

ARC director leaves learning legacy behind

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Photo by Teresa Benns

CENTER Quirky, zesty, fun, energetic and always smiling that is how Academic Recovery Center (ARC) graduates will remember Sharon Hines, the teacher who refused to believe they couldn't reach their goals.

"She was just so much fun," 2007 ARC graduate Jacqueline Lozen said. "I got such a kick out of her."

Grandmother Rosalie Fernandez, who came to the ARC to finish her schooling after quitting school as a child while still in the elementary grades, said Hines was the only teacher who ever sat down and really worked with her without making her feel she was unable to learn.

But it wasn't smooth sailing with every student. Hines had to be stern at times, insistent, and the master of tough love techniques. She needed all those tools in her bag to work with young people who, for one

reason or another, didn't or couldn't make it in the usual classroom setting. For some it was trouble with the law or with school rules. Others simply needed a more relaxed and slower paced setting or needed one-on-one assistance to compensate for learning difficulties. Not a few had dropped out of school, or left school early to become parents.

Whatever their circumstances, they found a friend, a coach, a cheerleader, a disciplinarian and a confidante in Hines, director of ARC for the past seven years. Although Hines will be leaving the Center to retire this year, she will ease out of the position slowly while training her successor, making sure that all the many innovations and learning aids she set in place for her students remain available when she is gone.

"I put my heart and my soul into this program to get it off the ground," Hines said. "But it's time to go. I honestly believe I have taken it as far as I can personally take it." She looks forward to moving to Missouri to spend time with her children and

grandchildren there. But there will always be a place in her heart for students with special needs.

While Hines may no longer actively teach, she will continue to educate school counselors and teachers in the specifics of the Irlen system and scotopic sensitivity syndrome, a condition that affects those with perceptual difficulties. Individuals suffering from the syndrome often experience light sensitivity, difficulty reading and understanding what is read and especially have problems with glare, including reading from white pages.

The Irlen system provides a series of customized colored reading filters that make it easier for some individuals to read the printed word and perceive other objects around them, even human facial expression. Scotopic sensitivity is based on the theory that some individuals have trouble receiving the proper wavelengths that allow vision to correctly perceive objects. A growing number of researchers are beginning to warm up to this concept and endorse treatment methods.

For Hines, it has been an invaluable tool for helping many of her students with reading and other difficulties. She recently became a certified screener for the condition and believes that awareness would help many presently struggling in school become better students and achieve their goals.

But the Irlen system was only one part of Hines' many-pronged approach with her students. And it is that approach she hopes to be able to successfully transfer to her successor, Joy Werner, a Center High School graduate, before she leaves later this year.

"I'm trying to figure out how to write down what I do," she said. "Believe me, it's not easy." While she says that no one is irreplaceable, Hines' success with her students over the years makes it clear that whatever it was she had going, it works. Hines says she has every confidence Werner will pick up where she left off and take the ARC to new heights, adding that she intends to help the new director in any way she can. The hardest thing about retiring, she says, is that she won't just be leaving those once her students she will be leaving her friends.

"It's not like your traditional classroom where you see kids for 45 minutes and then they go," she said. "Here I have kids for five hours at a time and we have formed friendships that will last a lifetime. It is not your traditional teacher-student relationship."

Hines does not feel her tough side has in any way detracted from those relationships. In fact she believes it is something that her students felt they needed and something they feel should be a part of the Center in the future.

"I have hope for our youth," Hines said. She explained that her students came to her recently and wanted to know if the new teacher would hold their feet to the fire. If there is a "secret" to her success, Hines believes that it lies in what those students said.

"I say what I mean and mean what I say," she said. "No matter who you are, these students need someone who is consistent, fair, applies all the same rules and makes them accountable. That's why it works."

Hines thanked the Center Schools administration for all their help and support in making the ARC what it is today.