

Custodian moonlights as student

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You'll find Johnnie Clark in the Kleberg Center at night. A pleasant conversation starts, and she might ask if you are in college. With a little scorn in your voice, you reply yes.

Then she'll proudly say that she too is a student.

A slight shock — Clark, who looks sixty-ish, doesn't resemble your average college student. Unlike most of the students, she isn't in Kleberg to study — Monday through Friday nights, she is a custodial worker there.

But every weekend, when most students are trying to forget about school and studying, she catches a bus in her hometown of Hearne for

a 90-minute drive to attend the Prairie View A&M University weekend college where she is a business administration major.

And her college career isn't the only phase of her that makes her remarkable — she is a hard worker, civic leader, and feminist all in one small, but sturdy frame.

Clark was born in Temple — she won't tell how many years ago — and reared in Sapulpa, Okla., graduating from the local high school there in 1938, the tension years before World War II.

Some time after high school she met the man she said she couldn't have done anything without, a Texan named John Henry Clark who is now her husband of 25 years.

Clark isn't the type to stay at home, while her husband is out

working: "He says I was the worst woman's libber he was ever in contact with.

"We have worked together in various towns — in Lubbock, Fort Worth and finally Hearne," she said. "All this time I didn't have an opportunity for college."

But she did have time for everything else. She has been teaching intermediate Sunday School at her church in Hearne, while at the same time taking part in the small, but active chapter of the NAACP in town.

And what sounds like service above and beyond the proverbial call of duty, Mrs. Clark is a pillar in the parent-teacher associations in Hearne — even though she and her husband have never had any children.

"I was past president of Blackshire Elementary for three years before integration," she says proudly. "After (integration), vice-president."

But still there was no time for college — that is, until a former Hearne resident, now a Prairie View A&M administrator, decided college shouldn't just be for those who have the weekdays to spare.

"Dr. Wayman Webster thought his people needed to be upgraded," Clark said. "So he started the weekend college."

The program Webster started provides free transportation to Prairie View and government grants for the education.

Clark, who heard about the program through her church pastor, has nothing but praise for the program.



"It is so excellent — it's doing a beautiful job," she said. "These are parents who have raised their children, but still want the chance to get a college education."

So at 6:15 each Saturday morning, when most of us are in heavy sleep, Clark boards the overcrowded bus in front of the old Blackshire Elementary building (which was renamed Northside after integration), and rides to other towns in the Brazos Valley — Cameron, Navasota, Bryan — picking up adults like herself who have decided that now is as good a time as ever to continue their education.

Classes start at 8:15 sharp. Clark is a sophomore — "It's a boring year" — and takes finance, human relations, management, and another business elective.

At 4:15, when classes are finished, everyone boards the bus to return home. Clark gets back to Hearne around 6:30 that night.

Just because they attend college only on the weekend doesn't make Clark and her schoolmates any less than typical college students. She says she spends hours studying in the library — Texas A&M's and Prairie View A&M's — just like any other student.

"We travel together, and usually do homework together," said Clark, who has a B-average. "I feel like a full-time student even though I do it only on weekends."

"I should graduate within the next two years," she continued, adding she's looking at ways to hurry up and get her degree. "If I go this summer and next, it'll shorten the time."

We've all been told a college education is a good thing to have, but why does Johnnie Clark — after so many years without one — want a degree?

"I don't care whether I have a high paying job when I get out, and I won't flaunt my degree at my neighbors," she said. "I'm not looking to beat anybody out of a job."

"I want the world to know this is what I worked for — this proves you can still do it, in spite of your age. I don't feel like I'm slowing down at all."

She doesn't mind being among the Texas A&M students, or that she is usually the oldest person on the bus to school.

"You young people have made me feel so good. I look at you and I know how to fix my hair and makeup."

And in a couple of more years, with her husband by her side, she will proudly claim a degree in Business Administration, a degree she will have waited almost 40 years to get.

But somehow, one gets the feeling every second in those years were well-spent.



Her boys were sweetest?
... Long before she was the nation's "First Mother," she was a house mother to the Kappa Alphas of Auburn University. And when Miss Lillian Carter returned to Auburn recently, it was obvious her school spirit had never dimmed. "My boys were the sweetest, best behaved — no gambling, no wild women, just studied all the time and God bless them, that's the biggest thing I've

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