

MARLENE STRAIT

Spend a few years on campus and you will, at some point, find yourself in a conversation with another staff person regarding years of service. And some familiar names will make their way to the top of the list. Marlene Strait is one of those names. Marlene is a member of a small group of individuals who have given more than 40 years service to the UW-Whitewater campus. At present, she is the longest-serving classified employee at UW-W, having hit year 49 on September 1st. We believe that is a noteworthy milestone!

In August of 1960, Marlene was approached by President Williams' secretary (the title of Chancellor did not come into use until the mid-70's) and encouraged to apply for a new position on campus. She began her employ as a Stenographer I on September 1, 1960. Enrollment at UW-W was 1,998. According to Marlene, President Williams frequently held gatherings for all office and maintenance staff. The entire campus was consolidated within a half-block area. Marlene was initially located in Old Main and worked for Admissions, Dean of Men, and Dean of Women. There were four secretaries working for those combined offices and they worked in a very small office area. The following January, the offices were divided and two of the secretaries moved across the hall to work in the Admissions Office, while Marlene and another secretary stayed to assist the Dean of Men and the Dean of Women.

In July of 1961, Marlene transferred to work for the Registrar's Office and the office of the Dean of Instruction, in the Andersen Library Building. She moved up to a Stenographer II level. When the Registrar's Office moved to Old Main, the following spring, she remained with the Dean of Instruction. It was that office that ultimately became the Office of the Provost & Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. When a new addition was built onto the library, the administrative offices were moved to a portion of that addition which was fondly referred to as "The Porch". And that became Marlene's new office area.

The Office of the Provost & Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs is the primary academic office responsible for all unclassified personnel actions. That office is also responsible for planning, developing, coordinating, reviewing, and administering all academic programs. It is the Provost who serves the campus in the chancellor's absence.

Marlene provides administrative assistance to the Provost and Vice Chancellor to maintain an efficient operation of the office. Her projects are diverse and involve composing correspondence, interpreting policies and procedures of the campus and System, and preparing reports for System. She is also the liaison among all offices on campus, and a resource for many references. Budgets also play a role in Marlene's office duties. She is a self-proclaimed "detailed list person" and finds that her lists come in handy when people request information. These lists are kept for historic purposes and will continue to provide useful information and historical data for generations to come. Marlene says she keeps twelve monthly files in her desk so that she can remain on task throughout the year and work independently to accomplish her tasks in a timely fashion.

Marlene's love of history is evident when you speak with her. She has some history of her own and was kind enough to share some regarding her family. She grew up on a farm and spent time milking cows and working in the fields. She was the middle child of three girls. They had no electricity and no running water until the 50's. A five-year-old Marlene walked over the hill, up through the woods, over a farmer's field, and down a gravel road to a one-room schoolhouse, where she was the only

student in her class level. When she turned 17, she left her parent's farm and traveled 150 miles south to Whitewater State College. She graduated in June of 1960 and married Kermit Strait that July.

Marlene resides in Whitewater, not too far from campus. She is a widow but has a number of family members living in the area. She had two sons. Her son, Mike, passed away at the age of 42, after suffering an arteriosclerosis hemorrhage. Mike's wife, Julie, and two younger children (Megan and Kyle) live in Elkhorn. His oldest daughter, Rachel, is married and lives in Whitewater. She and her husband, Heath, have two daughters and are expecting their first son in November. Rachel works for Chartwells. Marlene's son, Scott, is married (Kelly) and also lives in Whitewater. Scott and Kelly have three children – Carl, Yvanna and Caty Beth.

Marlene's five grandchildren range in age from nine to fifteen and all are involved in a variety of activities. She keeps busy making an effort to attend many of the children's activities. She notes that they were recently quite immersed in their 4-H projects for the Walworth County Fair at the beginning of September.

Marlene's parents are still living and reside in Stoughton. She spends every Sunday with them, enjoying the time they have together.

Her range of interests includes reading and traveling. In earlier years, she says she enjoyed sewing and cross-stitch. Travel remains a big interest for her. Marlene has experienced much of the United States, including two trips to Alaska. Her father has many first cousins in Norway, so she has had an opportunity to visit that country eight times. A number of her relatives in Norway have come to the U.S. to visit her and her family. She has also ventured to Germany and Lithuania.

Over the years, at UW-W, Marlene has witnessed a myriad of changes. She began her employ working on a manual typewriter, progressed to an electric typewriter, and finally to a computer. If you have never typed on a manual or electric typewriter, you may not be able to grasp the concept of this transition to computer technology. Anyone who has used this equipment will understand the challenges that each brings to the user. Marlene has seen a great deal of progress in the field of technology as it applies to the campus, and she is very cognizant of the fact that there will be much more to come.

Thinking back over past years, she highlights some events on campus come quickly to the forefront for her. Two events that saddened the campus community were the 1970 fire that destroyed Old Main (following some troubled times on campus), and the 1981 explosion in one of the steam pits, which killed two of her husband's co-workers. A most unfortunate incident that sticks out in her mind is the tenure layoff of faculty in 1974. Marlene notes that, on Mother's Day that year, President Carter, Vice President Greenhill and she worked to prepare the letters which were sent out, notifying the unfortunate faculty who were to be laid off. It was definitely not a nice way to spend Mother's Day.

But, just as she has been through some difficult times, she has also seen many good times on campus. She has come full circle, starting her work in Old Main and now residing in Hyer Hall. Of the fifteen presidents and chancellors, she has worked for eight. Marlene says she has been fortunate to have had supervisors who were dedicated to their jobs which, in turn, made it important for her to be dedicated to her job. She indicates that this dedication also made it easier for her to adjust to different methods of leadership over the years. She is pleased with the fact that her last five supervisors have moved up the ladder – three became presidents in other states and two became chancellors at UW-Whitewater.

What does Marlene like best about her work at UWW? She enjoys working with others and assisting them so that they may acquire the knowledge needed to complete their projects in a timely manner. “I try my best to ensure all projects are accurate by double/triple-checking my work.” If you have ever worked with Marlene, you know the emphasis she places on the accuracy of the information she disseminates. If you ever have need of securing information from her, you may rest assured that it will be right on target.

Marlene’s loyalty and dedication to the campus and to her job are demonstrated in many ways, but the following anecdote pretty much sums it all up. She smiles as she mentions that she almost had her first baby in the office. She had taken quite a bit of dictation that morning and then started feeling uncomfortable, so she went home. A call to the doctor and she was headed to the hospital. “Scott was born before I was admitted. I had put my shorthand pad in my suitcase. In the afternoon, I wrote out the dictation and gave it to a nurse who was taking classes at the university. She delivered it to the Dean of Women, Cora Forbush.” That’s quite a tribute to the work ethic with which she was raised.

As for her history with UW-W, there is a hint of sentimentality in her voice when she mentions the old buildings on campus that have been torn down over the years. But, she is quick to point out that the new buildings are important to attract students and to beautify the campus. “It is necessary to keep facilities up-to-date. I would have loved to have seen Old Main rebuilt, but that was not feasible.” She was on the committee for the Hyer Hall Historical Photo Project and provided two pictures for that project. She also wrote the drafts of the scripts for the president/chancellor pictures.

The consummate administrative assistant, Marlene was fully prepared for us and provided us with a wealth of information. We left with the feeling that we wanted to know even more. One thing we do know is that Marlene is a staunch supporter of UW-Whitewater. She doesn’t feel that one can accurately say that there is not much to do in Whitewater. She is delighted that the university provides a multitude of activities for the campus and the community. She attends football, volleyball, and basketball games, as well as university plays and events in the Young Auditorium.

“I love my work and am grateful to have the opportunity to work at the university. Our logo at one time was ‘UW-Whitewater: The Place To Be’ and it truly is!”