

Alumna provides gift, advice for young scholars

by Tom Tozer

The ball started rolling when an MTSU Phonathon student called Mary Neal Alexander (B.S. '41) for a pledge.

She committed \$100 and mailed in \$1,000. Later, she raised her contribution to \$10,000, then established an endowed scholarship of \$30,000. Now Alexander is taking it to a higher level.

Could it be that she still feels a strong connection to the Middle Tennessee State Teachers College from the late 1930s because of its commitment, even then, to students?

"The teachers who were there when I was there ... they had our best interests at heart. I don't think it was a matter of just grinding us out like a sausage mill," said the home-demonstration and home-economics major. "They cared about us."

Alexander lived in what's now the Percy Priest Lake area and was home-schooled as a child. After high school, her mother sent her to what was then David Lipscomb College, at that time a two-year school.

"My mother was determined that I get an education," Alexander said. "I had an eye problem, and the doctor told me not to go back to school for a year. After that time, I came to Murfreesboro. All the dorm rooms were taken.

"Someone told me about a new teacher coming in and said that I could stay in her house. ... It turned out she was the head of the home-economics department. I said no way was I going to stay with her, because that's what I was majoring in!

"My mother asked me if I wanted to live at home or stay with the new teacher," Alexander continued. "That settled that. Ms. (Carrie) Hodges and I became the best of friends, until her death many years later."

The State Teachers College didn't offer courses in home management, Alexander's primary area of interest. "But I really got that training living with her," Alexander recalled of her mentor.

Later, the department was renamed Family and Consumer Science. "Sounds more fancy," Alexander quipped.

After graduation from college, Alexander was one of three women recruited by the UT Extension Service. She spent the next 31 years helping people in rural areas get electricity and learn how to use electric stoves, refrigerators and freezers. She helped farmers install and operate electric milk coolers and, later, she stuffed cotton mattresses.

"Food, clothing and shelter, that what's we dealt with—those would always be necessities," she explained. "My title was 'home demonstration agent,' and I did that for about 20 years in three different counties. Then I was transferred from

Sumner County to Cookeville and became supervisor of 15 counties in the Upper Cumberland District."

A scholarship made possible by Alexander's generosity will be available to "the underdog," as she puts it, and not just to students with a high GPA.

"There are some people who can do things with their hands, but they don't have the ability to put it on paper," Alexander said thoughtfully. "They freeze."

Alexander's advice to students who go to college is to get involved in everything MTSU has to offer.

"Be a part of everything that you can possibly do," she said, "but don't let your outside activities interfere with your class time. Your classwork must come first."

Joe Bales, vice president for development and university relations, said Alexander's gift is "yet another example of the good will that MTSU has tried to preserve with our alumni and friends.

"The endowment and what it will do for countless students are invaluable. The relationships that come out of these kinds of connections are just as wonderful. We are grateful to Mary Neal Alexander for honoring her alma mater with this gift."

A gift of friendship also has emerged from Alexander's partnership with Development and University Relations. She and Lucie Murphy Burchfield, a development director, have become pals.

"I invited her to my wedding and I've cooked some of her recipes," Burchfield said. "I just think she's wonderful, and she's had a wonderful life. She did good things in her work and in her personal life. I love being around her."



FRIENDLY VISIT—MTSU Alumna Mary Neal Alexander, left, poses for a photo with a good friend, Lucie Murphy Burchfield of the university's Development Office, during a recent visit to Alexander's Nashville home. Alexander, a member of the Class of 1941 and a longtime home-demonstration agent for the University of Tennessee Extension Service, has expanded her \$100 scholarship pledge into an endowed scholarship for MTSU students.

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