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POLLY PEARSON RETIRES AFTER 40 YEARS OF HELPING OTHERS AT CATAWBA COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES

HICKORY -- Polly Pearson recently retired from Catawba County Social Services after 40 years of helping people cope with life's challenges. Originally hired in June of 1972, she taught people the daily skills needed for a successful life.

Raised during the era of segregation, she attended the Rosenwald School in Maiden and graduated from Central High School in Newton. She earned a certificate as a cosmetologist and practiced that occupation for a short time. But she soon realized she wanted something different. She returned to school, taking courses at Johnson C. Smith University, Catawba Valley Community College, and Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute.

Then she was hired for the Homemaker Services of Catawba County Social Services. She explained that the job involved teaching people how to manage their daily lives successfully. Her clients included elderly people on limited budgets, families struggling to raise their children, and blind citizens. After about 10 years, the department became more specialized, and she chose to work exclusively with families with children.

All of the families were at-risk for various reasons. Some were referred to the service by the court system, and some voluntarily signed up. In some cases, the parents were suffering with issues of mental illness or drug addiction. In other cases, participants had never learned the basics of parenting and household management. They usually had low incomes that put extra stress on the family.

In many cases, Social Services was the client's "payee," meaning Pearson managed the family's finances. She helped adults with their parenting skills, working through the department's Nurturing Program. She also provided practical advice, such as how to prepare healthy meals on a limited budget.



Polly Pearson (center) receives the Order of the Longleaf Pine from John Eller (left), director of Social Services, and Tom Lundy, county manager. Pearson recently retired after a 40-year career of helping at-risk families.

"I worked with people in the personal areas," she said. She added that she always tried to be respectful of the clients and tried to build a relationship with them. She often collaborated with Eastern Catawba Cooperative Christian Ministry and Greater Hickory Christian Ministry to meet her clients' needs.

She collaborated with ECCCM and Catawba Valley Community College to arrange GED and Basic Skills classes. She would even help the clients find employment. If needed, she would help them apply for Social Security Disability benefits and help them find affordable housing. "They could always call me if they had a problem," she said, adding that she received many phone calls at home.

Over the years, she saw many changes in the way Social Services operated. When she began working for the department, it was located in the building now housing the Employment Security Commission on Highway 70. Over the years, the number of programs and the staff required to administer them increased. Now, Social Services is housed in a three-building office complex.

In the beginning, most Food Stamp recipients came to the office on Highway 70 on a certain day of the month to purchase food stamps, which came in coupon booklets. "People would be lined up in the lobby," she said. "You'd probably have 100 or more." Now the program pays benefits through a type of debit card. At first, the Food Stamp program required recipients to pay for the food coupons. This requirement was often a struggle for extremely low-income families. Eventually, the payment requirement was dropped.

Pearson also recalled that Social Services formerly distributed surplus food commodities, such as powdered milk and cheese, once a month. "At first we were doing it at the office, and we would do it on weekends," she recalled. "Traffic would be blocked on the highway (because of all the people coming to pick up the food). It took weeks to prepare for it." Later the distribution site moved to the Catawba County Fairgrounds to accommodate the large crowds. Now, the program is handled by the county's two cooperative Christian ministries. The food is distributed as needed throughout the month.

Probably the biggest change was the computerization of records, Pearson said. When she first started, all records were kept on paper. Computers speeded up the process and made it more efficient.

Despite the changes in programs, computerization and physical facilities, human needs have remained the heart of the programs. Knowing that she was making a difference in people's lives kept Pearson going for 40 years.

While working for Social Services, Pearson and her husband raised their two children. Over the years, she also found time to serve on the boards of the Family Care Center, Newton-Conover School Board, the League of Women Voters, the Children's Advocacy Center, Sipe's Orchard Home, State Employees Credit Union and Catawba Valley Heritage Alliance. She has been active with the United Methodist Women through her church, St. Paul's United Methodist of Newton. She has served many years on the district and conference level with the United Methodist Church and United Methodist Women. She is also serving as a member of The Green Team (United Methodist Inc.), representing the Southeastern Jurisdiction, and as a "lay servant" of the Catawba Valley District of the UMC.

At her retirement reception, she was presented the Order of the Longleaf Pine, one of the highest awards the governor can bestow. This award is presented to individuals who have a proven record of extraordinary service to the state. Contributions to their communities, extra effort in their careers, and many years of service to their organizations are some of the guidelines by which recipients are selected.

Now that she is retired, Pearson plans to keep on helping others. She is currently exploring becoming a deaconess, a home mission program of the United Methodist Church. "I've always been the kind of person who wanted to help people," she said. "It is what God has called me to do."

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