

Miss Betty

For UF's Most Venerable Worker,
Retirement Is Simply a No

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

Elizabeth Jones walked into the welfare office in Gainesville for her second day at the location since being transferred from Chiefland.

As with her first day, the atmosphere didn't seem like a good fit for the 19-year-old stenographer — and neither did the “cell with a light bulb” that was her workspace.

“And when it came time for lunch ... they said, ‘Go to Louis’ diner;’” the now 85-year-old remembered of that day in 1952, referencing longtime Gainesville staple Louis’ Lunch, which closed in 2010 after 82 years.

“Nobody said, ‘Betty, would you like to go to lunch?’ ‘Betty, you wanna have a cup of coffee?’ or anything. So I went to lunch, and I found a phone, and I called the lady, and I said, ‘I am sorry. I’ve never done anything like this in my life. But I cannot come back to your job.’”

And she didn’t. Jones stuck to her abrupt resignation, and she certainly didn’t regret it. But the teen still needed a next move: not school (“I was young, and I didn’t want to go to college”), so it had to be work.

As is with most things in Gainesville, her rooming house rang of the University of Florida, as all of the other women who lived in it were either UF employees or students.

The obvious course, then, was to join them at UF, and the working ones told her how: take the test that measures shorthand and typing abilities offered at the Seagle Building downtown.

So Jones did, and thanks to gaining those skills in her hometown of Live Oak, she got the scores necessary to become a secretary at UF. It’s there she started in September 1952, and it’s there she remains today, working as a receptionist for the UF Information Technology office in Turlington Hall.

To save you some math effort, that’s 65 years (if you include two year-long gaps: one upon the birth of her son and the other following her 1994 “retirement”).

Regardless of whether it’s 63 or 65 years, though, UF maintains that she’s by far the longest-serving employee not only now but also ever.

“This is my university,” she said confidently. “This is my UF.”

Over the decades, while working in

different offices, Jones has carried out the duties typical of a secretary, receptionist, administrative assistant, and staff assistant — all titles she’s held.

But she’s learned to wedge in a little something extra not listed as a job role: periodically moving about the office to make sure everyone is cheerful and feels welcomed.

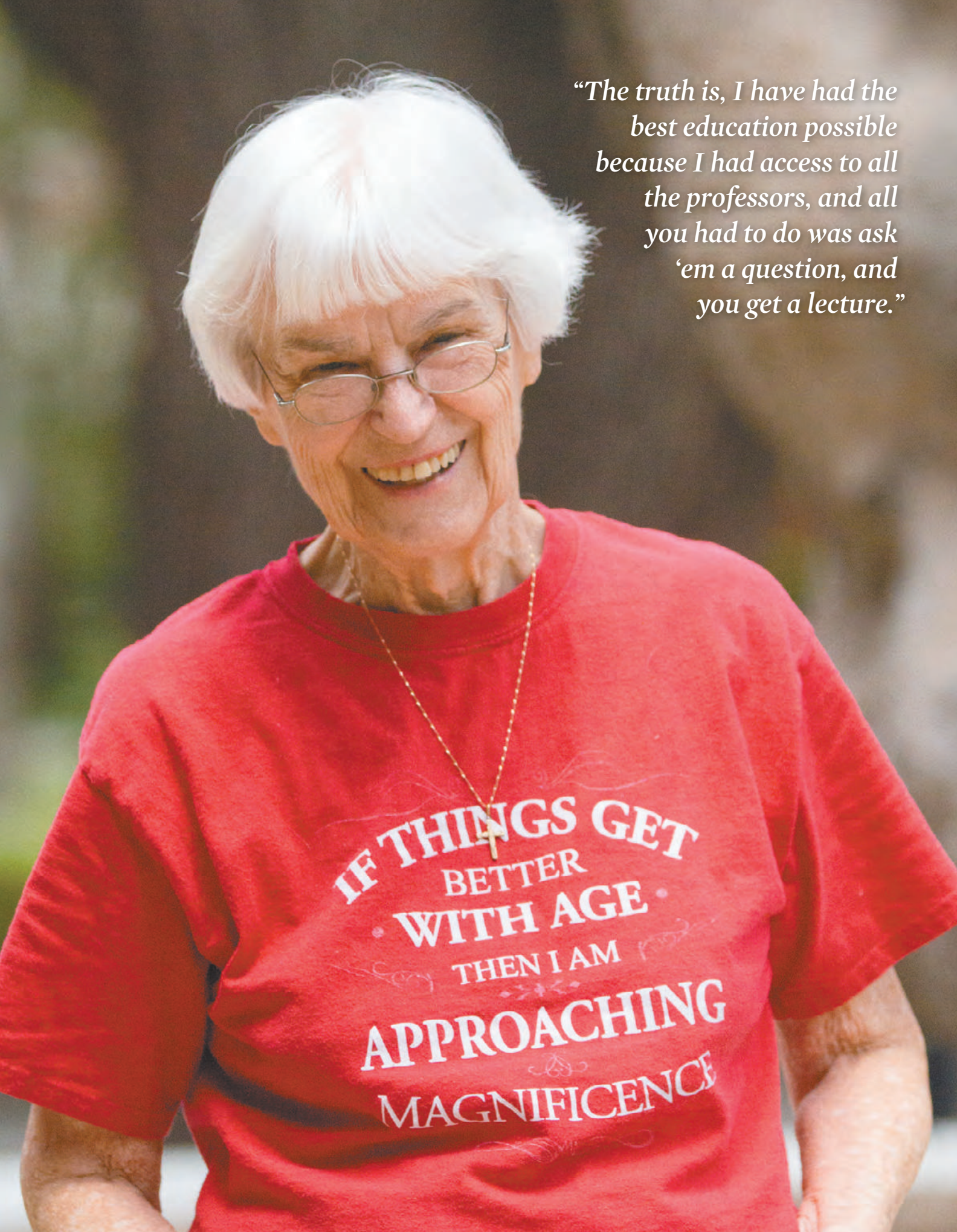
Jones — or, popularly, “Miss Betty” — does this in part by capping off about one in five sentences with an endearing name. Her weapon of choice is “darlin’.”

“This woman’s energy is like that of a 60-year-old, easily, or less,” said UF Information Technology Web Services Manager Kimbley Standifer, who has worked with Jones for seven years.

“I’ve seen 50-year-olds move slower than she does. She’s amazing. She keeps me happy. Everybody’s a darlin’ or a sweetheart.”

For someone who tried to quit school in the first grade and only briefly latched onto the idea of attending college, Jones said she does see the irony of building a career within education.

But it’s that same devotion that has indeed given her an education, an infor-

A photograph of an elderly woman with short, white hair and glasses, smiling warmly. She is wearing a bright red t-shirt. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery. In the top right corner, there is a quote in a serif font. The t-shirt has a white graphic with text and decorative flourishes.

“The truth is, I have had the best education possible because I had access to all the professors, and all you had to do was ask ‘em a question, and you get a lecture.”

**IF THINGS GET
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Elizabeth "Miss Betty" Jones (front and center) stands with her University of Florida Office of Instructional Resources coworkers upon her 1994 "retirement." "Working with you and the outstanding staff has been a pleasure," she wrote to Jeaninne Webb, the office's director at the time, in her retirement letter.

mal one but one that she equates to a Ph.D. in psychology.

"The truth is, I have had the best education possible because I had access to all the professors, and all you had to do was ask 'em a question, and you get a lecture," Jones said.

"I'm a good manipulator," she added, describing the ability as a positive to getting things done. "And that's what I love is the people."

Jones took life's first steps as Elizabeth Bass in 1932 on her parents' farm in Suwanee County, three miles outside of Live Oak. It's there that she and the six Bass brothers grew up and got their first touches of work, helping tend to cows, pigs, chickens, watermelon, cotton, corn, and tobacco, her dad's main money crop.

The farm had modern conveniences others didn't, most notably a gas generator for electricity as well as a pump and collection barrel that provided running water. Another feature of the

property: three houses for three black families of sharecroppers.

One of the families, the Williamses, had a daughter about Jones' age, so the two became playmates and each other's first friend. Jones attributes this interaction to her later being a supporter of black Americans during the civil rights movement, desegregation, and school integration, including at UF.

(The university admitted its first black student, George Starke to the College of Law, in 1958, six years after Jones started working at the university.)

Jones' pre-teen years lined up with World War II, and this was an especially turbulent time for the family because the

"It was an interesting time to go to those meetings" at the university on integration. I'm glad to see that it's working."

four older Bass brothers ended up in wartime service. Only one, though, was injured.

Initially that brother, the third oldest, remained on the farm through a military exemption, "but one day, while he was out there digging stumps, he put his shovel down and walked to

town and signed up for the Marines,” Jones remembered.

Aboard an amphibious craft headed onto the island of Tinian, the brother took a Japanese bullet to the shoulder. After the war, pain medication evolved into alcohol, and another brother’s attempts to get him dried out proved to be a challenge.

“It ruined him and the family for a good long time because it took away his shoulder socket,” Jones recalled.

The family took another blow with the father’s death in 1949, but the brothers picked up work at the farm and managed it for many more years.

Meanwhile, as a senior at Suwannee High School set to graduate in 1950, Jones did consider the possibility of college and took the Florida Twelfth Grade Test, a minimum score on which was required by universities in the state.



Two work-study students in perhaps the 1960s or early '70s who worked with Jones in the College of Education's Educational Media Center.

But she didn’t receive much encouragement from her school. When she went to ask the assistant principal about her score on the test, “he said, ‘Why do you want to know what score you made?’

“I said, ‘Well, I might want to go to college.’ He said, ‘You won’t go to college.’ He said, ‘You’ll be married in two years.’ I mean, that’s the kind of atmosphere it was, darlin’.”

(Later, while working in a UF office that had access to the scores, she saw that hers was only one point lower than the student who got Suwannee County’s sole scholarship from the state.)

Without college at the forefront, Jones went to work, first doing clerical tasks for Ford Motor Company in Live Oak, then as a stenographer in the welfare office in the city. She got

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transferred to Chiefland and then to Gainesville, where she quickly eased into UF.

When she arrived here in her story, she asked me to guess her starting monthly salary at the university. I was hesitant at first because I knew I'd be way off, but I eventually offered up \$800.

"It was \$125 a month."

Her position was in the now-defunct Department of Industrial Arts in UF's College of Education in Norman Hall, which at the time still housed P.K. Yonge Laboratory School.

That first semester in 1952, she found out she got a free day for the university's homecoming parade, which goes down University Avenue each fall and today still means a Friday off for students and workers alike.

Jones did have a boyfriend at the time, but she reached out to her cousin instead.

"I don't know why I didn't call my boyfriend," she remembered. "I called my cousin Tom and said, 'Are you going to the parade?'"

Tom, a UF student, arrived to pick his cousin up with another student, his friend Harold Jones, and the three went together.

"Between the two of 'em, I laughed during the whole parade," said Jones, who married her cousin's friend on June 13, 1953. "Harold still makes me laugh."

This time of joy for the newlyweds was one of darkness for the U.S. The beginnings of the civil rights movement and its push for desegregation met considerable opposition — at UF, across the South, and back at the family farm in Suwannee County.

Jones would go home on the weekends, and she and her brothers "would visit and talk and argue occasionally." At points, the debates became so intense that Jones walked out of the house and to her nearby sister-in-law's.

"One [brother] said to the other one something about Sister being down there with all those Yankees," Jones remembered.

"They were having problems with the integration of schools in Live Oak because it wasn't easy. [My brothers] were all good, but it was a very difficult time, very difficult."

Jones has UF-specific stories from integration and from another dark chapter during the 1950s and '60s: the Johns Committee investiga-



tions into homosexuality at the university and at others across Florida, which were meant to remove gay and lesbian students and professors.

But some recollections from these eras she doesn't want shared publicly.

"It was an interesting time to go to those meetings" at the university on integration, she said. "I'm glad to see that it's working."

Jones and her husband gave birth to their only child, Hal Jr., in 1957, and he also experienced racial conflict firsthand once he grew into school age.

"He had friends, black friends, who would say, 'Hal, don't hang around this afternoon,'" Jones recalled. "But he knew about the things that were happening: fights after school and ganging up and boys bothering girls."

Hal Jr. said he remembers the 1969 closing of Lincoln High School, an all-black school that also educated middle-schoolers, and students from it first arriving at his school, Westwood Middle.

"I made some super friends that I otherwise would've never gotten to know," he remembered. "But still, it was tough for everybody."

Jones did leave UF in August 1958 because she planned to be a stay-at-home mom. But

a little more than a year later, the secretary who replaced her became pregnant herself, so Jones went back to work to fill in.

When the replacement returned, Jones stayed in the College of Education but, in 1959, moved over to an empty spot in its Educational Media Center — a secretarial role but one that included the handling and reserving of audio-visual equipment and films for classes in the days before PowerPoint and YouTube.

This new position came with a promotion, and eventually, perhaps in 1972, her boss put her in for another.

Around the same time, a Gainesville engineering firm became interested in hiring her after a recommendation from a former UF doctoral student whose wife also worked as a

secretary at the firm.

Before making a decision, Jones went to visit the College of Education's dean to see if he planned on approving her promotion. "He looked at me and he said, 'Ah, Betty ... I think you've made up your mind what you're gonna do.' I probably said, 'Yeah, I think I'm just now making up my mind.'"

So she chose the engineering firm — only to awake that night crying because she'd go from working with people constantly to a more isolated office and position that came with meager tasks like buying bouquets for the firm's president to give to his wife.

"You don't have to go work down there," Jones' husband told her that night.

So she chose to stay at UF.

Soon after, in 1973, she moved into the role of staff assistant

in the Office of Instructional Resources, located in the old Library East building.

The office was an all-purpose one, in charge of photography, Xerox copying, ID creation, multiple-choice-test scoring, and a variety of other duties within UF.

It also managed the external Florida Teachers Certification Examination, which teachers in the state have to take and pass, and the College-Level Academic Skills Test, a now-discontinued

requirement to receiving an associate or bachelor's degree in Florida.

Instructional resources moved to Turlington Hall in the heart of campus in 1980, and Jones kept at it until retiring in 1994.

"This has not been an easy decision to make but gradually it has become clear that it is the right one for me at this time," she wrote to instructional resources Director Jeaninne Webb of her retirement in August 1994. "Working with you and the outstanding [Office of Instructional Resources] staff has been a pleasure."

But about a year later, she got a call requesting help with the FTCE and CLAST tests, doing things like registering test-takers and scoring. So in September 1995, back to work she went.



Jones and her husband, Harold, met in 1952 during UF's annual homecoming parade. "I laughed during the whole parade," Jones remembered. "Harold still makes me laugh." Their son, Hal Jr., was born in 1957.

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When the office stopped overseeing both tests, Jones switched to the role of part-time receptionist, the job she still holds.

The office is today called UF Information Technology and has shifted to a new variety of duties, such as ensuring in-classroom technology runs properly, installing it in new buildings, and providing accommodations for deaf students, to name a few.

In reflecting on the tech evolution she has seen since switching to the office in 1973, Jones said, “I don’t know where we’ll all end up. ... You know technology, too. It’s scary.”

Above all else, though, I had to ask the most obvious question of the longest-serving employee in UF history: Any thoughts on retirement?

“No. No,” Jones replied. For one, she said, her husband, a photographer during his working years, didn’t like the idea of her ‘94 retirement.

“Somebody asked him what he does. He said, ‘I’m a go-getter.’ He said, ‘I take my wife to work and go-get-her.’”

“My husband was concerned because ... he was afraid I was gonna stay home and might interfere with his routine and so forth,” Jones explained. “And he made a joke not long ago: Somebody asked him what he does. He said, ‘I’m a go-getter.’ He said, ‘I take my wife to work and go-get-her.’”

Hal Jr. figures his mom “will go forever.”

“It’s pretty amazing, right?” said the 59-year-old, an artifact diver by trade and dad to Jones’ two grandchildren. “I mean, good God, she’s 85. ... But she’s pretty humble about it.”

So without retirement in sight, Jones presses on, applying the same simple motto to her routine that she has throughout her time at UF: “You get it done as fast as you can, and you must do it right.”

The fast part once caught the attention of a boss, who gave Jones a suggestion for then but, unknowingly, perhaps also an appropriate forecast for her career.

“Spread it out. Make it last a little.”

This longevity has, of course, led to many a coworker and student surrounding her over the years. Each one of them, she said, holds a special place in her heart.

“I like everybody. I fall in love.”

“People person to the max?” I ask.

She laughs. “Yes, darlin’.” ■