

Charles Kuralt's secret life

The "On the Road" correspondent lived a dual existence for nearly three decades.

By [Bob Anez](#)

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Charles Kuralt, CBS's folksy "On the Road" correspondent, spent years exploring America's out-of-the-way places in search of oddball stories. But the best story may have been the one he never told.

For 29 years, until his death in 1997, he apparently kept a mistress and maintained a second family. The celebrated journalist was, in effect, husband and father to them, as well as breadwinner, friend and hero.

While his wife remained at their home in the concrete canyons of New York City, he nurtured his secret life along a rushing trout stream in Montana.

None of this would come out, however, until after his death, when his mistress, Patricia Elizabeth Shannon, sued to get a Montana retreat he promised her. Montana's Supreme Court ruled last month that the woman is entitled to a trial on her claim.

Kuralt was TV's ruffled Everyman, a bald, pudgy figure renowned for his sonorous voice and eloquent commentary. He died at 62 of complications from lupus on July 4, 1997.

He met the woman he once said "enriched my life beyond all my dreams" the year after he started his "On the Road" travels. At 33, he already was acclaimed for ferreting out quirky vignettes of Americana. He was also six years into his second marriage, to Suzanna "Petie" Flosom Baird, and had two daughters, both from his first marriage.

Shannon was a divorced, 34-year-old social activist and mother of three. She declined to be interviewed, but court documents tell much of their story.

They met in 1968 in Reno, Nev., where Shannon was leading an effort to build a park in a black neighborhood. Tensions were high following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. It was a natural Kuralt story.

He did his reporting job, then asked her to dinner, showing up with three dozen long-stemmed roses. They spent the night sitting and talking in the lounge of Reno's Holiday Motel.

She knew he was married. But with the freedom his travels gave him, Kuralt called her frequently. He visited for two or three days every few weeks. He doted on her, sending gifts and money. He was there for family gatherings, football games, holidays and graduations.

Back in New York, Kuralt's wife was aware her husband had a fishing place in Montana. But according to court files, she had no inkling of his second family. She has declined all interview requests.

Shannon estimated Kuralt sent \$600,000 during the first decade, when their romance was the most intense and they saw each other often.

"Charles always said, his refrain through all of his life, 'Don't worry, we're rich,' he would say. ... He was the breadwinner of the family," Shannon recalled. "Charles took care of all my needs."

He provided Shannon and her children with a succession of homes in San Francisco. He spent as much as \$400,000 to help her start a small business that eventually failed and paid for her to study landscaping in London.

He paid for her son, J.R., to attend college in Arizona and put Shannon's elder daughter, Kathleen Baker, through law school.

He bought Shannon a \$50,000 cottage in Ireland and purchased 20 acres along the banks of the Big Hole River in Montana. They built a cabin there.

Kuralt bought an additional 90 acres abutting the land and moved an old schoolhouse to a bluff overlooking the river. He spent \$180,000 to renovate the school into an office, where he planned to write after his retirement.

The few letters from Kuralt to Shannon that are in the court file contain little romance. However, a handwritten, undated Christmas poem comes close.

Titled "What I Will Give You (A Christmas IOU)," the verse promised: "A string of pearls, a suit and sweater, a Rubens print, a holly tree, and me. A mixing bowl, a sofa and chair, a set of china, a butcher's knife. My life."

Kuralt also inscribed Shannon's copy of his 1995 book "Charles Kuralt's America" this way: "To Pat, who enriched my life beyond all my dreams. Love, Charles."

Kuralt sometimes signed notes to Kathleen and J.R. as "Pop." In a 1995 letter to J.R., Kuralt enclosed money and wrote: "I love you like a son, even though I have been an often-distracted father."

"Charles was basically a father to me," Kathleen said at a court hearing. "He gave me some of my first driving lessons. He was there at all the holidays."

As the relationship wore on, Shannon became increasingly frustrated with Kuralt's unwillingness to leave his wife.

"I always thought he would get a divorce at some point," she said in a deposition. "I went through bouts of despair and there were arguments, but we never directly talked about -- about his life in New York. I knew it existed. ... I did not inquire into it and he didn't discuss it with me."

The situation worsened after Kuralt's "On the Road" assignment ended in 1980, when he became host of CBS's "Sunday Morning." With his schedule less flexible, he traveled less and spent more time in New York.

Still, they would usually rendezvous for three weeks each September. They backpacked the mountains. He loved to go fly-fishing in meandering creeks; she would sit on the banks nearby and read.

Three months before he died, Kuralt orchestrated a mock sale to hide the fact he was giving Shannon the original Montana property. He sent her \$80,000; she used it to buy the 20 acres and the cabin they had built.

The court fight is over the other land and schoolhouse, valued at \$600,000. Kuralt's will, written in 1994, left the property to his wife.

Shannon contends his last letter to her, two weeks before his death, conveyed their Montana home to her. It read: "I'll have the lawyer visit the hospital to be sure you inherit the rest of the place in MT, if it comes to that."

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