An Interview with Ethel K. Smith

‘Do Better If I’m Busy’

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While guest-teaching at Wingate College in the fall of 1985, I had the opportunity to visit with Ethel K. Smith Library, where large oil paintings of Mrs. Smith and her late husband, Bud E. Smith, look down on the main reading room.

When we moved to Wingate in the summer of 1953, prospects weren’t too bright. Although the trustees had assured my husband that all bills were paid plus money in the bank, he discovered the school owed 352 different creditors! And by July 1, the day he began work, only 19 students had registered for the fall term.

“The weather was hot; we already had one baby, I was pregnant, and we were living on campus in a 3-room upstairs apartment with no air conditioning and a shower on the back porch. But by fall, 192 students showed up, and the next year enrollment jumped to 312.

“After Dr. Bud drummed up so many students, he discovered I was a book collector so that fall I taught part-time, even though I was sick.”

She continued part-time teaching, then moved to administrative librarian and finally head librarian.

The present library, constructed in 1959 and enlarged in 1972, is a suitable size for pride in her life. An unusual sparkle danced in her eyes, as we talked on.

Dr. Bud foresaw that libraries would someday be computerized, so I completed two courses in systems analysis,” she continued. “This prepared me to be a liaison between the administration and the librarian-who don’t always speak the same language. Thus, I could explain our needs to the technical people. I wrote the programs for the first unit in 1959, plus the addition in 1972. The architects then designed the library to fit our needs. This is important. Otherwise, you may end up with just another attractive, but inefficient, building.

“Since funds were limited, Dr. Bud aimed to make every construction dollar do double work. He promised us they came with reasonable bids, he’d guarantee the change-orders would be very few. Although I knew nothing about blueprints, I located a book on the subject and taught myself how to read them. As a result, I went over every library drawing with a magnifying glass. Believe it or not—construction began—only one change-order was needed, and that for an electrical outlet in a work room.

“I did the same for other buildings erected during his administration, and each time the change-orders were few and far between. I often told my students that if you really want to do something, you can find a book somewhere to show you how.

By now we had moved into the dining room of the retirement home she and Dr. Smith built on land inherited from his family, near the Meadow Community (once known as Perko’s Crossing). “I made these by the thousands at Wingate,” Ethel said as she served me and Bessie, my wife, a good Rocky Mountain omelet.

“Here, put this pudding under your notes so you won’t make pencil marks on the table. We bought this dining furniture while at Wingate, in a flea market. In the talk, the kids and I enjoyed entertaining faculty, trustees, and other campus guests. I quit counting our guest list when it topped 10,000 people.”

Each time I asked about her work, Ethel invariably replied, “Now another thing about Dr. Bud...” It’s apparent that she recollects her 21 years as Wingate as a team project.

Interest in People

I soon sensed that here is a couple whose work is best interpreted as people-centered. A few examples:

(1) Faculty development. “Back then, we couldn’t afford many faculty members with doctorates, a churchwoman, she’d see in the nepotism rules prevalent on many campuses by hiring husband-wife teams. With a salary package for two, we could attract brighter teachers. And when Ethel encouraged the faculty to work on masters’, then doctors’, degrees. One way he did this was by eliminating Saturday classes, thus freeing up time on Sunday. He also encouraged faculty members to buy homes, knowing this would give stability. When we arrived in 1953, there were only four faculty-owned homes in Wingate. When we left there were over 50. We often said a good word for them to bank loan officers and the like. For one teachers’ meeting, I set up a display of faculty-owned homes.”

(2) Student excellence. “My husband was strong on work-help for the students,” she continued, as I reached for another orange coconut ball. “We never permitted a student to drop out just because of money. We’d find a way. And too, we majored on under-achievers. Each semester and hall monitor, Dr. Bud brought home the grade sheet of every student, which we compared with test scores. Then the two of us would meet with those who were performing below their potential. It was hard to do, but it was always worth it.”

Community involvement. “We also got acquainted with local citizens, whether related to the college or not,” she explained. “We started the over-60 club at Wingate Baptist Church, and after he retired, did the same in our own church.”

In the midst of all this, Ethel Smith continued her education as well. A graduate of Meredith College in Raleigh, she also earned a bachelor’s degree in library science at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, as well as a master’s degree in English and counseling at Appalachian State University in Boone. In addition, she earned a graduate work in library science at the University of Chicago.

Retirement

Before saying goodbye, I talked with Ethel about her present interests, 11 years after leaving Wingate.

“I do better if I’m busy” are the six words she used to describe life these days in the little community of Meadow. But six words are a mere starter in describing the many accomplishments of Ethel. Back in 1974, a student asked, “Dr. Bud has his flowers, but what will Mrs. Bud do?” He needn’t have asked.

For one thing, she went back to school herself, enrolling for a course in genealogy at a community college. Also, for the first time, she entered partisan politics.

“As long as we were in public life, few friends even knew what party I belonged to,” she told me. “Now I’m free to be involved. I work in our project, such as encouraging citizens to register, telephoning, lining up transportation for voters on election days, stuffing envelopes, and the like.”

On one son, Jim, 39, lives in nearby Raleigh, where he’s a planner with the state department of natural resources (as well as a commander in the naval reserve). So she enjoys babysitting and sewing for grandchildren Caroline, 8, and Louisa, 5. Her other son, Bill, 32, is an engineering manager at National Semiconductor in San Jose, CA.

As a churchwoman, she’s a trustee at Chowan College, active in her local WMU, an associational board member, and substitute Sunday School teacher. She talked with pride about the Bud E. Smith Scholarship fund she has set up and the Bible library at Trinity church, where she’s a member. It aids church members wishing to attend any of the seven Baptist colleges, as well as Southeastern seminary.

School Girl’ Figure

Ethel added, in closing, that Freda, her Chinese chow (9th dog she’s owned), keeps her busy, letting in and out of the house. “That’s how I get my exercise, keep my figure,” she laughed.

One day, I think she’ll catch Ethel’s attention. “If the phone rings and she’s in the house, she wants out,” Ethel explained. “If the phone rings and she’s outside, I have to go let her in. She demands attention. I’ve spoiled her more than I ever did my own kids.”

And on Sundays, she outruns me to the church to get the prayer book and hymn book. “I haven’t figured out how she knows when Sunday comes, unless it’s the ringing of our church chimes. The church is 3/4 mile down the road always, but she knows the chimes from here, but apparently she can.”

What Others Say

Around the campus, I talked with friends who knew the Smiths back in 1953-74. Here’s what some of them said:

“I grew up on an adjoining farm to Hettie Smith, the president’s mother. A cousin adopted me when I was about a year old, after my poor Mom died. I was shy, wouldn’t hardly say a word to anyone. Each morning, I’d go to Hettie’s with a saucer for butter and a half gallon jug for milk. I’d just stand there, holding out my little saucer. One day Hettie told me I could stand there all day, but I wouldn’t get any milk until I said what I wanted. She was the friend who broke the ice. She also got me to talking with neighbors and strangers. None of my family had ever gone to college. I’m sure my adoptive parents felt I needed special attention, since I was so shy. So they sent me to Wingate. From the first, Ethel and Dr. Smith recognized and called me by my first name. I remember how hot it was and she helped me find a fan for my dormitory room. She and Bud were caring people. I understand she kept a clothes closet in the library, where she outfitted needy girls, but always in a quiet way. If I needed help today, would I feel free to talk to Ethel? Yes!” —Linda Tarr, a staff member at W. T. Harris Dining Hall on campus since 1969.

“Ethel wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty. For example, if a mommied stopped up, even in a boy’s dorm, Freda would bake orange ‘fix it’ herself!” —Walter Woodson Wingate faculty member.

“Since my Dad died when I was young, I think of the Smiths as if they were my parents. Ethel often scolded me about taking better care of my body. ‘I even nag you like a mother,’ she once told me. The college was their life, wherever they were. They made a good team, sort of hand-in-glove. Not a typical relationship, and not necessarily the norm for college administration. I’ve always been proud of our library, even when we were a junior college. It’s one of the key assets of our school.” —Etta Fay Sarnes, secretary to the president since 1960.

Ethel K. Smith greets Freda, her Chinese Chow, who beats her to church every Sunday. According to Mrs. Smith, Freda would never allow anyone to photograph her—until she learned her picture might be in the Biblical Recorder!”