

Let's Get Acquainted

Ruth Shade: a character

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A REAL character. That's what they call Ruth Shade at Western Piedmont Community College.

She's always smiling, laughing, fooling around. Always seeking out and exchanging affectionate banter with students and staff.

"A student may graduate from Western Piedmont without knowing Gordon Blank," WPCC President Gordon Blank says, "but no one graduates from Western Piedmont without knowing Ruth Shade."

A custodian in the "A" Building, Mrs. Shade dusts, vacuums, and cleans the library and the offices of Dr. Blank, Dean H.D. Moretz, Business Manager Kenneth Clark, and others.

"I kid with all of them," Mrs. Shade says with a laugh. "Dr. Blank, Dean Moretz—all of them. I like them all. I don't have an enemy on campus that I know of."

"I really thinks they like me too," she adds while covering her face in an attempt at modesty.

Western Piedmont students "aren't too messy," says Mrs. Shade. "They don't use ashtrays as they should, but I understand."

"Children will be children" she says of the college students with an indulgent smile.

Students say they like Ruth Shade because she's "outgoing," "talks with everyone," and "picks on everybody."

Her popularity at the college was proven the hard way back in February when Mrs. Shade suffered a heart attack and remained hospitalized for 23 days.

Mrs. Shade says she had company every day, with Dr. Blank as her first visitor. State Sen. Roger Sharpe, a former instructor at the college, also came by to see her. Nurses at Grace Hospital teased Mrs. Shade, she says, about being their first patient ever visited by a senator.

In addition to daily visitors, Mrs. Shade was showered with 54 get-well cards, 16 flower arrangements, six fruit baskets and gifts of lingerie. She believes that every instructor and secretary at WPCC came to see her while she was hospitalized.

When it was time to go home, she cried. "I know you think this is stupid, but I hated to go," Mrs. Shade says. "I hated to leave my nurses."

Most of the nurses were graduates of Western Piedmont, she added, and they often told her that it was "their turn to wait on her".

Very soon after Mrs. Shade left the hospital in March, she resumed her daily walks on the NCSD track. The doctor had set no limits on distance, leaving it to her discretion. On her fifth day back on the track, with her distance up to five laps, she felt what she describes as "pins and needles" in her chest. A quick call to her doctor and Ruth Shade was limited to one lap daily.

Now five minutes per lap is her average speed and she walks 2½ miles each day, including weekends. Her son Bruce, she says, always tells her to slow down.

In addition to her daily walks and weekend hikes, Mrs. Shade likes being a member of the Flying Club. Even though she isn't a pilot, she enjoys going along as a passenger on club trips. She became interested and joined the club after taking a free promotional flight offered by the club some time back. It was her first experience in a small aircraft.

The "foxy lady," as some students call her, moved to Morganton from Monroe in 1955. She began work at Western Piedmont in 1969, one year after the school moved to its new campus.

Mrs. Sam (Amy) Brinkley, Dr. Blank's secretary at the time, was instrumental in Mrs. Shade's employment at the school.

After moving to Morganton, Mrs. Shade had worked part-time for Sam Brinkley's aunt, Mrs. Lillian Brinkley, for 14 years. For nine of those years, she also worked for Mrs. Amy Brinkley. The WPCC secretary suggested that

Mrs. Shade try to find a better-paying job at the college. Mrs. Shade applied, and buildings and grounds supervisor Jerry Gerald hired her.

"And I love this job. I love being with people," she says with genuine warmth. "When students are on quarter break it's really kind of boring. 'I don't have anybody to talk with.'"

"If nobody pays you no attention, you get lonely," Mrs. Shade says with just a note of sadness. "If you're not married, you're alone a lot and you can get real depressed."

Like other singles, she fights a constant battle with loneliness, settling into a daily routine of work, exercise, chores and television designed to fill the time.

The daughter of a brickmason, Mrs. Shade is the former Ruth Gidney. She was brought up with two brothers and two sisters in a rural area near Monroe.

Mrs. Shade, who won't reveal her age, is twice-widowed. Her first husband, Robert Freeman, was killed by lightning while on a construction job back in 1961. At the time, their adopted son, Bruce Gidney, was 2. The

Freemans had married while she was a junior at Green Bethel High School in Boiling Springs. She completed high school after her marriage.

One year after Freeman's death, Mrs. Shade married again, this time to Otis Shade. When the marriage didn't work, she moved into a mobile home park on her own. Otis Shade died two years later.

Her son is not much company. "The girls keep him out," Mrs. Shade says with a wide smile, giggling. "Most of the time I'm sitting there by myself." She shakes her head.

"There" is her home, a trailer in the Oak Hill community.

"Boyfriends?" she responds, covering her face. "I've got one, but I'm not calling any names."

Keeping a few secrets of her own, Ruth Shade goes on her way, sharing the tears and the smiles; the secret successes and the private pains of Western Piedmont students.

Work? Well, the students tease her about that. They think she's paid to talk with them. And maybe they're right.



Mrs. Shade at work in the Western Piedmont Community College library.