

Anthropology Professor Jack Weatherford Honored in Mongolia

To promote its country's culture and heritage, Mongolia has created a foundation and prize in honor of DeWitt Wallace Professor of Anthropology Jack Weatherford, an expert in Mongolian history and culture. On January 27, 2012—the 25th anniversary of the establishment of U.S.–Mongolian diplomatic relations—the foundation will issue its first Jack Weatherford Prize and medal.



The medal, modeled on the one given to winners of the Pulitzer Prize, will be awarded annually to the author of the best book or other work of scholarship about Mongolian history or culture written in the Mongolian language.

Because 2012 is also the 850th anniversary of the birth of Genghis Khan, the office of the President of Mongolia also has arranged for audio book recordings of Weatherford's books, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* and *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, to be played at all Mongolia's sacred sites.

The following is an interview conducted recently with Weatherford.

Q: There's now a Mongolian medal in your honor. Have you yourself received any medals in Mongolia?

A: I received the nation's highest medal, the Order of the Polar Star, in 2007 from President Enkhbayar, and in 2010 received the Friendship Medal from President Elbegdorj.

Q: Tell us about the audio recordings of your books that are being placed at the sacred sites.

A: Mongolians have a deep sense of history and are incredibly committed to honoring the environment around them. Various rituals are performed to honor mountains, rivers, and lakes with prayers, libations of milk or vodka, and songs. Because 2012 is the 850th anniversary of the birth of Genghis Khan, officials decided that playing my audio books would be a good way to honor these sacred sites and to show that the Mongols have not forgotten their history. Since the books were written by a foreigner, they also demonstrate that the whole world remembers the deeds of the great Mongols of the past.

Q: What does that mean to you?

A: For a scholar to find so much acceptance and appreciation is a truly great honor, but I always remember the scholars of a century ago who lost their lives in Mongolia for doing what I am now free to do. The honor goes to them, for they kept Mongolian scholarship alive in the most difficult circumstances. Through my work I hope to pass along their work to the next generation.

Q: You and your wife, Walker Weatherford, spend your summers in Mongolia. What makes Mongolia so special to you both?

A: Walker and I are now legal residents of Mongolia and spend five months a year in our home there. I have

learned more from seeing how the Mongolians deal with Walker, who has multiple sclerosis, than from all the books I've read. She is in a wheelchair, mostly paralyzed, and barely able to speak. Of course, in Mongolia there are no special facilities for disabled people; the streets and sidewalks are a jumble of broken cement and open holes. Yet when we step out of our building, hands always appear. No one says, "May I help you?" They simply do it and disappear, expecting no thanks. I never have to ask for help. Every week a few musicians come by to play the horse-head fiddle and sing for Walker, in the belief that music is the best medicine. Pop singers and hip-hop groups have come for the same purpose, saying that it will keep our home warm. One singer who spoke no English learned to sing "Only You" by The Platters because it's a song Walker loves. People from all over the countryside send us dairy products. Our kitchen is usually full of yoghurt, hard cream, curds, mare's milk, mutton, horse ribs, and wild berries. Lamas, shamans, and healers come by to offer prayers, incense, herbal teas, chants, massage, and other forms of traditional treatments. Even strangers send camel wool or cashmere blankets, shawls, and socks to keep Walker warm. Mongolia has welcomed us with a care and warmth I can scarcely comprehend. The greatest honor for the two of us is not any official recognition but these daily acts of concern, along with the young parents who have asked us to name their newborn children. Their request illustrates how much they want to keep the connection with their past and pass it on to their children. I feel that through these children whom we have named, Walker and I will be a part of Mongolia for another generation, long after we are gone.

Q: If someone wanted to visit Mongolia, when should they travel and what would you recommend they see?

The best months to visit Mongolia are from July through the end of September when the grass is green and the animals are well fed. Little time is needed in the city; the true Mongolian experience is in the countryside. You'll need a car and driver since there are few roads and only local drivers will know the way. There's a wonderful two-week loop from the capital south to the Gobi, northwest to the old Mongol capital at Karakorum on the Orkhon River, and east through the wild horse area and back to the city. There are camps along the way where you can stay in a *ger* (the Mongolian tent or yurt) and get good food. Otherwise, there are no hotels or restaurants.

January 25 2012

- [About Macalester \(http://www.macalester.edu/about/\)](http://www.macalester.edu/about/)
- [Academics \(http://www.macalester.edu/academics/\)](http://www.macalester.edu/academics/)
- [Admissions & Financial Aid \(http://www.macalester.edu/admissions/\)](http://www.macalester.edu/admissions/)
- [Life at Mac \(http://www.macalester.edu/lifeatmac/\)](http://www.macalester.edu/lifeatmac/)
- [Support Mac \(http://www.macalester.edu/supportmac/\)](http://www.macalester.edu/supportmac/)