



David Weintraub is the executive director of ECO and an award-winning documentary filmmaker and author.

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## The other sides of ECO's David Weintraub

by **BETH BEASLEY**  
Times-News Correspondent

**A**s a young child growing up in Long Island and Brooklyn, David Weintraub was mesmerized by the souvenir snow globes his grandparents gave him. Peering into them like crystal balls, he would dream about faraway people and places.

When his mom, a librarian at his elementary school, played a magic carpet ride game with her young students, Weintraub was captivated. The kids would close their eyes and imagine being whisked across a wide sea to another country.

"When we opened our eyes, she would be dressed in the clothing of another place and she'd tell folk tales from that country, serve some tasty treats from the place and play guitar and sing some of their songs," Weintraub says.

These childhood experiences sparked what would become Weintraub's relentless quest to preserve disappearing slices of American culture.

"I learned at an early age that through our folk tales and values that our cultural tapestry has a great deal of common ground," Weintraub says.

In Western North Carolina, Weintraub is best known as the executive director of ECO, the Environmental

and Conservation Organization, based in downtown Hendersonville. Less known are his considerable achievements in documentary filmmaking, book writing and editing.

"My passions are protecting the environment and preserving culture," Weintraub says.

### Cultural preservation

Tall with a faint goatee and salt and pepper hair, Weintraub is a skilled communicator, a trait enhanced by his legal training. At 51, he's a veritable renaissance man.

When the former civil rights lawyer is not working at his full-time job defending the environment, he's produc-

ing award-winning documentary films and writing and editing books.

Last year he founded the Center for Cultural Preservation in WNC, he's a member of the bar in four states and the District of Columbia, he's Dad to 7-year-old Jonah and he's been married for 18 years to Liz Ryan-Weintraub, his college sweetheart and former lawyer who now works as a pediatric nurse at Mission Hospitals in Asheville.

To relax, Weintraub loves to hike, kayak, play mandolin and spend time with his family and pets — two cats, fish and Jonah's various sea critters — at their home in the Tranquility area of Flat Rock.

What's more, Weintraub is working on a new documentary about the heritage of native cultures in Western North Carolina tentatively titled "Changing Landscapes — The Changing Face of Southern Appalachian Culture and Tradition."

"The film would look at how culture and traditions prospered in the mountains and also how they informed land practices," Weintraub says. "From the Cherokee to the Scots-Irish/English emigrants as well as the African-American community — their blood was that soil."

Weintraub has started an oral history portion of the project. He's looking for volunteers and donors who would like to help fund the project, which he estimates will cost \$200,000. He hopes to release "Changing Landscapes" in the summer of 2012.

"We'll go back in history but also look at younger generations and how culture is being carried on," Weintraub says. "The Steep Canyon Rangers, the up-and-coming bluegrass band, is participating as are many others."

### An evolving path

While growing up in Brooklyn and Long Island, Weintraub's experience

with nature was limited to "pigeons, crab grass and telephone poles."

Thankfully, Weintraub's parents, both teachers, took him to the great outdoors for vacations.

"They whisked us out of the big city to the mountains of the Adirondacks in the summer. Once I got a taste of the mountains, I could never let go. That's part of what brought me here," he says.

During his years in South Florida, Weintraub longed for the mountains. He and his wife decided to move to this part of the Blue Ridge in 2005



David Weintraub sits with some films and books he has worked on.

after years of vacationing in Hendersonville.

"The sound of crickets and bullfrogs got into my blood," he says. "We wanted Jonah to be raised as part of a community where people care about each other."

As an undergrad student at Stony Brook University in New York, Weintraub was pre-med. But a college experience advocating for migrant farm workers influenced him to pursue a life outside medicine.

"Over time I realized I could do more as an activist than a medical doctor," Weintraub says.

From 1980 to 1990 Weintraub

served as operations manager for Philadelphia Concerned Legal Professionals. The organization offered support for basic services and legal assistance to Philadelphia's low-income community. Weintraub helped establish a legal and medical clinic and won numerous battles for the community.

In 1991, Weintraub started attending Touro Law School in Long Island. While working on his degree, Weintraub started laying the groundwork for the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture. He named the center, dedicated to cultural preservation, to

honor his Aunt Dora Teitelboim, a Yiddish poet.

A year after receiving a law degree from Touro Law School in Long Island in 1994, the couple moved to the warmer climes of Miami. Weintraub established the Center for Yiddish Culture in Miami and served as its executive director until 2007.

"It was originally set up as a way to keep Yiddish literature alive

through publishing, but my aspirations for it grew after I moved to Miami," he says.

In 1995, Weintraub landed a position as executive director for the Volunteer Lawyers Project for the Southern District of Florida. He spent four years at that job, managing a heavy case load of civil rights cases, representing some of the clients himself.

"I loved helping clients but hated dealing with lawyers and judges," he says.

All the while, he continued to feed his cultural preservation ambitions as head of the nonprofit Center for Yiddish Culture. Weintraub



**David Weintraub with his son Jonah.**

wrote or edited a dozen published books, ranging from poetry and children's books to Jewish fables and a bilingual picture book.

The center, which suffered some financial setbacks in later years, had an art gallery and hosted multicultural programs, as well as music and writing contests. Weintraub's new organization, the Center for Cultural Preservation, [www.saveculture.org](http://www.saveculture.org), is an evolution of the Center for Yiddish Culture.

Weintraub's goal for the Center of Cultural Preservation is to help breathe new life into forgotten or vanishing cultural legacies through oral history projects, documentary filmmaking, and developing online resources and books.

"I've always been a strong believer in expanding my horizons and stretching myself, which is why I've had so many careers," Weintraub says. "I've seen them as one big continuum."

So far, his career path has been a fulfilling journey.

"I've thought about making some actual money someday, but I always end up in the nonprofit world," he says. "I've worked for nonprofits for over 30 years because that's where all

the actions is. I believe in living a purposeful life and trying to make a difference wherever I've lived."

## ECO

You can see the compassion in Weintraub's large brown eyes as he talks about his projects and his work to preserve the environment and the cultures of marginalized communities.

After taking over the helm at ECO in 2007, Weintraub used skills honed from his years as a public interest lawyer and head of nonprofits.

"I'm a big fan of David's," says Katie Breckheimer, who served as president of ECO's board of directors until the end of last year. "I believe he has taken ECO to a whole new level."

Weintraub spearheaded some long-range strategic planning that was sorely needed, Breckheimer says. In the process, he has increased ECO's income from grants and major donors.

The nonprofit ECO works to protect Western North Carolina's natural heritage through advocacy and education focusing on green infrastructure, water quality, recycling and green energy.

"David's skill and prior experience in working with nonprofits made him a good fit for ECO," Breckheimer says.

"His writing ability and his political savvy are a real asset."

His biggest environmental coup so far? Working with the city of Hendersonville, an out-of-town developer and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help protect and restore about 50 acres of sensitive wetlands next to Jackson Park.

"It was a win-win for the developer and the environment," he says. "Hopefully this plan will go forward once the economy recovers."

## Films to remember

As part of his mission to help preserve culture, Weintraub has produced two award-winning documentaries. The first, "Where the Neon Goes to Die," premiered in Miami in 2007. The film chronicles the 60-year Yiddish cultural legacy in Miami Beach, using rare footage and images and interviews with living members of Miami's Yiddish stage and screen.

Weintraub delved deep to uncover the thriving Yiddish culture in the Miami of the mid-20th Century — a heyday of Jewish literary groups, Yiddish theater and radio, and circles of musicians playing all-night sessions on the beach.

That culture began rapidly disappearing when the Art Deco revival on South Beach and the "Miami Vice" phenomenon caused property values to soar, forcing many longtime residents from their homes.

"There's a cultural amnesia," Weintraub says. "We've neglected cultural traditions that have been so rich in America."

"Where Neon Goes to Die" was dubbed Best Documentary in South Florida in 2008 by the Miami New Times and has been screened at dozens of film festivals.

"David has contributed greatly to our understanding of this community's past," says Paul George, a professor of history at Miami Dade College and the resident historian for the Historical Association of Southern Florida.

"His film on Yiddish movies in the

heart of today's South Beach opened a window on the different South Beach of just 30 years ago," says George, a historical adviser to the film. "Ironically, these movies were screened in a venue that today is one of the district's hottest nightclubs."

Creatively, Weintraub says he felt most fulfilled when "Where Neon Goes to Die" aired on several PBS stations in South Florida and Southern California.

A second documentary, "The Golden Side of the Tracks," won Best Local Film at the 2009 Miami Short Film Festival and is tentatively scheduled to air on public television in 2011. It's a documentary about Overtown, once a flourishing community of black culture on the north side of Miami, where jazz greats Ella Fitzgerald and Cab Calloway went to play in all-night sessions after gigs in beach neighborhoods. Overtown suffered economically after so-called urban improvements in the 1960s. The area was bisected by the construction of Interstate 95, which resulted in mass evictions, business closures and loss of community cohesion.

"His documentary on Overtown brought to life the richness of that community's past, which has been all but obliterated over the past half century with highway construction and urban renewal," George says.

The area now is threatened by gentrification and rampant high-rise condominium construction, but local nonprofits and community organizers are taking stands to preserve residents' rights as well as the area's heritage and livability.

In the process of working on all of his documentaries, Weintraub made a profound discovery. Whether he's talking to elderly Jews on South Beach, residents of the black community in Overtown or natives of Western North Carolina, Weintraub hears a positive, connecting thread in their lives.

"All of these folks didn't have two

dimes to rub together, yet they felt wealthy because they had everything they needed to make them happy — family, close friendships, cultural celebrations, religious affiliations, living close to the earth," he says. "In many ways, hearing their stories makes it clear that our definition of wealth and happiness today is somewhat misplaced."

"The Golden Side of the Tracks," which runs 35 minutes, premiered at the 2009 Asheville Film Festival. It then appeared at a Miami theater and in Overtown, an emotional experience Weintraub won't forget anytime soon. He loved watching the faces of the Overtown residents whose lives he had chronicled as they watched the film.

"Their bittersweet tears and laughter as they reflect upon their life makes it all worthwhile," he says.

The film also screened in February at the Henderson County Main Library to help honor Black History Month. The event was followed by a panel discussion featuring three women from Hendersonville's black community. "So often these untold, forgotten stories, when they finally see the light of day, are some of the most provocative and meaningful of all," he says.

### Looking ahead

In his free time — hard as that is to imagine — Weintraub and his son Jonah, a second-grader at Atkinson Elementary School, are writing a children's book together.

"Jonah and His Yiddish Kite" tells the story of a young boy traveling back to the old world of his grandparents' original home in Eastern Europe to earn respect and love for their ways of life.

Partly autobiographical, the story reflects what Weintraub dreamed about when gazing into the snow globes his grandparents would send him as a child from their retirement home in Miami.

When asked to name his proudest accomplishment thus far, Weintraub

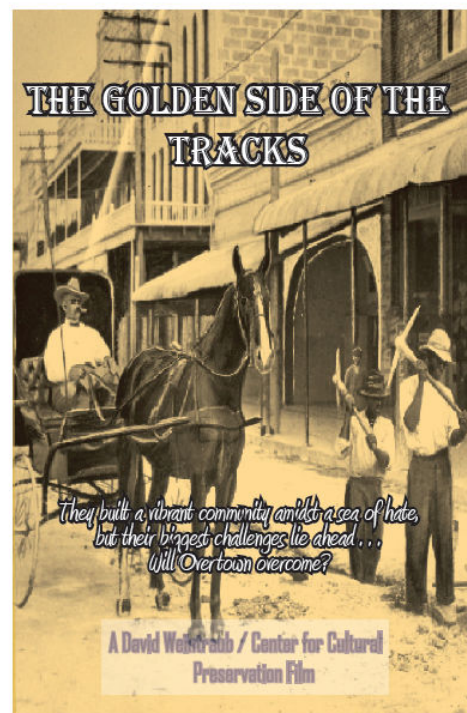
doesn't hesitate: "Raising a son, who like me, loves to surround himself in nature and to take advantage of the mountain trails and waterways that this sacred place has to offer."

In the near and more distant future, Weintraub hopes to keep connecting the dots that link his passions. He knows he'll always work with the environment.

"I also know that I'll be working to tell the untold stories of America's rich cultural legacies to make the invisible visible again," Weintraub says. "I suppose if I could wave my magic wand and choose to do anything, I'd like to concentrate more on documentary filmmaking. It's just hard to make a living doing it, and I have no interest in doing commercial filming."

Where will that lead him in the next 10 to 20 years? He's guessing it will be an outgrowth of what he's doing today.

"I'll be looking for the next door to open," Weintraub says, "and when it does, I'll come knocking."



Weintraub's latest film, *Golden Side of the Tracks*.