

A legacy of service: Sherman retires after 28 years as Extension agent

Written by April Peregoy



Retiring after 28 years as a family consumer science extension agent, 18 of which were spent at the Phillips County Extension Office, Bonnie Sherman marked the final week of February as her last before moving on to her retirement years in Illinois.

To honor her years of service, fellow extension agents from Golden Plains, Phillips County Commissioners, Social Service employees and a large group of friends and community members gathered at the Extension Office on Monday, Feb. 23 for a retirement celebration.

Sherman grew up in a small town called South Haven in southwest Michigan. Her family owned a dairy farm, producing their own brand of milk and ice cream, which she said is still available today.

She attended Michigan State University in Lansing and earned a bachelor's degree in textiles and clothing. Upon graduation, she moved to Colorado Springs and worked for nine years at a school for deaf and blind children.

Though she learned many valuable lessons while working at the school, Sherman said she began to long for something different. While she had never participated in 4-H herself, she had many friends who were involved in the program, and she always admired them for it. So she returned to school at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley to become an extension agent, earning her master's degree in nutrition.

Her first job as an extension agent for Golden Plains Extension Area was in the Kit Carson County office, located in Burlington. She began Feb. 2, 1981 and worked there for two and a half years. Back then, Sherman said her title was home economist—a title that later changed to what she is known as now: family and consumer science agent.

In Burlington, she also supported the 4-H program by sponsoring workshops, and supported other extension projects as well.

Looking for a change of scenery, Sherman moved to Glenwood Springs in August of 1983. Though she said it was an absolutely beautiful place to live, she missed the people of the Eastern Plains. "The office there was more solitary; each county worked on its own. I missed

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the staff of Golden Plains.”

As a result, she moved back to Eastern Colorado in February, 1990 to work at the Phillips and Sedgwick County Extension Office in Holyoke. She was happy to see that many of the agents she worked with in Burlington were still a part of the Golden Plains Extension.

Since becoming the 4-H and family consumer science agent in Phillips and Sedgwick counties, Sherman has instituted many programs designed to help youth, women and families alike. One of her proudest achievements is pioneering the Strong People Stay Healthy program in Colorado.

A weight-lifting program designed to help women put off the onset of osteoporosis, as well increase their strength and balance, Sherman and LouAnn Boyle brought the idea back with them to Colorado after attending a national convention in Nashville, Tenn. The national program is called Strong Women, Strong Bones, but Sherman said she did not want the local program to discriminate and changed the name to what it is now.

Another program that people may not realize was started by Sherman is the Family Visitor Program, which is now known as Baby Bear Hugs. She and former preschool teacher Deb Huwa formed the program in the early 1990s. Around the same time, Yuma County Social Services was successfully sponsoring the same program, and its director Tom Westfahl began applying for grants to make it a regional program.

When the grant was successfully obtained, Phillips County became part of the regional program, but was able to have its own name of Baby’s First Steps. Just last year, the program was taken over by another sponsor and changed to Baby Bear Hugs.

Other programs initiated by Sherman include Youth Child Consortium, the Diabetes Health Fair, now in its fifth year, and Dining with Diabetes cooking classes.

For her dedication to these programs and the extension office, she has won several prestigious awards, such as the Florence Hall Award from the National Association of Family Consumer Science Agents, a District Service Award, a Telly Award and she was Beta Sigma Phi’s Woman of the Year in 1999.

Outside of work, she has been a member of High Plains Heritage Quilters, is the 4-H quilting leader and is in the Agenda Club. Every year, she has put together the presentations for the high school seniors’ breakfast. She loves animals and is the proud owner of two dogs, Buck and Pete, and four cats. She also enjoys reading, knitting, crocheting, cross-stitching and puzzles—both jigsaw and mental.

Sherman’s decision to retire this year was made after she found the house of her dreams in Huntley, Ill. “I know it sounds kind of silly, but I found this house I really loved and couldn’t pass it up,” she said.

The retirement community of Huntley, Ill. offers many activities and will bring her closer to her family, she added. She plans on leaving Holyoke in the middle of March.

However, she insists she will miss Holyoke and her job at the Extension Office. “This is a job where I’m always learning new information and about new technology. I would not be as knowledgeable as I am if I did not work here—that’s what I’ll miss the most about it,” she said.

She will also miss the fun times she had with the 4-H program, and she especially laughed when recalling memories of 4-H camping trips at Beecher Island. “You never knew what the weather will do,” she said, adding during severe storms, many of the tents would rip or completely fly away.

“They were fun, but they were also very tiring and difficult,” she said, adding, “But they did give me some funny stories to tell and they’re the experiences that stick out most in my mind

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through my time here.”

During her 28 years of Extension experience, Sherman said she has seen many changes take place. The biggest is, of course, technology. She recalled having to write newsletters on hand-cranked duplicators as well as having to communicate with other offices and CSU through the mail.

“Email has certainly changed the way we do things now,” she said. “We don’t have to wait to get information in the mail. We can simply send an email and have the answer immediately. Or we can look it up on the Internet.”

On the downside, however, the number of positions available to Extension agents has decreased sharply. “When I first started working in Burlington, there were two or three family and consumer science agents in each office. Now we’re down to one or two in each office. And, in my case, I’m the agent for two counties.” She credits the decrease of positions to state budget issues.

When asked if she would pick the same career if she had the chance to go back, Sherman said she would, but added she is glad it was her second career choice. “I was much more mature coming into the job. Being more confident helped me with decisions I had to make and in meeting people. I think to stay with this job, you need to be more mature because it can be hard. But it can also be very rewarding.”