

# **Memoir of an Early Office Occupations Instructor**

*By True Sherman*

Everything big has a small beginning. DMACC's first classes started small in West Des Moines in an empty grocery store located at 2501 Vine Street. Four programs started in February 1967 with a very small number of students. One year later, there was a small number of graduates – twelve. The school was officially known as Center #1, Area 11 Community College. The DMACC name came later.

This first graduation in February 1968 was held in the lower level of a medical building in West Des Moines. Each of the twelve graduates was presented with a boutonniere or corsage. The press was there. After the ceremony, a huge cake was cut for everyone to enjoy.

## **Hired to teach for DMACC in 1967**

I was hired a little over a week before students arrived for the Fall 1967 quarter. New programs were being offered. Enrollment was high enough for Office Occupations (secretarial and clerical), to add a staff member. There were already four students who had started in February and who were halfway through their one year of training – three secretarial and one clerical. Dennis Marten headed the Office Occupations Department and the Clerical Program. Between the two programs we must have had about 25 new students starting that fall.

I had to quickly set up a program using an altogether new system - vocational - which gave me a very uneasy feeling about everything. My teaching experience had centered on teaching a course in typing, shorthand, bookkeeping or other business subjects, but not in a situation where everything was integrated together. Since I had years of work experience, I learned the textbooks didn't cover what it was really like on the job, so the students pretended they were in an office, and I was their boss. Every assignment had to pass standards of "mailability" or usability. There weren't many business teachers who taught the art of erasing. On the job secretaries learned how to do an acceptable job of erasing; so, in my classes, a poor erasure meant - do it over - just like on the job. I never found a textbook that told how to erase.

A few days before students arrived, we had to have our first staff meeting for all programs of this new college. At that time the staff consisted of fewer than 20 people, including the janitor and building secretary and our superintendent, Paul Lowery. The programs headquartered in this location called Center #1 were Dental Assistant, Medical Assistant, Operating Room Assistant, Marketing and Office Occupations, plus a room where a new program could meet until a meeting place could be found. I remember some programs were housed in the Methodist Church in Ankeny. Data Processing and Accounting started at Center #1 before they moved out.

The counselor for the Iowa State Department of Vocational Education for Post-Secondary Schools was our resource. In vocational education, use of textbooks was discouraged. Real office-like situations were to be used for our laboratory training, using our innovative methods. Lecture time was to be minimum and allocated in each area to be taught. Students progressed from where their skills were when they started the goals they established individually. Grades were not given, only evaluations. Most testing was done at the end of each quarter to determine what they didn't know, so the next quarter's goals could be easily set. No two people were alike. This sounds like a lot of work for the instructor, but it was surprising how motivated the students were to meet their goals

Each student was assigned a work place, an office-size desk with a typewriter return on the right side, the latest model of electric typewriter, an adding machine, a transcribing machine, their own dictionary and Secretary's Style Manual. A beautiful comfortable, bright yellow chair was at each desk. This put the student immediately in an office mode. This equipment for the student was first class. The staff had to be happy with beaten up Army Surplus desks and hard straight-back chairs.

### **Early memories**

The partitions in the building were about eight or nine feet tall - the ceilings were high, so there was a few feet of open space at the top. The partitions themselves were no more than an inch thick. Sound went through and over the top. You could hear everything going on in an adjacent room. Sometimes you almost had to shout to be heard. The climax came when a new program went into this tiny classroom where I used to give my secretarial students shorthand dictation. This was the keypunch program, a short-term program of seven weeks. When you have seven of these noisy clickety-clack machines working at the same time, the sound pervaded the whole building. Marten got in touch with administration, asking that the program be put elsewhere. In a few days, we were notified the problem had been solved. A trip to Army surplus helped solve the problem. A bunch of old gray woolen Army blankets were found and hung on the walls. Not completely soundproof, but they tried.

Our monthly staff meetings moved around to different stations. This way, the staff could keep up on progress. The permanent location of the college had been selected to be in Ankeny and construction begun on seven small buildings called The Phasing Campus, located just west of the East 14th Street entrance. Four p.m. was our meeting time, and just before we left our building in WDM for our first on-campus staff meeting, someone notified us to wear our boots - the road hadn't been paved yet, and after a heavy rain, it was a mess. When we arrived, there was a very long line of boots neatly lined up outside that first building.

Permanent buildings were being constructed that first year. Eventually all of us at Center #1 would be on campus. A Business Building was about the sixth or seventh one, but by the time it was finished, the Data Processing and Accounting Programs had grown so much, there was no room for Office Occupations. We had to remain at Center #1 for two or more years. We had the entire building to ourselves and needed it because our enrollment had ballooned.

The layout of the building interior was such that the three medical programs were in small rooms with the instructor's desk in one corner. No one had a window except the Dental Program - it had all windows on one side of their classroom. All of these rooms were on the south side of the building, and tucked into the corner was a place where students could purchase foods from vending machines and eat at high tables, sitting on bar stools (probably Army surplus). Our labs, as we called our big room, took up the center portion of the building. It accommodated 24 office-size desks with electric typewriters. Another room adjoined this room that held 24 smaller-sized desks with manual typewriters for the secretarial program. Next to this was another classroom for the Marketing Program headed by Jerry Manning. Across the hall he had his own cubicle for his office. The east side of the building had about four small office type rooms. Leonard Bengston started there, sharing his room with another administrator. Carroll Bennett also had an office there. None of these people had a secretary; but I recall how Bennett would come into the lab and ask for one of my secretarial girls to take a letter - a real letter. I had an excellent student, Nancy, who said she would "try". The next day he was back and asked for Nancy. I said I have several other girls who needed "real" experience also. He insisted on Nancy. When she graduated from the program, she became his full-time secretary for several years.

Office Occupations was almost 100% female. One year there was an exception when a young man enrolled in the clerical program. Like many of our students in the first years, he was from a foreign country, Mexico. His family had a flower business in Mexico and hoped to groom him to enter the business after he finished his business training. He was a handsome lad, and all these girls around him were "ga-ga" to have him there. When Valentine's

Day came, a delivery truck drove up to the front door of our center. The driver brought in a huge box designated for this young man who opened it and proceeded to hand out a beautiful orchid to each student.

Every program had an advisory board, consisting of 6 to 9 people representing the occupation the students were being trained for. Toward the end of that first year, a board member who managed a law office called, asking if I might have a student who could work after school to earn a little money. I asked a student named Linda if she was interested. Linda went downtown to this law office, was hired and began work the next afternoon. About three days later, I got a call from the office manager asking if I had any more girls like Linda. I sent Kathy down for an interview. That was in 1968, and both girls are still there in 2014. Both have advanced in their duties.

About five years after the college started, I was approached to develop a two-year Executive Secretary Program. The college had in mind a continuation of the one-year program to greater skill development, plus an addition of a few credits from Arts and Science. As all programs just starting, enrollment was small that first year with just two students. The biggest drawback was that our Office Occupations Program was still operating out of the old grocery store in West Des Moines, which meant the vocational training was on one campus and Arts was in Ankeny. Transportation was the student's responsibility. The next year the addition to the Business Building was complete, and all of Office Occupations was relocated to the main campus. Enrollment surged for the Executive Secretarial Program.

### **Running into a former student**

When we all had to enter the college on E 14<sup>th</sup>, just before classes were to start, my car stalled in the left lane before turning left to get on campus. There I sat, blocking traffic behind me. In a few minutes I heard a knock on my window - it was a patrolman. I rolled my window down and he said, Patrolman Hill here. How can I help you?" I said, "Are you Wilbur or Gene?" "Oh, my gosh! It's Mrs. Sherman!" When I taught high school in Stanhope the year I got married, this kid sat beside my desk in the assembly where we met every morning. I would ask him, "Wilbur, would you take this to the office?" He would answer, "My name is Gene." Next day I would ask him, "Gene, would you take this to the office?" He'd answer, "My name is Wilbur." How can you forget a kid like that? He stopped the traffic, gave my car a push and it started up again. I'll never forget him!

In a lab class in legal secretary, I had just checked a student's transcription of a ten-page interrogatory where she had misspelled interrogatory 20 times using only one "r". I groaned when I saw what she had done, but recalled my days on the job. This was not a usable copy, which meant it had to be retyped. She had to learn to use her dictionary. This was before word processing equipment - a couple hours' work. I convinced her that redoing it would help improve her typing speed and accuracy.

### **DMACC students compete nationally**

How can I forget all those contests - state and national? The first I learned about this competition was early spring of 1968 that first year. All our students were automatically a member of Office Education Association we called OEA. Marten and I were informed that our location would be the host to this state-wide event we knew nothing about. All the community colleges in the state that had office occupations programs would travel to Des Moines with their entrants for a chance to put their skills to test against each other with the winners getting the opportunity to go to nationals, which I believe that year was in Texas.

We got right to work having competitions in about a dozen areas - typing, shorthand, adding machines, transcription, job application, parliamentary team, chapter of the year and some others. So many students were unaware of their abilities

until they competed and scored well. In addition to getting the students prepared, we had to get our facilities in shape. The day of the contests arrived. Students surprised themselves and were exhibiting their trophies.

Each of the fourteen years I taught there, we had contests each spring. The staff had grown along with enrollment so that staff alternated being chaperones. I recall being on the trips to Indianapolis and Chicago. Our DMACC groups had always scored so high and were hard to defeat in job application, parliamentary and chapter of the year. The awards ceremonies were held in the ballroom of the hotel where all were housed. The final night was the banquet followed by awards. I recall at the Chicago convention, I was seated with most of the parliamentary team. Here was this delicious dinner being served and these girls were so worried, they couldn't eat anything. There was no need to worry - they won again!

All the group trophies were accumulating over the years. A special trophy case was built to display them in the hallway of the department. Those group trophies were huge. A trophy for a single entrant was given to the person who won it. The students traveled to the competition by chartered buses, so welcoming them back was a real special event.

### **Early book store**

Another oddity I remember is the way we handled student's books. When students enrolled in the program, their fee included the price of any book requirements. The depository for these books (we called the first bookstore) was a narrow closet at the side of our lab. Marten was in charge of it, and it stored the book requirements for all the programs in the building.

Marten was always uneasy about someone breaking in at night and taking some of our wonderful equipment. He could make a quick desk check in the morning. One night before leaving the building, he found a small rock at the bottom of the back door to keep it ajar.

### **A course called "Charm"**

All students, clerical and secretarial had to take this course called Charm. This dealt with manners, etiquette, office apparel, makeup and lots of necessary subjects. Marten approached me, saying he felt uncomfortable teaching this material to his clerical students. If you teach my girls Charm, I'll teach your girls machines. He knew I didn't like that offset press, so that was a great deal for both of us.

We had an occasion in the program when this Charm class was paying off. It was after a new student started late in a quarter whose body odor was so bad, no one wanted to have a desk near her. An older student had been talking with her at the front of the lab for a long time; Marten was getting uneasy, when suddenly this session broke up. About 10 minutes later the older student came to Marten's desk and said she knew he was uneasy, but she was explaining to this girl what deodorant was and how to use it. The problem was solved, thanks to Barb, the student.

### **Move to the main campus in Ankeny**

That first fall when we had to report for classes in Ankeny, I started out that first morning and checked my mileage - 14 miles from my driveway to my parking spot. The entrance to the building was almost two blocks away, and when I got into the building, I had to get to the far north end for my office and classroom, another block. It was so easy at Center #1 - I just drove about three miles to the front of the building, opened the front door, and turned left a few steps. I was in my classroom. I always had a brief case of work to lug in and out each day. Was it worth all this extra effort?

The thought of quitting entered my mind every day for about a month - I just loved my work and the girls in the program - I was getting used to it, so I stayed.

The Exec Program was hardly off the ground when the college felt a couple of new programs should be offered—a two-year Legal Secretary Program and five-quarter Medical Secretary Program, so it was back to the drawing board. The local chapter of the National Secretaries Association had been pushing to start this program. Three representatives from the association agreed to help set up guidelines for the content - they knew what should be taught. All three had a long tenure in their offices and also their attorneys gave them their blessings. I had resources galore - I just had to get it organized into learning. There were about ten different areas of law which we divided up among the four quarters of class time, plus the legal advisors wanted each student to experience 24 weeks of internship.

In the fall of 1973, the first class started with almost a full class enrollment of 24 students. The training was a new concept for me, so each day, I seemed to be leaning almost as much as the students. The law classes started with the fourth quarter and each type of law was introduced by a lawyer who lectured twice a week for an hour, followed by a three-hour session of lab work. That was where my work started. All dictation, transcription, or rough draft work had to be selected from real-life lawyer's offices and put into instructional form. Nothing was available in textbooks using Iowa laws, and my advisory board wanted the students trained to work in local offices – somebody had to do it. My students that year liked to be called my guinea pigs.

At the end of two years, after a little attrition for one reason or another there were about 14 girls who graduated. They had spent two years of their lives with each other; that parting was a little sad - how can we keep in touch with each other? Some were leaving the area - getting married—there were a lot of questions about the future. I made a suggestion that has been with me now all these years. We would start a round robin letter, and I'd send it off to the next person when I got news. Wonderful idea, but little did I know what it would grow into.

The next class came to graduation - Would you do it for us, too. Sure! And so it went for eight years of graduates. I finally picked the holiday season to get this out. When you have a student for almost two years in a self-contained situation, you really get to know them - they are almost like daughters, and I loved them all. However, all good things must come to an end. My newsletter last December contained an alert - I would be 95 in 2014 and felt it was time to say “adieu.”

As you teach, you look out at your class, and that is the way you remember them. As time goes by, they age; you age. So what do they look like now? I hope I can still recognize them using a little bit of imagination.