Mary Wesley: Hello, welcome to VT Untapped, a podcast from the Vermont Folklife Center that explores the state through the voices of its own residents. I’m Mary Wesley.

Upbeat cello begins, and plays under narration.

This is the third episode in a series where we’ll talk to people around the state about what they’re going through and what they’re thinking about in 2020. In this episode we’ll meet some traditional artists who are continuing to practice and create throughout the pandemic.

The artists you’ll meet in this show are part of the latest cohort of the VFC’s Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program -- we call it “VTAAP,” for short. Now in its 28th year, We established VTAAP to support the vitality of Vermont's living cultural heritage. Traditional arts are often perceived as primarily--or even exclusively--tied to the past, but we see them as living practices, constantly evolving and changing to meet the unfolding needs of the people who care about them. Traditional art draws on the past, but is continually refined and shaped by needs and perspectives of the present.

At the top of the show you heard Gopal Niroula and his daughter, Isika. Isika was singing a traditional Nepali song, while Gopal played Tabla, a double hand drum. Gopal and Isika are one of 18 pairs of master artists and apprentices who were accepted into VTAAP this year. Today you’ll hear from three different pairs: Gopal and Isika studying Nepali music in Essex Junction, Kate and Jude in Marshfield practicing traditional French Canadian weaving, and Heather and Wolf learning stone carving in Barre.

By providing assistance to a community-acknowledged master of a traditional form and one or more apprentices, VTAAP works to establish relationships that foster direct, interpersonal--and often intergenerational--learning. The goal is to support the continuation, sustainability, and ongoing relevance of traditional practices in the state.

The program focuses on activities rooted in the shared identity of the communities that practice them. That identity might be cultural, regional, tribal, ethnic, occupational--any of the deep connections that define who we are in relation to one another. Traditional forms supported by the program over the years have included Abenaki basketry and dance, Yankee and Franco-American fiddling, Somali Bantu instrument making, memorial stone carving in Barre, Japanese Ikebana, Congolese Dance, and Tibetan dranyan performance among hundreds of others. VTAAP is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and donors around the state.
Of course - we've all been thrown a major curveball (or several) in 2020, and when we opened up the application process this summer I'll admit that we were a little concerned about whether or not people would have space to continue practicing their artforms amidst the challenges of the pandemic—or find ways to safely work and learn together. We shouldn’t have worried. If traditional arts are a way to make meaning in the world and stay connected within community, this might be the time that we need them the most.

*Upbeat cello begins, and continues under narration.*

We don’t have space in this episode to present all 15 projects that VTAAP is supporting this year, so today we’re starting with just three. Let’s begin by properly meeting Gopal and Isika. Of course, we are doing all of our fieldwork and site visits remotely this year, so all of these recordings were recorded in Zoom.

**Gopal Niroula:** My name is Gopal, I was born in Bhutan, [town name]. It is one of the smallest Asian country. And then when I was like eight years old, I left Bhutan with my parents because of the cruel government. And then I stayed in Nepal for like 22 years as a refugee. And in 2014, in November 2014, I came to the United States, especially in Vermont, and then like I love music, I used to play different kinds of musical instrument when I was in Nepal, like tabla, piano, flute. And then, yeah, I'm very much interested in music. And then yeah for of my children, I think that I can help them, I can help them to grow, they're like music, but stuff like that.

When I was in Nepal, when I was in the refugee camp, we didn’t have any kind of like net, any Internet. But when I went to different parts of Nepal, I used to be the teacher in Nepal. I used to teach English you know. And then from YouTube and from some of the social media I learn, like, flute and tabla. And then I didn't have any teacher for music for me especially. I learned myself because of my interest. And then I do play Tabla, is two drums. I think you are familiar with that. And then I play flute from mouth and nose also.

**Isika Niroula:** I really like Nepali music for a lot of reasons, and I really like playing so much instruments because I want to one day I want to go on stage and play those instruments. And I really enjoy playing like I really enjoy singing and like dancing. I love dancing. And I really want to practice the harmonium because I feel like practicing the harmonium could make you get even better at music and stuff. So I really enjoy playing the tabla and I really enjoy dancing. I sing a lot of songs as well, but I have never sang a song in the stage and I'm trying to practice. Maybe after this pandemic I might go to a stage and sing and maybe by then I might have learned the harmonium.

**Gopal Niroula:** We know it's around more than 90,000 Bhutanese Nepali people are in the United States, though most of them were born in Bhutan. But we live most of our life in Nepal, and then we always think about Nepal, we don't think about Bhutan. You know, we don't like to go back to Bhutan again. But we will go, everyone will go to Nepal and visit there, and the music that we play is related with the Nepali culture.
Mary Wesley: For those who may not be familiar with the resettled Bhutanese Nepali refugee communities in Vermont, families like Gopal’s have undergone a harrowing series of displacements on their journey to New England. Starting generations ago, people from various ethnic groups in Eastern Nepal settled in Southern Bhutan. After being targeted by Bhutanese nationalist campaigns against ethnic pluralism, these culturally Nepali groups were forced to flee to refugee camps located in Nepal starting in the 1990s, where they lived for decades. In recent years, many Bhutanese Nepali refugees were resettled in the United States, including in Vermont, where they are creating new lives for themselves and future generations.

Gopal Niroula: I help my daughter to learn some of the music, and we are in the land of freedom. We don’t have any Nepali Books and like Nepali teachers in the United States. So just to preserve our culture, just to preserve our language I always request my daughters to learn our culture, preserve our language.

Isika Niroula: Sometimes when I was young, I would look at him playing the drums and stuff and I would find it hard. And one day I said to my dad, I’m really interested in playing this. Could you please teach me? And he said, Of course. So he kept on teaching me. And he played the flute with his nose and we put it on Facebook and a lot of people liked it. So I started to get more like better at it, so. He, like, really teach me a lot, and I'm really happy about that.

Gopal Niroula: Recently, during the time of pandemic, I do like Facebook Live. So every Saturday I add different people, different musicians from different country.

Mary Wesley: Just jumping in here to say that Gopal is reaching a lot of people through his Facebook appearances. His most recent event during the Hindu festival of Tihar got 3.6 thousand views!

Gopal Niroula: So like, I think I started in April 16. I think so, because, you know, this time, most of the people who stay home because of the pandemic, they don't have anything to do and. By other music, if you play the kind of music, if we invite some of the musicians from different parts of country, you know, they can entertain themselves. So that is why I thought that idea and I started the Facebook live.

Isika Niroula: and he’s with my uncle and usually I sing there and my sister, when I sing, she learned to sing from me, which I was very proud of because I was like: I taught my sibling and she’s going to be like me and I’m going to try to teach her more. It's like my dad was my teacher and I'm my sister's teacher, and it was all because of my dad.

Gopal and Isika play and sing a different portion of the same song that opened the episode.

Mary Wesley: Next we’ll visit Kate and Jude at the Marshfield School of Weaving.

Jude Poor: My name is Jude, I grew up in Vermont on a farm in a French Canadian family. I guess the reason that I wanted to come learn weaving is because I’m really just like I started sewing and as I was like coming out as like trans and queer, I was like sewing clothing that I felt
good about. And I really, like, learned that, like, just the power of like making textiles and wearing textiles and like how I can make you feel so amazing. And just the story that textiles can tell about you.

**Mary Wesley:** Jude Poor grew up in Jericho, Vermont and now lives in Burlington. Jude uses they/their pronouns. They’re working with master weaver Kate Smith who lives in Marshfield to learn about weaving traditions from French Canada.

**Kate Smith:** I came to this school as a student in 1979 to study with Norman Kennedy, and then I became his apprentice in 1982. And for the next 10 years, worked with him directly until the patroness of the school died and the school closed. In 2003, I restarted the Marshfield School of Weaving again in its former location.

**Mary Wesley:** By the way, Norman Kennedy who Kate apprenticed with, is a National Heritage Fellow. In the United States this is the highest public recognition of excellence in the traditional arts. Born in Aberdeen, Scotland, Norman is hugely important to the continuation Scottish and Gaelic cultural traditions. Through this apprenticeship, Jude is tapping into this lineage of learning between master artist and apprentice.

**Kate Smith:** So we've been going strong ever since then with more and more students wanting to study this traditional textile production.

So I have a partiality towards the project that Jude is working on, which is the French Canadian heritage. We had a deaccession auction and Jude was able to purchase a beautiful old loom. It’s very similar to the ones they would have used up in Canada. So we are in the process, we're going to restore that. So the next project will be on that. It's going to be not your traditional, like, wool striped plaid shawl. It's going to have their voice in it, so that's exciting.

**Jude Poor:** It's still a developing idea, I think. Yeah, I definitely really love the like comforting this of a shawl and just the way that it wraps you and I'm not sure how yet, but I would love to… do like a representation of like the comfortability of like wearing clothing that is like gender affirming, which is still developing, I'm not sure how I'll tell that story yet. We are also planning another project which, do you want to hear about that?

**Mary Wesley:** Yes!

**Jude Poor:** This is one that I've put a little more thought into. I think about it a lot actually. So I'm gonna weave a linen piece and I'm going to take apart my childhood rosary and I'm going to weave the beads into the fabric. In a like, on the warp. So it'll be like beads that down and then I'm gonna make a skirt out of it that like, so the beads go down your leg. It's a little scampy. But I don't know, that it's something that I've thought about a lot, and just like the story of like to weave those beads in, of like, beads that I used to pray on, to like, not be who I am. And then like to wear them as like who I am. So that's a project that I'm really excited about.

My family came down from Quebec. To work in the mills and do you know Lakeside in Burlington?
Mary Wesley: The neighborhood. Yes. Yeah.

Jude Poor: So that was like the French Miller neighborhood and pretty much most of my family grew up there. I did not, though. But yeah. So I just grew up hearing stories about, like, how they would all get together and play music and. Yeah, I had to learn my prayers in French and it was spoken around me at like gatherings and we'd go to Quebec a lot and visit. Yeah, and my whole family just makes like they're all like doer's, like my grandma a bear was a chair weaver and wove the Reed?

Kate Smith: Well, like Rush or Cane or.

Jude Poor: Yeah cane. Yeah, and my pepe and meme, are like they do stuff with fur and they make clothing out of fur and rabbit farm. And so there was always like this like, these skills that they had brought down from Quebec. So I kind of wanted to do the same thing.

Kate Smith: I'm resonating with it. And I think it's so exciting to take these objects that had, you know, a specific story that was not very positive and transform it into something that makes a statement. I mean, it's very moving.

I come from a traditional background and my fabric business is all about historic reproductions. So it's interesting to help Jude find their way into, you know, the designs that we're going to use. Won't be bound to the rules that overshot has to be for a traditional bed cover. We'll maybe make it into a shawl. So that I'm finding very exciting that there's a whole lot of rules that we're going to maybe intend to push the boundaries of. So, yeah. Stay tuned.

Cello transition.

Mary Wesley: The last team we'll hear from is Heather and Wolf who are doing their work in the Granite capital of the world! Barre is internationally known for its high-quality stone and for its long tradition of stone carving, largely established by European immigrants to the area in the 1800s. Barre granite is still used today for building stone, monuments, memorial grave markers and more.

Heather Ritchie: I'm Heather Milne Ritchie, I was born and raised in Barre, Vermont. I'm a granite carver by trade and a multimedia artist. And I've been producing art in many fashions for twenty five, thirty years. But I've been in the memorial granite industry working professionally for twenty.

Wolf Whitney: All right, hi, my name is Wolf Whitney and I am a woodcarver, and also I'm now starting my apprenticeship under Heather for stone carving. I was born in Barbados, the beautiful island of Barbados, moved to America seven years ago. And after leaving the army, I decided art was the way I wanted to go. So I moved here to Vermont and I'm glad I made that choice. It was a great opportunity. I met with Heather and it's, we just hit the ground running.
Heather Ritchie: I started carving granite in Barre under George Kurjanowicz. It's through the Vermont Folklife Center Apprenticeship Program in 1999, and my apprenticeship was four months long and George hired me right afterwards to assist him in his studio because he saw that I had gained enough skill to work on the industry jobs side by side with him and help him grow his business.

I own my own business. So I basically get stones that are already designed, already commissioned. Sometimes I get to do my own drawings, a lot of times I don't. And they give me all the paperwork and they deliver the stone and I do my carving in it and then they take it away and it gets washed and boxed and put on a truck and sent to a cemetery. It's something that you have to be specially trained for, and the past five years, I've wanted to take on an apprentice to share what I know because there's very few of us in Barre that do this craft. I think there's fifteen of us total. It's physically demanding work. It's really hard on your body. It's really loud, it's dusty and, and it hurts sometimes. It's steel on stone and your body is kind of the machine that helps us do that. So it takes a special kind of person who can tolerate the environment and who can and who can play the game, not just the business side of it, but the actual physical production side of it. And when I met Wolf, I knew that she had the chops to put the energy into it. And I wasn't really scared of hurting her. I wasn't scared of ruining her life. Or her hands or her elbows. She's pretty tough. And she I knew when she cold-called me that it was like serious business right off the bat that she was really interested in a very sincere way in and making a career out of this.

Wolf Whitney: I found the woodworking program at the Vermont Woodworking School, which is down in Fairfax, Vermont. And I got in there and started building furniture. But I realized furniture is nice, but I wanted to do something more with wood, something more artistic. So I started to do some wood carvings and my first couple of carvings actually sold pretty well. So I was like, OK, what else can I do? I'm likin' this, I like, I like this medium. But I felt like I was missing something. I felt wood is nice, but it doesn't stand the test of time.

Heather Ritchie: And looking at her portfolio of work that she made not just in wood, but in plaster and clay, like she had the eye for the reductive method of sculpture already? I knew that that was going to make my job training her so much easier because she could already see. You don't have to flip your brain. She didn't want to change the way she was thinking about making things. Most people just want to put things on, and we take things away.

Wolf Whitney: I believe in destroying things to make art.

Heather Ritchie: When I saw that, I was like, OK, this is really feeding a fire. This is making things just flow.

Wolf Whitney So I am a practicing Pagan, and within Paganism, it's all about Earth materials and creating from the Earth. So Stone just fit right in there. But within my religion it's just a very big thing to use your hands. It's a way to honor your gods. It's so using your hands is seen as
something that is just you're putting a part of yourself into this piece of work and it's an honor to do it. So with Barre being Barre, I mean, Granite capital of....

Heather Ritchie: The world!

Wolf Whitney: The world, yeah. It's the culture here, it's so I don't even know how to explain it, like I find myself at a loss for words with it, because you go down, downtown Barre, and everyone's just so proud of the art that is there.

Heather Ritchie: Even before I got into it, they were, there was always the regard that to be a carver, to be working in the industry, if you had dust on your boots, people didn't look down on you. They actually said, thank you. We send out stuff that goes to cemeteries everywhere in the United States, and we're part of a process for people that helps them heal. We play an important role in our immediate community, but we also play a large role in the community of the world at large in the circle of life thing, because none of us get out alive.

Wolf Whitney: I am currently working on individual projects just to get a feel for tools and how different stones work. I started off in sandstone and I'm working my way up through the.

Heather Ritchie: Density.

Wolf Whitney: The densities of stone before I get started with granite. Yeah, she was she's been nice to me. She doesn't want to just break my arms off on the first day.

Heather Ritchie: No, no, I know she's strong, but I figured we'd start with the softer stones and work our way up to granite, And it's not taking her long to move through. She's on marble right now. We did just finish a commission piece that we worked on together.

Heather Ritchie: What we're doing is really special because we are two of the only women who are carving stone in Barre. There's women who work within the granite industry and drafting and offices, drive trucks, they wash stones. A lot of them are in the family of these little mom and pop shops. And some women are saleswomen, but. There's no other woman carvers, and so the opportunity for me to train someone, I knew I wanted to train another woman, I knew I wanted to train someone like me.

Wolf Whitney: I was just at the right place at the right time.

Heather Ritchie: Yeah. Who you know, that we can just keep moving us forward instead of waiting for Mr. Nice Guy to just take on his apprentice, and I mean, we have hundreds of men working in these granite sheds and no women.

Wolf Whitney: It's a great environment to learn in here and I'm just thankful.

Cello transition.
Mary Wesley: I hope you’ve enjoyed meeting Gopal and Isika, Kate and Jude, Heather and Wolf. Throughout the program cycle, which runs September 2020 to August 2021, VFC staff will be engaged in fieldwork to document the experiences of all the artists and apprentices involved in the Vermont Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program during this extraordinary time. If you want to hear more about what these artists are up to, stay tuned to this podcast, to the Fieldnotes blog on our website and our social media channels. Find us @vermontfolklife on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. If you visit our show notes at www.vtfolklife.org/untapped you can learn more about the history of VTAAP and see a full list of all the projects being supported this year.

This episode is one in our six-part Listening in Place series. As the events of 2020 continue to unfold the Folklife Center’s Listening in Place project is an effort to maintain and cultivate community, listen to others, and document our extraordinary daily lives together during the pandemic and beyond.

If you’d like to learn more about making your own recordings or doing your own interviews within your family, household or community, head to our website at www.vtfolklife.org/listening to learn more. If you so chose, the recordings you make could be added to the VFC archive, allowing future Vermonters to revisit and learn from what we’re going through now.

This fall we’re offering several free, virtual workshops via Zoom that introduce the Listening in Place project and its many activities, including one coming up on Dec. 5 called Building Conversations for Civic Action. For more details visit our website at www.vtfolklife.org/workshops.

From all of us here at the VFC we hope you and your families are keeping as well as can be. We’ll be sharing more stories from our Listening in Place project through this podcast and also on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Cello music begins and continues under narration.

If you liked listening to this show please tell others to look us up and subscribe. You can find VT Untapped on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, Spotify and TuneIn Radio.

VT Untapped is produced by me, Mary Wesley. Abra Clawson was an assistant producer on this episode. Our executive producer, who also happens to be the VFC archivist, is Andy Kolovos. The cello music in this show was recorded by Dave Haughey. Thanks for listening.

Cello music swells and fades out.