PATRICIA SHANNON BAKER

At A Glance:

Born: December 23, 1933, San Diego, Calif.,

Died: April 16, 2018, Port Townsend, Washington

Maiden Name: Patricia Elizabeth Shannon

Married: James Robert Baker,
Hurschel Calvin McKenzie

Children: Kathleen Baker, J.R. Baker, Shannon Baker

Primary Cities/Counties of Residence/Work: Reno, Washoe County, Nev.; Port Townsend, Wash.; Twin Bridges, Montana; Conamara, Ireland

Major Fields of Work: Public relations, community leader, author

Other Role Identities: Mother



Patricia Shannon Baker
From *Charles and Me*

Public relations professional spearheaded Reno park

Patricia (Pat) Shannon Baker is best known in Reno for organizing the construction of an "Instant Park" on Montello Drive, and for writing a book about her infamous 30-year relationship with a famous married TV newsman.

Born in San Diego in 1933 to John Charles Shannon and Wanda Beatrice Jackson Shannon. Baker came to Reno at the age of 2, attended Reno schools, including the University of Nevada. She worked for a local bank for a while.

In 1951, she impressed members of the Reno Restaurant Association when she had a photo taken of one of their dinner meetings, and had it processed and printed between the appetizers and the dessert, so it could be distributed to guests before they left, which at the time was a herculean feat.

In 1960, she was awarded a Best Sport award at a Dick Graves-sponsored golf tournament.

At the age of 29, in 1963, she wrote an angry letter to the editor of the *Nevada State Journal*, stating she was a divorced mother of three children who came to the police station and attempted to pay several overdue parking tickets. She said she worked as a copywriter at an ad agency, and even though she was $20 short of the debt, her boss was willing to cover it. Nonetheless, the police put her in jail for a few hours, which she called a humiliating experience, until her debt was paid. She called for a change in policy.

In her northern Nevada public relations career, she worked for the Carson Mall, the Tyson-Curtis Advertising company, and Sierra Pacific Power Company.

The 1968 slaying of Martin Luther King, Jr, inspired her to do something for her community. She eyed an unused block of Reno on Montello Street, in a mostly black neighborhood, and started a campaign to change it into a park for underserved children. The lot was owned by the Washoe County School District, but not used for a school, so she campaigned to have it donated to the city of Reno. But she knew she needed publicity to make her dream a reality. She heard that a CBS newsman named Charles Kuralt was just starting to roam the country doing stories for his new "On the Road" series. She proposed he come to Reno to learn about her "Instant Park" idea. He did, and their lives were never the same.

She recruited hundreds of volunteers to go door-to-door to sell $1 shares in her park idea, and hundreds more to actually do the physical labor needed. She got landscapers, electricians, and construction companies to donate the supplies and labor needed. Work on the park began on a Friday morning in July, and by Sunday evening, there was a full park, complete with gazebo, splash pool, basketball court, tables, and grass, where once a weed-covered lot stood. And covering it all were the national news cameras of "On the Road." Kuralt said in his story,

> "Almost lost in this crowd is a slight pretty woman named Pat Baker. The whole crazy idea of building a park in two days was hers. The night Martin Luther King was killed, she sat up late, as so many people did … thinking the things so many people thought … thinking she had to do something. The difference between Pat Baker and most other people is that after talking to her employer, the Sierra Pacific Power Company, and to people in the neighborhood, and to tough-minded contractors she'd never met before, she was able to figure out what to do. Her idea became theirs, too, and now they're pouring concrete, and Pat Baker is watching her dream happen out here in the sun."

When the park was dedicated in front of 500 people, she was surprised to find it was named Pat Baker Park. And a later story in the *Nevada State Journal* said the park was becoming a "parental problem" for the neighborhood, referring to the fact that children never wanted to leave the park and come home. The tidy park still stands, a cornerstone of its neighborhood, and has been renovated over the years. The splash pool is gone, the basketball court area is larger, and a new play structure has been built.

Charles Kuralt invited Pat Baker to dinner at the end of that hectic weekend and arrived to pick her up carrying three dozen red roses. She introduced him to her three children and her mother. He took her to dinner at a hotel, and they sat in the lobby all night talking about their lives and hopes and dreams. He was 33 at the time, and she was 34. He had a wife and two children, and an ex-wife, all of whom he supported. It was to be the beginning of a secret, intense 30-year relationship between the two that was kept quiet until his death of lupus and heart failure on the 4th of July 1997. He had become an acting father to her children, giving Pat's son his first baseball mitt and later an internship at CBS, and even sending two of her children to college. He saw her frequently, under the guise of being "on the road," so his New York family never knew, and he sent her more than a half million dollars in support money and gifts.

In early 1969, she was presented with the Promotion Award from Printers Ink Magazine at a Reno Advertising Club function for her "leadership in the greater Reno area." Later

that same year, she left Sierra Pacific Power to work for the state of Nevada's Employee Security Department. Shortly after, with the help of Governor Paul Laxalt, the brother of her friend, author Robert Laxalt, Baker went from Reno to San Francisco to work in the public information office of the Department of Labor there, but soon found it got in the way of her time with Kuralt. She quit and started her own women's rights consulting firm, Pat Shannon Baker and Associates. That did not provide her enough money to live on, so Kuralt supported her. While in the Bay Area, she and her daughter also started a company making bespoke soup broths, called San Francisco Stocks, which folded after her mother convinced her it was too much physical labor for too little monetary reward.

At one point she wanted to learn more about her ancestral home, so Kuralt took her to Ireland. In Conamara, they found an old cottage, named Derrynavglaun, which they bought and rebuilt. When she wanted to landscape it, she decided she needed to learn more about landscape design, so he paid for her classes at the Inchbald School of Design in London.

The two celebrated holidays together, vacationed with her family together, and eventually bought a 20-acre property in Montana along the Big Hole River. They had a cabin built and later bought 70 more acres near it. They moved and transformed an old one-room schoolhouse into his office. It became their getaway place, where she said they shared many happy times together. Even though their relationship had somewhat cooled in later years, as it became clear he would never leave his wife Petie; when he became gravely ill and was hospitalized, he wrote Pat Shannon Baker a note stating that she would get the cabin but did not have time to have it written into his will before he died.

That led to a lengthy legal dispute between Pat Shannon Baker and Kuralt's New York family about those 20 acres, the cabin, the schoolhouse, and the 70 extra acres, all worth over $600,000, that eventually ended up in the Montana Supreme Court, which issued four separate rulings in the matter. The upshot being that Shannon was awarded the property, but Kuralt's daughters would have to pay the estate taxes on the prime fishing property. She later turned the property into the Bluebird Fishing Camp, which still exists. Bluebird was a name given to the newsman by the Kiowa Indian Tribe 30 years earlier. It has two cabins that can be rented out to fishermen and nature lovers. She also honored Charles Kuralt with a musical celebration there in honor of Kuralt's heroes, the explorers Lewis and Clark.



Pat Shannon testifying in Montana property trial.
Roanoke Times, 1998

Pat Shannon wrote about the relationship in her memoir, *Charles and Me, Notes in the Margin*, which was released by Four Courts Press in Dublin, Ireland, in 2002. In the book, she used a photo of Charles, her mother and her three kids all looking tidy and smiling, while she herself looks disheveled, and said, "That picture…has been reprinted in newspapers all over the states, accompanying stories

trying to make sense of our lives. One look at the picture should have ended the discussion. There was no sense in our lives."

She also did several interviews, after the affair became public. In one, with the *Baltimore Sun*, regarding Kuralt keeping her a secret, she said she felt he did what many rich and powerful men do, and that's compartmentalizing their lives so one part never meets the other. They argued about the arrangement occasionally, but it didn't change the relationship.

Before that, she wrote *The Man Who Stayed Home: A Conamara Memoir*, from Twelve Bens Press, 1997, a nostalgic look at life in rural Ireland, with its community bonds, storytelling, and dramatic landscapes. It was not well received by the people she wrote about.

After Kuralt died, she divided her time between Ireland and Montana for 15 years. Later in life, she split her time between homes in Port Townsend, Wash., and the property in Twin Bridges, Montana.

Pat Shannon Baker died in Port Townsend, Washington, on April 16, 2018.

Books Written:

1997 *The Man Who Stayed Home.* Twelve Bens Press.
2002 *Charles and Me: Notes in the Margin.* Four Courts Press, Portland, Oregon.

Researched by Patti Bernard, written by Kitty Falcone

Sources of information

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