



Shirley Perkins (Curtis, Collier) Daniels

Birth: 1926

Death: February 24, 2014

Near the end of her interview, Shirley Perkins reflected on her life, “I think I’ve had a good life. I sure would not want to go back and repeat my youth.”

Few people would blame her for this sentiment. Abandoned by her mother at birth, Shirley was raised by her paternal grandmother until Shirley was six years old. Then, with the death of her grandmother, Shirley was “shipped” by train from Rockford, IL, to Los Angeles, CA, to live with one of her father’s cousins, whom Shirley called Aunt Allison Bentley. When this “aunt” would have a falling out with Shirley’s father, Shirley would be “shipped” back to Rockford, IL. Then, she “would be boarded out with different individuals.” From 10-years-old to 17-years-old, she lived with “the last adult” whom she called Aunt Susie. “She wanted me to be a librarian because I used to read and read,” Shirley said.

Until she was 17 years old, Shirley had thought her mother was dead. No one talked about her, nor were there any pictures of her. Then, Shirley learned her mom was alive and living in Chicago, only 96 miles away from Rockford.

After finding out her mother was alive, she saw her maybe only 25 times, according to Shirley. Yet at the time of this interview, when she was almost 70 years old and her mother was about 90 years old and suffering from Alzheimer’s, Shirley had recently been drawn into her mother’s care. She had had to sign papers to have her “committed to a board of care.” Shirley commented, “Suddenly I’m taking care of the lady who never knew me, has no idea what my life has been like. It gets to be a bit much sometimes.”

Nevertheless, as a child, Shirley was a bright and energetic student. In high school, she was involved in the student newspaper, the Girls Athletic Association, and the Spanish Club. She was a swimmer, and her grades earned her an induction into the National Honors Society. Yet, according to Shirley, because no one talked about college at home, she never considered going on to higher education.

In 1944, when Shirley was about 20 years old, she moved to Grand Rapids, MI. By then she was already married to Herman Curtis, who was from Grand Rapids and serving in WWII, and they

had a two-month-old baby boy, William. She came to live with her mother-in-law. By late 1945 or early 1946, according to Shirley, she was divorced from Curtis and had met Richard Collier. She married Collier in late 1946.

During that time, Shirley worked as an elevator operator at Ralph Morris Furniture (known countrywide for fine leather furniture) and helped “entertain buyers” at catered parties. Then she moved to the third-shift assembly line at Winters and Crampton Furniture in Grandville, MI, and then onto Berkey and Gay Furniture Co. to work on an assembly line, making auxiliary gas tanks for aircraft. Finally, she went to McInerney Spring and Wire to make car seats.

With the servicemen coming home from the war and taking back their factory jobs, Shirley did not work for about a year. In 1948, however, she returned to work because the young family wanted a house of their own. Because of her “poor work attendance,” McInerney refused to take her back. Shirley said she vowed from that time forward “to establish a record of good work attendance.”

From 1948 to 1950, Shirley worked in the kitchen of the Oakwood Manor, a nursing home for wealthy, elderly ladies. She never missed a day of work. Then, from 1950 to 1952, Shirley worked at Fleck’s, “a clothing store, a very nice store. It was Wurzburg’s, Bon Marche, and Fleck’s, excellent clothes.”

From 1952 to 1965, Shirley worked at the General Motors, Fisher Body 2, plant on Alpine Ave., in Walker, MI. At first, she made aircraft (i.e., Saber jets). “I went into training and learned how to be Rosie the Riveter.” She was part of the group that was called the “Squawk crew.” This group “went in and fixed up other people’s botches,” according to Shirley. After the plant stopped making aircraft, Shirley was assigned to the “cut and sew” part of the assembly line for car seats. In 1955, Shirley ran for and won the position of secretary in the local UAW union. She held that position until 1963.

In 1959, Shirley finally started on her path to higher education. She enrolled in a History class at Grand Rapids Junior (now Community) College. And she continued to work sometimes 54 hours a week. “I would work 10 hours a day and go to JC at night,” Shirley said. She would study while doing her assembly work. “It’s knowing your parts and the rhythm. As long as that rhythm doesn’t get broken, it doesn’t matter.” She could study and work at the same time. But on Easter Day 1963, on the way home from visiting her son who was then at Michigan State University, Shirley was in a serious car accident. She had a head injury. When she recovered, Shirley was no longer able “to compartmentalize and concentrate” as she had before the accident. She then had “to read things two or three times, but she said, “I am well blessed.”

In 1963, Shirley earned her associate’s degree. Then on a tuition scholarship, she went on to Michigan State University and in 1965 earned her bachelor’s degree. Finally, in 1969 she received a master’s degree from Western Michigan University.

As soon as she had her bachelor’s degree, Shirley started teaching elementary school in the Grand Rapids Public Schools. She taught for 3 years and then in 1969 was asked to “head the state aid dollars.” In this position, Shirley was responsible for fifteen schools, three different

specialized programs, five reading programs, and authorizing the salaries of both teachers and paraprofessionals and the purchase of any materials. The next year she accepted the position of director of the Career Opportunities Program and remained there for 5 years.

For 21 years Shirley worked for the Grand Rapids Public Schools. At the time of this interview, her position was similar to the one in the early 1970s. She was the coordinator of the Urban Teacher Preparation Program (UTPP). Her salary was paid by a consortia made up of Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS), Grand Rapids Community College, and Grand Valley State University. Shirley was the only employee and her mission was to assist GRPS in recruiting and retaining minority and male teachers. At the time only 17 percent of the teaching personnel were minority, and a “significant portion of that 17 percent were going to be retiring.” According to Shirley, UTPP was based on Bill Bennett and other “new career theorists who said that you take nontraditional persons . . . and you bring them into the schools. You provide them with career lattices that . . . permit them to move from nonprofessional status to professional status” (e.g., paraprofessionals, child care workers, security guards, nurses, secretaries, anyone who had a college degree and wanted to become a teacher). Among her many job responsibilities, Shirley raised donations from the community to pay for the students’ salaries while they were earning their teaching certificates. She also used the donations to pay for the substitutes who filled in for the student teachers’ regular jobs. Shirley also worked “in some capacity” for GVSU from 1987 to 1994.

In addition to work, Shirley was always busy serving the Grand Rapids community. During her son’s school years, she was active in the PTA and supporting his basketball. Sometime in the late 1960s, she was a “community ambassador” for the World Affairs Council (WAC), traveling to Hawaii and British Honduras and then making speeches about her trip for a year. Shirley then served on the WAC board for 8 years. She volunteered for many other organizations, including:

- United Way
- Negro Business and Professional Women
- Race Street
- Grand Rapids Art Museum
- Association of Adult and Continuing Education
- Benevolent Order of the Golden Seal
- Phi Delta Kappa
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority
- Grand Rapids Community Foundation
- Michigan State Board of Public Community Colleges
- Grand Rapids Study Club (“a special spot in my heart”)
- Healthy Kent 2000
- Project Rehab
- American Association of University Women

In ending the interview, Shirley reflected, “I always tell people that I grew up in a little United Nations.” Yet, she admitted that in [her] own way [she] had always been a competitor. When [she] was coming through school, [she] wanted to see who was the top one, and [she would try]

to stay with him.” She ended by saying, “I always thought that as you grow older, you’re supposed to grow sweeter. That’s what I want to do—grow sweeter.”

Other Resources:

Raymond Tardy Community Service Award Honoree—1989

<http://www.grcc.edu/woodrickdiversitylearningcenter/programs/giantsaward/giantsawardsprevioushonorees19832015>

MLive *The Grand Rapids Press* article by Sue Thoms

[http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2014/02/shirley\\_daniels\\_88\\_worked\\_her.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2014/02/shirley_daniels_88_worked_her.html)