

KEVIN KIEFF

Max DelSignore: Thanks for tuning in. So glad to have you here for another edition of the Northern New York Community Podcast. I'm your host, Max DelSignore. Our upcoming conversation with Kevin Kieff will be a terrific blend of local history and philanthropy. We will learn that Kevin's family were, in fact, pioneers dating back to their settlement in the North Country in the late 18th century. And we'll also learn how his affinity for the region merged into a career devoted to preserving and stewarding some of the area's most precious lands and territory.

Interwoven into family heritage and professional pursuits is a passion for service and community. Before our chat with Kevin, we must take a few moments to thank our supporters of the podcast, WPBS, and the Northern New York Community Foundation. They're responsible for the creation and production of these great stories from the heart of our community.

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Now, to start our conversation with Kevin Kieff, let's go back to the year 1799. Kevin, what happened in that year?

Kevin Kieff: Well, the first ancestor of mine left an area over around Saratoga, and walked into the North Country to see if there was land suitable for farming. And after spending a brief time here, walked back, and gathered up a wife and his first child, and came up through Fort Stanwix and walked into the North Country. History books say that he and his brother put the first tree to an ax in what would become the town of Adams in 1800.

Max DelSignore: So, you did a little bit of research to find this out. Was it, were it family members that told you about this, or did you have to dig into the archives to confirm it?

Kevin Kieff: Actually, I had to dig a little. I knew more of my father's family history, because our grandmother lived with us for many years and would talk about it. But on my mother's side, they weren't as talkative, and Daniel Fox, who was her third-great grandfather, was the one that I discovered. But I actually discovered it in archives down in Adams.

Max DelSignore: Very cool. Now, let's not forget, too, I think an important part of this story is that Mr. Fox lived to be 102, correct?

Kevin Kieff: He did.

Max DelSignore: Which, for that time and era is just amazing.

Kevin Kieff: It was. He was known as a centenarian farmer. It was really unusual for someone in those days to live to that age. His obit said that at the age of 100, he was still putting shingles on the barn.

Max DelSignore: Wow.

Kevin Kieff: And so, it was quite a span. He told stories, so they say, of Revolutionary War, and he actually had two grandsons serve in the Civil War. So, that was quite a span of history.

Max DelSignore: That's an incredible story. You grew up in the village of Cape Vincent, and you describe it previously as an idyllic community. Can you explain what the village was like during your youth?

Kevin Kieff: Well, certainly seemed, to me, at least, growing up there in the late fifties and the early sixties. It was a tight-knit community, you pretty much knew everybody, you and your friends went out and played and your parents sort of sent you out the door without worrying about what was going befall you as you were out, other than normal hijinks, I guess, of kids out on street.

But it just seemed to be a very friendly, nurturing atmosphere to grow up in. I suppose there were things going on that, as kids, we didn't know, but it didn't seem to be quite as contentious in the turmoil that maybe you think of today, and-

Max DelSignore: And you went to school there, right? In the village?

Kevin Kieff: I did. The school I first went to was K-12, until it merged with Clayton and became Thousand Island Central. But I went all of my years at the school right there at the end of Esseltyne Street.

Max DelSignore: Where did your interest in local history, and the tourism industry, which we touch on later in this conversation, where did that come from? And did growing up in Cape Vincent factor into those areas of interest?

Kevin Kieff: I think the history came from my dad and from his mother, my grandmother, that I mentioned had come to live with us toward the end of her life. And she lived to be 93 years old. And they just always talked about their time growing up in Cape Vincent. So, the roots go deep, but my grandmother always referred to her friends, right up until the time she died, pretty much by their maiden names which had long ago faded away, as far as most of my generation would've remembered, but I loved hearing those stories. And they just stuck with me. So, I think that fostered my desire to sorta dig into history and people that came before, particularly.

Max DelSignore: Your father, Henry, was a career firefighter. Retired as a Fort Drum Fire Chief. Your mother, Audrey Dillenback-Kieff, worked in many jobs serving the community in a variety of ways during her 95 years of life.

Max DelSignore: What did you learn most from your parents?

Kevin Kieff: Well, that's a tough one because it was so much. But I guess with respect to our conversation, I learned a great deal about what it was like to grow up in a small community, and to contribute to that community, participate in it, and give back. They were ... We would sit around the dinner table and you just would listen to your parents talk about their engagement and organizations and their daily lives as far as what it was like to be raising a family in a small town.

So, I think I took away from that just a great comfort in the fact that ... again, roots were deep. You were sort of very settled in a community, and how important it was for that community to have its members participate and look after one another, and care about one another, and those were the kind of things that came fairly natural, it seemed, to my parents.

Max DelSignore: You learned quite a bit from the older generation, in your early jobs working on a truck farm, and having a paper route as a youngster. You got to know an influential couple in those early years, too. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Purcell. The story goes, Mr. Purcell was an attorney and financial advisor to Nelson Rockefeller in New York City for close to 25 years. Very successful in the railroad industry, and he made quite a fortune. Doing some archive search, he had given to his alma mater, Cornell University, what's documented, anyway, equaled close to \$20,000,000.

You had said Mr. And Mrs. Purcell bought Deerlick Farm in Cape Vincent in the 1950's and settled into the area, and you actually got a chance to help on that farm. What did you learn from Mr. Purcell and your time being able to help on the farm?

Kevin Kieff: Yeah, well, my dad was a firefighter and he worked 24 hour on, 24 hour off schedules. So, he was always a hard worker. He had grown up learning from his grandfather how to be a gardener, and when Mrs. Purcell bought the farm in the early 1950's, she hired Dad to come as her gardener on the estate. And he worked for her for close to 30 years, doing that. And raised just incredible gardens. The Deerlick Farm was a showcase on the grounds, and I went to work with Dad when I was about 11 years old. So, in the early '60's.

I got to know the Purcells in that respect, from just mowing lawn and being around. They spent all their summers and holiday weekends here at Deerlick, and really picked up just from knowing them and respecting them, the great way that they approached philanthropy and giving back. They never had children, but Mrs. Hazel Purcell took it upon herself to think that ... both of

them thought that education was so important. Mr. Purcell was Chair of the Board at Cornell.

And so, they took on the project of helping first their own family members, nephews and nieces, and then later, family members and children of people that worked for them with their education. And it was a lifelong pursuit, particularly of Mrs. Purcell, to help in that way. And then in later years, in the late '60's, it just celebrated its 50th anniversary, they gave the library to the village of Cape Vincent, and that was a project that both of them loved for the remainder of their lives, was the support of the Cape Vincent Community Library.

Max DelSignore: And you were a beneficiary of their generosity, as well, when you were a youngster. Correct?

Kevin Kieff: I was. My dad having worked for them and then me working for them from the time I was 11, when it came time to go to college, they were very financially supportive of my college education at St. Lawrence, and then subsequently, I think, very pleasing to them when I decided to go to Cornell and get my Master's.

Max DelSignore: Was there any conversation with Mr. Purcell about that, when it came time to pursue the Master's? Did he offer guidance and say, "Cornell's the place to be," or ... ?

Kevin Kieff: No, no, there wasn't. We talked a little bit about undergrad, and I selected St. Lawrence and I can remember them telling that both of them had done quite a bit of research and approved of the choice, even though I think he probably would have preferred that I had gone to Cornell.

But I didn't tell them about my Master's pursuit, just because I didn't want to feel that, by any way if I got in, that I had done it by pulling strings-

Max DelSignore: Oh, I see.

Kevin Kieff: So, I can remember calling them after I'd been accepted, and it was sort of a nice surprise to them.

Max DelSignore: So, after you received your degrees, St. Lawrence, Cornell, you pursued your career in social services. What led you down that path?

Kevin Kieff: Needed a job after college, really. It was not in my ... I went to Cornell for public administration, so in some ways, it was my field. But to come back to the community on Northern New York, Jefferson County, where I had always lived, and go into social services, was a real eye-opener. It showed me a side of life in Jefferson County that frankly, I had not experienced growing up in Cape Vincent.

I worked in foster care. I worked in child abuse and protection. Both of those units, and so I saw a side of society in Jefferson County that I had never before been aware, quite frankly, even existed.

Max DelSignore: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Did that exposure influence or change how you give back to your community in any way?

Kevin Kieff: I think it broadened my, sort of my knowledge of the great need there is in a community, that might have been different from what I would have seen had I not had those positions with the social services and the probation departments, because I guess when I saw my parents giving back, it was to church and to the fire department. They were both very active in the Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star, those types of things.

But the experiences I saw with working in social services, probably gave me a view that leaned more towards the kinds of things that the United Way and the agencies that they supported were dealing with in the North Country that really wasn't a part of my upbringing in Cape Vincent.

Max DelSignore: You transitioned to New York Casualty Insurance Company in Watertown for 17 years before entering the New York State Park system. How did that opportunity come to be?

Kevin Kieff: Quite by surprise, actually. I was with New York Casualty for 17 years; the company was eventually taken over and subsumed into a larger company down in Pennsylvania. So, there began a process of downsizing, and I was one of the last officers of the company to be downsized. And as I was looking for other opportunities, frankly, I just saw in a newspaper article that the position with State Parks had opened up, and made some phone calls and was lucky enough in talking to Senator Jim Wright and Jim Leanna, who at the time was the chair of the Republican party, that I'd be interested in the position. And they were incredibly helpful in sort of guiding me through that process, and the appointment came, so. A bit by luck, I guess.

Max DelSignore: And some connection, too, along the way, within your network.

Kevin Kieff: Yes.

Max DelSignore: You mentioned the position as Director of the Thousand Islands Regions of the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Kevin Kieff: Long title.

Max DelSignore: Very long title! But you mentioned it's an appointed role. So, you had the chance in your 15 years in that position to serve under four different governors of the state.

Kevin Kieff: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Max DelSignore: What was that experience like, knowing that you ... in some respects, had to report to the top to ensure everything was being stewarded the right way?

Kevin Kieff: Well, it was great to receive the initial appointment from Governor Patacki, and then it was a bit nerve-wracking to live through changes of administration, because it was an appointed position. And you knew that you served at the pleasure and displeasure of the governor, and his commissioner. But I felt very fortunate that I was able to transition between administrations, four of them, and three commissioners. So, it was an incredibly, for me, rewarding career.

Max DelSignore: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Your knowledge of area parks is certainly extensive. What park - this might be a tough question, but - what park do you cherish the most? Of the territory that you were responsible for.

Kevin Kieff: Boy, that is a tough question, because we had 24 state parks over four counties, and they all are just incredibly beautiful. They all have their own personality, and ... so, I guess I would pick one that, really, most people wouldn't probably even consider a state park, in the traditional sense, as far as camping and swimming and those kinds of things are concerned.

I became enthralled with Rock Island Lighthouse, which is in the channel of the St. Lawrence River, just west of the Thousand Island Bridge, and it was a property that was owned by Parks, but really was shuttered and unavailable to the public. And just prior to my coming, a grant had been submitted but not successful, to rehabilitate the island, and to get the lighthouse opened up to the public. And so, it was a project that I took on, when we had an opportunity to re-apply for that grant, and felt would be exciting and beneficial to the community. And we were successful and spent many years rehabilitating the facility, and it's a wonderful place. It is considered to be the most intact lighthouse in public domain open to the public, and actually, the tower accessible to people to walk up. The only one in the St. Lawrence chain, going into the Great Lakes. So, it's a great property.

Max DelSignore: So, our North Country explorers out there that are listening, need to go see Rock Island Lighthouse, it sounds like.

Kevin Kieff: They should take the opportunity. It's a great place.

Max DelSignore: Is there another park, too, that you can think of, of the 24 that you really feel is kind of a hidden gem?

Kevin Kieff: Well, another one that's somewhat different and speaks again to philanthropy, was a property that we were able to receive into the state from Bob Wehle and his wife, Gatra. And Mr. Wehle had decided that the property he owned in the town Henderson, when he was done with it and his wife no longer wanted to

live there, should become a state property. And while it initially went to the Department of Environment Conservation, it was deemed that State Parks might be a better fit as far as opening it to the public.

And so, that became the newest state park in the time that I was there, and is a magnificent property of three miles of undeveloped waterfront in Henderson.

So, again, it doesn't have swimming and it doesn't have camping, but it is a wonderful hiking park, and if people had never gone down and taken walks along the trails, on the cliffs that overlook the lake, they really should take that opportunity.

Max DelSignore: You've chosen to give back to the community in myriad ways. What would you say has been the most enjoyable part, or parts, of your personal philanthropy and the things that you've given back to?

Kevin Kieff: Well, I guess it started more in volunteerism than it really did with ... giving of money, although I will say that I think I learned about giving from the earliest times, when you asked what I learned from my mom and dad. It always was a part of the family discussion, particularly about giving to our church. And I can remember, from some of my earliest memories, sitting in the pew and having either Mom or Dad hand me the family envelope of giving, and being able to put it in the collection plate when it passed. And it just made you feel like such a big boy, to be able to participate in that way.

And then from probably as early as they felt, particularly my brother and I and then my sister came along later, that we would be aware of what we were doing. We always had our own envelope for giving, and Dad's pocket change became available on Sunday morning to get your quarter and put it in the envelope, and then when the collection plate was passed, to be able to put it in. So, I think that was a blessing, to learn giving at such an early age and just have it be part of what you learned that people did.

I would have to assume or guess, because I don't really know, but for people that don't learn it early, it must be a bigger challenge because it's sort of nice to have grown up just always assuming that a portion of what you are blessed with, giving in a financial sense is something that you should give away. And I think if you don't learn that early, it might be harder to all of a sudden part with something if it was never a part of your early giving. So, in early giving, I think that was very substantial in molding my view of philanthropy.

But also, a big part of it was just giving of your time and to organizations, and the largest one, for me, was after coming back from college, being asked to serve on the board of the United Way. And just because of the many issues that all of the wonderful agencies that United Way supports, being able to learn about them as we studied, as a board, where money should go that is given

through United Way. And how agencies should be supported, and what their mission was, was a huge impact on me.

Max DelSignore: You had the opportunity to serve at a municipal level, as well, at a very young age being a village trustee in Cape Vincent. Which you had mentioned before, but also, having a four-year stint to serve on the city council in Watertown. What lessons did you take away from that experience, and did that in any way impact how you give, or how you participate in your community?

Kevin Kieff: Yeah, well, I was a government major at St. Lawrence and then went on to get my Master's in public administration, so I had always been interested in public service in that route. And my first job with the county was certainly in a government aspect, but when I decided to, when I first came back to get on the village board in Cape Vincent, it was an eye-opening experience on a very small scale. Just to see how small government operated, and the kind of services that people expected from their government on a local level.

Which was, you know, are the street lights on? And is the plowing done? And somebody comes to pick up the garbage and the village water and sewer services work, and people were pretty happy. Then when I moved to Watertown and ran for a seat on city council, it's just a lot of the same things, just on a bigger scale.

Again, I think my time with the county, more, showed me the societal needs that were, particularly at that time, I think, getting more by agencies than by government. But I've seen that change over time, where agencies still, of course, are critical and very involved, but there's also a much bigger sense that somehow government can help in more of those areas. I'm not sure it helps very efficiently. I certainly do not feel that ... that is an efficient source of community support as non-profit agencies are that really get in and do the work, so I'm not sure that taking tax dollars and thinking the government's gonna be a response to a lot of those issues, is anything that I've learned has been particularly beneficial over the years.

Max DelSignore: What inspires you to give back?

Kevin Kieff: Well ... Inspires me, I'm not sure is exactly how I see it, as far as giving back is concerned. It's always been just ingrained in me that it is almost a, an obligation, and I don't mean to make that sound like that's a bad thing, because it certainly hasn't been for me. I've just felt that I've been blessed. I had a wonderful family and a wonderful upbringing, and extended family with loving grandparents, as well. I've been fortunate enough to almost always have a job, except for the brief downsizing period with the insurance company. And so, it just feels to me that having the opportunity to give a portion of what I've received has been a blessing.

Max DelSignore: Can you share a local example of giving back that has either compelled you to give, or volunteer, or even in just a community example that has really left an impression on you, where you might look at it and say, you know, "That, that is really special and it's making a difference."

Could be a recent example, or it could something from earlier times.

Kevin Kieff: Well, I think what's important, because the examples I'm gonna give are probably on a rather grand scale for most of us to think about, because it's important, I think, for people to give regardless of how much they feel that they're able to give. So, small amounts by many people are just as important as large amounts by a few. Again, the United Way example is a lot of people giving and many in small denominations, to make a big difference.

But the two examples that, really, I look at with people that have achieved a great deal and have still felt that giving to their community was very important, one was, again, Bob and Hazel Purcell and when they made the decision to give the library to the village and town of Cape Vincent. Mrs. Purcell had approached the mayor, as the story goes, in 1967 and said, "I'd like to do something for the community, particularly for the children of the community. Do you have a suggestion?"

And she thought maybe a community center of some sort. And they said, "Well, have you ever seen our library?" And she was introduced to the tiny, little two-room library that I remember going into as a kid, with a teacher's desk that sat just inside the first door, and that's where you learned to be quiet. And then, the musty smell of the donated books, mostly, that were on those shelves. And she walked in and she looked around and turned to the mayor and said, "I've found my project."

And the Cape Vincent Community Library today is just an incredible facility, and eventually mother was a librarian there, sort of a double-edged wonder for me. And then, a couple that I was fortunate enough to get to know and respect greatly, Dick and Mary Macsherry, did the same type of upgrade for the village and town of Alexander Bay in Alexandria. And the beautiful Macsherry Library. So, always feeling that reading is important, and an avenue for people to improve themselves, I thought that those two couples in somewhat modern times, not modern to a lot of people who'd be listening because Cape Vincent Library's now 50 years old, but those were important avenues for me that I felt that that was just an incredible example of local giving.

Max DelSignore: How can philanthropy make a difference in promoting our community's history, as well as efforts in tourism?

Kevin Kieff: Well, promoting history, I think certainly philanthropy can be important in ensuring that we have an ongoing history, because a community needs to be vibrant and healthy in order to really survive and want people to live there, and

to do well, and to feel it's important to be in that community. And certainly through the ages here, I was on the board at Jefferson County Historical Society, so it's a place where history's preserved and people can feel connected to their community, whether they have a longstanding relationship with it, like mine that goes back to 1799, or whether they came here from ... with Fort Drum or for business last year. It's still important to know, I think, the history of your community.

So, on the historical park, I think that's where it fits. On the tourism part, and you know, we're just blessed up here with God-given natural beauty on the tourism part that I was involved with for 15 years, but so, it's just a natural promotion there. But I think when people come and see beyond the natural beauty, sort of a community that's giving and considerate and welcoming and I think all of those things are supported by a healthy philanthropic community.

Max DelSignore: So, you've been retired now for more than three years?

Kevin Kieff: Just, yeah, just three years in September.

Max DelSignore: Are there any other opportunities that you're thinking of, where you'd like to volunteer in the future? Some people have free time when they retire. Others say, "I'm more busy now than when I was working,"

Kevin Kieff: Yeah, I think I'm busy enough. I enjoy it. I laughed when I was getting ready to retire and a friend told me the secret of retirement for the first year is, "Just say no to everything."

But that's never been particularly my strong suit. But I've been involved with Samaritan Keep nursing home and now some village, on the boards for many years, and that gave me a stint on the Samaritan Medical Center board, as well. And that has been ... I like to continue to learn about the community, and being so intimately involved with the healthcare side of Northern New York, through those boards, has been a real eye-opener for me. I find that service on boards, and I think most people would say this, you take so much more from it than you give. It's just an incredible learning experience.

Max DelSignore: To wrap up, I have one more question for you, and I just want you to complete this sentence for me.

"Philanthropy is important to the North Country because ... "

Kevin Kieff: Well, there are so many ways that it's important, but I guess for me, I would say that the most important aspect of vibrant philanthropy in the community is that it really knits together the generations. And I think it brings together so many different aspects of a community and the people that live in it, in a bit of a cohesive pattern that it wouldn't have if it weren't there.

The ability for a community to respond to need, at so many different levels and impacting people ... And the non-profits don't just respond to one particular segment of society. I mean, people of means can be in need of service, and people of meager means, perhaps, never really require services. But when you do, to have that net of help and support there that philanthropy provides, I think, for me, would be the ... it's important.

Max DelSignore:

Well, Kevin, it's been a great pleasure to share this time for your story. We appreciate all your efforts to make our North Country communities a better place to live, professionally and personally, the way that you have. And we thank you for all that you've done.

And that's all for now. We hope you enjoyed this episode of the Northern New York Community Podcast. Remember, every interview is easy to access, and always free whether it's online or on your mobile device, you can find the podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play or other podcast platforms when you search for the Northern New York Community Podcast.

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Our sincere thanks to Kevin Kieff for joining us, and we look forward to having you come back next time for another edition of the Northern New York Community Podcast.