

Hard-working mom honored

BPW bestows Woman of Year on Maggie Hughes

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VALDESE – On May 13, 1976, Maggie Simmons-Hughes moved from Florida to North Carolina to escape an abusive marriage. With only a high school education and limitless determination, she worked three jobs to support herself and her five children.

Little did she know that 24 years later she would be Vice President of Human Resources at a major corporation and be named Burke County Woman of the Year by Burke Professional Women (BPW).

Hughes may not have known the success that lay in wait for her, but she knew that to help herself and help her children she had to have an education.

Shortly after moving to Valdese she began working for Burke Mills for \$3.35 an hour.

Richard Whisenant, then president of Burke Mills, promoted her to personnel manager because of her knowledge of the insurance industry.

Hughes said the raise allowed her to quit one of her three jobs and enroll in college - one course at a time.

"I could not and would not be where I am today if Richard Whisenant had not supported me and the company supported me by opening doors. They paid for every dime of my education - school, books, everything," said Hughes.

She earned a degree in business administration from Western Piedmont Community College and in 1999, Hughes was named Outstanding Alumnus.

Although she is taking this semester off, she is currently working toward a bachelor's degree in business management from Lenoir-Rhyne College.

Hughes insisted her work ethic is what made her the woman she is today.

"You hear people say you inherit certain things from your parents," Hughes said, "but I know nothing about my birth mother and father, so this had to be taught to me - this work ethic."

Even Hughes' entry into the world was fraught with uncertainty.

She was abandoned as a baby and spent the first three months of her life in an orphanage until she was adopted by the couple who would instill in her the values and ethics that would become her foundation for the rest of her life.

In addition to her work and educational pursuits, Hughes is also a deacon at the Waldensian Presbyterian Church and a member of the Burke County Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, Burke County Personnel Association, Women of the Moose and director of the WPCC Foundation.

According to Jackie Scott, president of BPW, what the judges liked most was the fact that Hughes was able to accomplish so

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Photo by Karen Andries

Maggie Simmons-Hughes, Burke County's Woman of the Year, works at her desk Friday at Burke Mills.

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much while raising five children as a single mother.

"I talk to my children about the fact that I felt like I neglected them," said Hughes, "but they never felt that way. They felt that it gave them strength by having to finish preparing dinner and finish the laundry and things like that."

Today, the grandmother of 11 shows no signs of slowing down.

During her spare time, the energetic, outgoing, fun loving Hughes rides a motorcycle, goes horse back riding, camping and recently learned to shoot pool.

"There's always another mountain I want to climb, another place I want to go," Hughes said, "but then you have to come back to that basic root of your work ethic, of your home, your family. That's the most important thing."

As far as the future is concerned, Hughes said she wants to spend a good portion of it helping others achieve the kind of success she has enjoyed.

"I have always wanted to help an unwed mother because I'm sure that that's where I came from and I would like to help abused women. I've never been at a point in my life where I could, but I think now I can," she said.

Regardless of what struggles a person may be facing, Hughes believes there is always a way to overcome those struggles and better oneself.

"If a person wants to go to school today, they can go, Hughes said. "There's money there for people to go to school. You've got to have that determination to change your life, and you do it one step at a time - and they're baby steps."

At 7 p.m. on Tuesday at the Community House in Morganton, Hughes will be surrounded by those who have loved and supported her through all of her challenges as the BPW honor her as Burke County Woman of the Year.

Hughes' face lights up at the thought of accepting the award.

"When I was made alumnus of the year at the college, that was the ultimate, but this is even greater. I know now how the Dixie Chicks feel," she said.

Tickets for the BPW dinner are \$12. Anyone interested in attending should call Jackie Scott at 437-8662.