

In celebration of the service of Jean Edwards Jackson.
2012 recipient of the Jack Burney Community Service Award
Presented by a grateful town on December 2, 2012

Jean's story is, quite simply, a love story.

And yet, that single observation belies the chance turns of fate, the depth of commitment, and the abiding faith that brings us together today to celebrate Jean's contribution to our Town.

Jean traces her story's beginnings to the day she met Bruce Jackson. It was a chance meeting, a true twist of fate that landed the two of them--each with a date--at a wedding luncheon in 1955. Jean was a recent graduate of Ohio Wesleyan and was headed to Cleveland to teach. Bruce was doing graduate work in math at Duke. They chatted. They joked. They swapped stories. The day ended, and Jean and Bruce went their separate ways, each one perhaps tucking away the tiniest regret about what might have been.

Fast forward one year. Jean is traveling the back roads of Virginia with family over the Thanksgiving holiday. A roadside sign triggers a memory of Bruce, who'd mentioned that he was from Drakes Branch. And in that moment, Jean takes a leap of faith, asking that the family make a quick detour through the little town. There she finds Jackson's Hardware store, and inside, she finds Bruce's dad, the proprietor, who insists they all come home to dinner. Dinner ends. Jean's family packs back in the car. And now the regret is palpable for Jean. She recalls that she wished then, "If only..."

For Jean's good friends and family in the room, there's no suspense in the recounting of these events. The story comes full circle and ends as it must with Jean and Bruce marrying in 1961. But, that's a five-year gap. In the intervening years Jean and Bruce pursue separate callings, meeting again only because the friend whose wedding had introduced them points Jean in Bruce's direction as she prepares to travel in Europe.

Bruce is in Germany, working for the Air Force and on leave from Davidson, his alma mater, where he has joined the math faculty. Jean resolutely decides this time around that she is leaving little to fate. The two arrange several meetings while Jean is in Europe, and together they acknowledge what the universe seemed to know all along: they are meant to spend their lives together.

And so it is that we are all deeply indebted to Bruce for bringing Jean to Davidson.

But we also have Bruce to thank for positioning Jean to write a second chapter of this story, in which she throws down roots in Davidson deeper than even she'd imagined possible. Jean will tell you that when she met Bruce, she was "a big city girl." She and her family had lived in Silver Spring, just outside of Washington, DC, during her high school years. After graduating from college she'd lived and worked in Cleveland, back in DC, and just outside of Philly. She'd traveled the capitals of Europe. Without Bruce in the picture, Jean's life doesn't seem that it was destined for small town America.

So let's pick up the story after the two parted in Europe. The long, slow dance of Bruce and Jean's courtship culminates in a consuming correspondence by airmail--601 letters over the course of a year. Jean returns to teaching back in Philadelphia. Bruce is finishing out his Air Force stint in Europe and planning his return to Davidson. Their parting in Paris leaves Jean and Bruce knowing they'll marry, but it also leaves Jean anticipating a move as a newlywed to a very rural Southern college town to which she has no ties, other than Bruce.

In case you missed it, let me give you that number again...601 letters. Each of Bruce's share of the letters carefully and lovingly and hopefully spins out a vision of the town and the promise it holds for him and Jean. When she arrives as a new faculty wife, Jean is already well acquainted with the names of the people who will quickly become the couple's closest friends. After a quick turn through the Lafferty house and then the College apartments, Bruce and Jean settle into the house on Crescent Drive that will be their home for 45 years.

Jean sets about assuming the role of faculty wife. She credits strong women in her life, including her mother, whom she lost too early in life, as well as the other women whose husbands were members of the math department, for serving as her models. "My mother was the wife of a Methodist minister. Our lives then were about being a part of our husbands' lives and roles here. And I loved it all--the entertaining, the students, the faculty..."

Bruce and Jean's family grows to include two daughters, Julie and Brooks, and Jean's adopted community asks ever more of her. She dives deeper into community service. The elementary school comes asking. Jean joins Carol Barber as a "swish lady," wielding fluoride in defense of Davidson's littlest mouths. The church comes asking. Jean teaches Sunday School and becomes a master of the covered dish. And the College? Well, it never stops asking. Soon, Jean finds herself, along with Judith Jackson, being asked to coordinate Davidson's graduation lunch for 1,200. "That lunch," remembers Jean, "gave me an introduction to working with other people on campus on my own, not as Bruce's wife.

And it is here, I think, that we must acknowledge that our love story gains a new character: the Town of Davidson. Little by little our Town is getting to know what a quiet, caring, and committed woman has landed in its midst. And if our Town is good at one thing in particular, it is terrific at spotting and swallowing up whole a kindred spirit. That graduation lunch was the start of a whole new series of big-time asks, not least among them: the Rupert Barber production of the Sesquicentennial and any and all special campus events to which then-President John Kuykendal took a shine.

Each time the community asks, Jean responds without hesitation, but I think not merely out of a heightened sense of duty. When Jean and I met a few weeks back to chat about the Burney Award, her depth of feeling for our Town was never far from the surface:

"Our children had such opportunities. They were exposed to people with talent and dedication who gave of themselves... It looked like a sleepy town, but here were gifted, educated people. It was a wonderful place to be nurtured as adults."

Of her own service, however, she demurred, "It was just what you did."

For many of us, it's hard to imagine anyone landing in Davidson and not becoming smitten almost immediately. But, we all know that there's a distinct difference between infatuation and love. A good portion of the difference comes when we can see the object of our affection for the sum of its parts. It is to that chapter of Jean's story that we now turn.

As the years pass, Jean continues to build relationships through her service work with the people around her. And those relationships ultimately serve to remind Jean that love is a two-way street. When Bruce becomes ill, the people who Jean has served turn out in force to shepherd and support Jean and Bruce through the biggest test of their love story. But even in grieving her loss, Jean turns that experience on its end.

"I had this hole when Bruce was no longer here with me, but I'd also gained this list of people through so many one-on-one experiences," says Jean of the world she encounters after Bruce's passing. She and Missy Kuykendal begin providing bereavement support to others in our community. That work leads to Jean's involvement with DCPC's Congregational Care Committee and eventually to her becoming a church deacon, who leads the church in its development of a Stephen Ministry. Smile with me as I share Jean's reflection on her work as a Stephen Minister:

"We are trained to accompany a person through a time of crisis, all in anonymity. This where I am most comfortable."

How fortunate we are that of all the places Jean might have found herself, that this space is where she is most comfortable. She sees our Town for what it really is: the sum of its residents. And we have been richly

rewarded for her ability to see each of us as individuals and meet us where we are, whether in exquisite moments of inspiration or troubling periods of doubt and grief. It is a rare gift indeed.

Not surprisingly, Jean, too, acknowledges that gift. The other day she told me:

"I have had a life that is rich beyond measure in this smallish town, and I have missed Bruce Jackson. He brought me here. He prepared the way here. We built a life here, and now I have this new aspect of my life. The gratitude is so deeply rooted in my spirit."

In Jean's view, there's "really nothing extraordinary" to honor about her quiet travels among us.

Your town, Jean, respectfully disagrees. Today, we are so honored to acknowledge our gratitude, which is so deeply rooted in our collective spirit, for having been a chapter in your love story.