

## **A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF SUE RAY STRICKLAND**

Sue Ray Strickland was born on January 28, 1935 in Wake County, North Carolina, the second daughter of Maynard and Pauline Jackson Ray. During her early years she lived in a little white farm house on Purnell Road which at that time was little more than a dirt path with minimal state maintenance. In 1935, access to electricity had not made its way down Purnell Road, so the Rays and other families in that area learned to live without electricity and running water. She often spoke of how great it was when the Rural Electrification Authority brought power lines down the road and they were able to enjoy the “modern” conveniences provided by electricity. Despite what we would perceive as severe hardship today, her young life was happy and marked by strong family ties, friendships and simple pleasures.

In 1941 Sue entered the first grade at Wake Forest Public School. At that time, Wake Forest students started school in the first grade and remained at the same school through high school. She enjoyed school with the additional social contacts it provided and she was an excellent student.

In the mid 1940's Maynard bought a house on South Main Street in Wake Forest and moved his family to the “big town”. Just prior to that move Sue's brother, Tim, was born. To Sue, Tim was like having a real live baby doll and she did her best to spoil him. They were very close and Tim was always one of the most important people in her life.

Living in Wake Forest greatly facilitated her access to the school and the Wake Forest United Methodist Church, which became the Ray's new church home. She was very active, being a class leader in her school and in activities at the church. For many years Sue helped her mother run the Church Rummage Sale from their garage on South Main Street. Church members would bring clothing and household items no longer needed to be sold at the rummage with the proceeds going to the Church.

During her High School years, she was an honor student and class president her sophomore, junior and senior years. She played varsity basketball all four years and was team co-captain her senior year. Her other activities included Future Homemakers, class reporter, year book staff, office assistant, marshal, and senior superlative. She was also a participant in Girls State.

When Sue graduated from High School in 1953, her older sister was in college and the Ray's could not afford another college student, so she went to work for Nationwide Insurance Co. in Raleigh. In the fall of 1953 she met Paul Strickland, a freshman at Wake Forest College. If it wasn't love at first sight for Paul and Sue, it was pretty close. After about seven or eight months together they were engaged with plans to marry upon his graduation. After his sophomore year at Wake Forest, Paul was accepted for pilot training in the U S Air Force Aviation Cadet Program and was sent to flight school in Texas. With the resulting months of separation, they mutually agreed to, at least temporarily, call off the engagement.

Sue continued to work for Nationwide and met and married Charles May. She and Charles had a son Martin (Marty) in 1957. Marty suffered brain damage at birth due to oxygen deprivation which resulted in moderate retardation. Raising a handicapped child placed an untenable strain on the marriage and Sue and Charles separated and divorced after about three years.

In the late 1950's Sue left Nationwide and accepted a position with First Citizens Bank and Trust Co. in Raleigh. During her years with First Citizens she attended several banking courses and distinguished herself both academically and through the application of a strong work ethic. She began her career with First Citizens as a clerk in the Installment Loan Department and worked her way up to become one of the bank's first female Officers, eventually being promoted to Vice President.

While pursuing a highly successful career in banking, she never neglected her duties as a single mother of a retarded child, a task made even more difficult by the loss of her father in 1973. With all of the demands placed upon her, which now included support of her mother, she still found time for active attendance and support for the Wake Forest United Methodist Church. For many years she taught Sunday school and held down the duties of Financial Secretary.

In 1984, Paul, who had also married, had a son and a daughter, and was now separated and awaiting a final divorce, came back into her life. Almost immediately Paul and Sue realized that they were meant to be together and after his divorce became final they were married on May Day 1985. They were married by Reverend Helen Crotwell in the Wake Forest United Methodist Church and had the distinction of being the last couple to marry in the original sanctuary. After their marriage they honeymooned in the North Carolina Mountains where they particularly enjoyed hiking the Blue Ridge Parkway Mountain Trails around Blowing Rock and Grandfather Mountain. Hiking was an activity they enjoyed for many years both in the mountains and the trails around Falls Lake.

Sue and Paul lived in her little house just off of South Main Street in Wake Forest for their first two years. In 1987, they built a comfortable three bedroom ranch between Wake Forest and Youngsville. With their new home there was plenty of room for a big garden and they always had enough fresh vegetables for themselves, the freezer and their neighbors and relatives.

The summer of 1990 turned out to be a tragic time for Sue when her beloved younger brother, Tim, died with cancer. Two years later her mother died unexpectedly. With her mothers' death, she not only lost her parent but also her primary help with Marty. By now Marty's mental and physical health had deteriorated to the point that he required daily supervision and support. With an outside household assistant Sue and Paul were able to manage his care so that he could continue to live alone at the home in Wake Forest.

Sue always enjoyed cooking and was very good at it. After her retirement from First Citizens Bank in 1998, she enrolled in several gourmet cooking classes which enabled her to broaden her culinary skills. She had her own little herb garden and knew just what to do with them to really dress up a meal.

Sue had five grand-children, a girl and a boy from Paul's son, Greg, and three boys from Paul's daughter, Devra. She loved all of her grand-children even though she never got to spend enough time with them. Greg and family lived in Chicago, Illinois and Devra and family lived in Utica, New York. She was a proud grand-mother, never letting a holiday, birthday or any other special occasion pass without remembering.

Sue and Paul always tried to take at least one week away together each year. Their favorite destinations were the North Carolina – Tennessee Mountains, the North Carolina – South Carolina Coast, several Florida destinations and Nashville, Tennessee.

In December of 2004 Marty's physical health had deteriorated to the point that he was admitted to the hospital for a comprehensive medical evaluation. The collective medical opinion was that his most critical need was major back surgery. After successful back surgery, he was transferred to a nursing home where his various medical problems continued to worsen. Today he is still a resident of the nursing home where he will probably remain.

Marty's nursing home confinement weighed heavily on Sue and as the months dragged into years she became so involved with his problems that she began to lose perspective of everything else. On July 16, 2007 in the early morning hours, a very tired Sue went to sleep at the wheel, drifted off the road and struck a wooden fence. She was killed instantly when one of the fence boards struck her in the head.

I can tell you these details of Sue's life because I am Paul, the one who was blessed with a second chance to spend a little over twenty two wonderful years with this great lady. She was truly the love of my life and she taught me the absolute beauty of unconditional love. If the requirements for entry into Heaven are what I believe them to be, I am sure that Sue is there and can only pray that I may live up to that standard and one day I will be with her again.

If you are reading this as a recipient of the Sue Ray Strickland Memorial Scholarship, study hard, strive for excellence and make the most of the opportunity, and remember, Sue is watching, so make her proud.