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INDEPENDENT

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New folklife center director bring love of lore

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By **JOHN FLOWERS**

MIDDLEBURY — Brent Bjorkman developed a passion for history and folklore as a young child who would listen, spellbound, as his grandfather told him stories about his Scandinavian ancestry.

Years later, Bjorkman is the person delivering the stories, as the new executive director of the Vermont Folklife Center (VFC) in Middlebury.

Bjorkman, 42, has been on the job for around five weeks now. He recently took over for the legendary Jane Beck, who retired after more than two decades at the helm of the VFC, which she founded. It was Beck's legacy and the skilled staff that remains at the VFC that prompted Bjorkman to apply for the top job at the organization, which has moved into new digs in the historic John Warren House at 88 Main St. in Middlebury.

"It was Jane's vision this whole time that I will be carrying out far into the future, with the help of a staff and board that has always been such a part of the visioning process," Bjorkman said on Thursday.

Bjorkman began his professional life as a schoolteacher, but decided to pursue a new calling after seeing an exhibit showcasing Scandinavian folk art at a museum in Santa Fe, N.M. The exhibit showed, among other things, how historic crafts and art forms receive individual twists and tweaks as they are passed on from generation to generation.

"That's really when I found out that folklore was a dynamic process; it's not static in the past," Bjorkman said. "It's certainly based in the past, but it's the dynamic nature of it that propelled me forward."

Bjorkman decided to immerse himself in the study of material culture, ethnology and traditional wood design by doing post-graduate work at the Vasterber Folk High School in Sandviken, Sweden.

He returned to the United States in 1996 and earned a master's degree in folk studies from Western Kentucky University. In 1998, he was hired as a folklife specialist with the

Kentucky Folklife Program, during which he presided over many folklife projects and developed education outreach programs, among other things.

He most recently served as associate director of the American Folklore Society, based in Columbus, Ohio. He jumped at the chance to apply for the VFC position, when he learned earlier this year that it would be open. He became even more enamored of the job after interviewing and meeting his prospective colleagues.

“I felt connected to the staff right away, and that’s one of the reasons I wanted to come here,” Bjorkman said.

He also relished the opportunity to return to the folklife arena at a grassroots level, where he will become more involved with collecting and disseminating information.

“I wanted to get back to doing some real community-based programming work as a public folklorist,” Bjorkman said.

The VFC currently boasts an inventory of around 5,000 ethnographic interviews — recorded chats with Vermonters of all walks of life who have imparted skills, anecdotes and stories of a bygone age. Since the majority of those interviews are on tape — a medium that is subject to deterioration — the VFC under Bjorkman’s guidance will be working diligently to digitize, for all time, its compilation of interviews.

To that end, the VFC is installing a mastering/recording studio in the lower level of its new headquarters. Amy Kolovos — one of the top archivists in the state — will preside over the digitization of the VFC’s many interviews, which may ultimately be accessible on-line.

Bjorkman’s priorities for the coming years include forging more educational partnerships with area schools, Middlebury College and the University of Vermont; attracting visitors to the VFC’s new headquarters; doing more to chronicle the state’s immigrant population, including the growing Bosnian and Somali communities; and refining the center’s on-site learning tools, including its iPod listening stations and video offerings.

“It’s almost a hand-in-glove kind of thing, because of the focus of that four-year institution and the humanities-based discipline,” Bjorkman said of the VFC’s logical relationship with Middlebury College. “Having those students ... perhaps practice and doing projects with us, if that might fit in with instructors and interested students, I think that would be a wonderful thing.”

The center is scheduled to formally unveil its new headquarters in early November.

He believes people will like what they see.

“Things are finally coming together,” Bjorkman said. “We want to make sure we are fully functional.”