

FISHING FOR ADVICE



RICHARD DIXON/The Battalion

Ruth Hunt, known as the "fish lady," talks to freshman Joe Tabares in Hullabaloo Food Court on Wednesday. "The Corps is a tough place for freshmen," said Hunt, who sits at her table every day to talk with students.

Woman offers friendly ear, counsel to cadets, civilians

By ERIN HILL

The Battalion

Two A&M traditions celebrated their eighty-third birthdays this year—Bonfire and Ruth Hunt, also known as "the fish lady."

Since 1967, Hunt has served as a friend and unofficial adviser to freshmen in the Corps of Cadets, or "fish," as they are called, and other students.

She sits every day at a table near the bowling alley in the Hullabaloo Food Court in the Memorial Student Center, talking to students who drop by to visit.

"When everything looks down around the Corps I come down here and Ruth will lighten my spirits so I feel I can make it again," said Mike Yates, a freshman cadet and general studies major.

She has many visitors at her table, both cadets and civilians. Elizabeth Nunn, a freshman mechanical engineering major who is not in the Corps, said she tries "to visit every day at least."

"She is the mother they [the cadets] are missing," Nunn said. Hunt listens to students' problems and tells stories of her experiences with the Corps and A&M.

"If they have a problem we all try to work it out... there's no way to help 'em except love 'em," she said. Her most common piece of advice: "Hang in there, you'll make it."

A brick in front of the Sam Houston Sanders Corps of Cadets center bears her name, and a photo and plaque honoring her hang inside, crediting her with keeping "scores of cadets" from dropping out.

John Paddenberg, a senior history major and former band member, still stops by. "Everyone goes to see the fish lady!" he said.

Hunt received her nickname in the fall of 1975 when she was talking with a senior cadet in front of the MSC.

As Hunt tells it, the senior spotted a freshman cadet he did not know and called out to him, "Fish Jones, come here. I want you to meet this lady." The freshman, Gary Weaver '79, called back to the senior, "I know who she is, sir. She is our fish lady."

"I realized that's what I am—I am their fish lady," she said. "From that moment forward I tried to fill those shoes."

The Corps staff nominated her for Mother of the Year in 1972 because of her work with the cadets. She is the only woman ever to win the award without having any children attend A&M.

A cadet named Bob Felsh was her escort for the Mother of the Year ceremony and was instructed to take Hunt out to dinner at a nice restaurant on the Corps tab. When he asked her where she wanted to go, she said "I want to go to Duncan."

She said Felsh was disappointed but she was firm; that was where everyone else would be and she didn't want to miss the action.

Her most memorable experience was going to Nebraska in 1973 to see the Texas A&M football team play the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers, she said. In honor of the Mother of the Year award, the A&M chapter of Alpha Phi Omega, a service organization, arranged for Hunt to ride to Nebraska with an A&M student and stay with his wife's family.

Last year the Class of '72 invited her to their twenty-year reunion and presented her with a A&M wristwatch for being their Mother of the Year.

Hunt has traveled with the Aggie Band all over the Southwest Conference and taken many Corps trips, including one to Memphis in 1975 to attend the Liberty Bowl. She said she does not travel as much as previously but still keeps busy through volunteering on campus.

In 1967 Hunt moved from her hometown of Henderson, Texas, to College Station to be near her son Jim, who was stationed in Houston with the military. She found a job as a waitress at the Ramada Inn, now the University Tower, where she met A&M students and their families.

Whenever Sbsa dining hall closed, many students would get their meals at the Ramada, a popular nighttime hang-out.

Hunt would often get to know the families and would tell the students to come over anytime they needed someone to listen.

"Sometimes I was the only motherly human they could talk to," she said.

In early 1975 she began visiting the MSC occasionally in the mornings. Once she was given the title of "the fish lady," however, she made it her duty to be

on campus every day.

She wears the Corps brass and a Band lyre which is "unshaven," since that is what Corps freshmen wear. She said she only dons a shaved lyre for Final Review.

In addition to her Corps pins she wears an official nametag, suggested by Colonel Parsons, former commandant of the Corps. Hunt said that when Parsons heard her nickname, he said, "Ruth, get you a tag. I like that."

Her first try, which read "The Fish Lady," wasn't quite the way he wanted it, so she had another one made. It said "The fish lady" and still wasn't right. Her third effort, "the fish lady," was perfect. She said Parsons wanted the name in lower case letters for authenticity's sake since the title of "fish" is always in lower case letters.

Over the years she has met famous former students such as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros, Class of '68; the late Congressman Jack Teed, Class of '50; and the late J. Earl Rudder, Class of '32, former president of Texas A&M.

Since many of the A&M class reunions were held at the Ramada she was also able to meet Pinky Wilson, who wrote the "Aggie War Hymn," and E. King Gill, Class of '24. Gill, the student who started the "Twelfth Man" tradition by being prepared to come out of the stands and play on the football team, even autographed her program "The 12th Man."

She also has had two Fish Camps named after her over the years, one of them being the "Hunt's Hot Peppers."

"I've gotten back more than I've ever given, more love, caring, and happiness back everyday," she said. "I love A&M. I love the Corps. I feel honored that they'll even turn me loose over here."

Hunt said she believes strongly in the Corps structure, but realizes it can be difficult to get used to.

"I've been around the Corps for over twenty years," she said.

"I put it in my words to explain to them how it is, soften it up a bit, but I never interfere with Corps business. I always tell them that's the way it is and you wouldn't want it to change to suit you."

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