Foreign Service Journal*, her seminars at the Foreign Service Institute, her presentations at the Foreign Service Youth Foundation’s welcome-home potlucks (including one just a month before her death) and the many workshops she led.

### A Passionate Advocate

Norma McCaig was passionate about all aspects of her life. She was active in her church, leading meditation classes and participating in the art club, and was an executive-level recruiter. But her greatest strength was her magnetic ability as a consummate communicator, a connector. Every fall, she would host a pumpkin-carving contest; and in the summer, she threw a huge party for her birthday. Whatever the occasion, the goal was always to get as many people as possible together, to work on connections.

A graduate of the Georgetown Training Specialist Program, she reached out to mentor other cross-cultural coaches and worked with anyone and everyone to further her vision of international understanding. This included working at the Washington International Center, organizing cross-cultural training for children at Berlitz and participating with NAFSA, the Association of International Educators, for more than 20 years. She carefully tailored her workshops for each audience, even if the message was the same.

For many years Ms. McCaig was affiliated with George Mason University. She actively helped adult Third Culture Kids become part of the discussion through Ruth Van Reken’s “Families in Global Transition” conferences. Appropriately, the 2008 conference honored Norma for her role in getting the movement off the ground in the early 1980s.

The term “global nomad” was born in India. Ms. McCaig had traveled around the world to the South Indian hill station of Kodaikanal for her school reunion. As she was standing in the shower, wondering why she was going to the reunion of a school she had attended for a few years where she may not know anyone, it occurred to her that as soon as she met the other alumni, she would feel at home because they were all “global nomads” like her.

In what may have been a karmic aligning of her universe, she presented a paper in 2001 to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness on the children of devotees, who are often raised in cultures and countries different from those of their parents.

Norma McCaig believed that children raised with a built-in multicultural understanding become culturally sensitive and globally-minded adults for whom any dream, even that of becoming president, is possible.

### Closure and Connection

She authored numerous articles and publications on global nomads, “re-entry,” transitions, resiliency and her own “Seven Cs” — advice on raising global nomads. The fourth C is instructive in this context:

“*Closure and Connection*. This is an area that is often overlooked. Unless parents have good closure skills, kids have very few chances to pick them up. It is vital to learn about closure and walk your kids through healthy goodbyes. Remember that global nomad children say more goodbyes before the age of 18 than many monoculturals do in a lifetime.

“Even if you experience relatively low mobility abroad, chances are that people are always in transition around you and your children are saying many, many goodbyes in spite of their relative geographic stability. The grief associated with these goodbyes can accumulate unless intentional effort is made to grieve productively. It can be difficult and frightening to watch a child grieve. This is especially true if you have not done your own grieving.

“Communicate to your child that pain around goodbyes is an appropriate emotion that honors what the person (or location, or pet, etc.) has meant to you. Teach your children to incorporate things that they have valued about what or whom they have lost. For example, if your children deeply love an aspect of a culture that you are leaving, allow them to incorporate it into your family culture. If your children miss an especially kind friend, teach them to incorporate that kindness into their own values.”

While there was sadness at her memorial service, there is some comfort and a lesson to be learned from Norma McCaig’s life. As someone pointed out, she *lived* with cancer, enthusiastic and full of life to her final day. Taking her own advice on grief, I remember when, after a resilience workshop at FSI a year ago, I suggested we eat at one of my favorite hole-in-the-wall kabob restaurants, just so that I could watch with joy as Norma gleefully ordered dish after dish — mango lassi, naan, kebab, raita, dal and kheer. She would nibble and inhale the smells and flavors, reconnecting with her global childhood. I will drink mango lassis the length of my days, recalling Norma — filled with brightness, kindness and a zest for life.

Ms. McCaig is survived by her brother and niece, who were there to take care of her at the end of her life.

Memorial contributions may be made in Norma McCaig’s name to the Cancer Foundation ([www.cancer.org/](http://www.cancer.org/)). Her legacy Web site can be viewed at <http://www.legacy.com/WashingtonPost/GB/GuestbookEntry.aspx?&PersonID=120196511>. ■