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### **DESPITE NOT WANTING TO BE A TEACHER, ADMINISTRATOR LEFT MARK ON EDUCATION**

JAMESTOWN – Teaching school never appealed to young Kathy Ross, a Tallahassee native, whose mother and maternal grandmother were teachers. “I swore I would never be a teacher,” she said.

Ironically, Kathy Ross, now Dr. Kathy Baker Smith of Jamestown, made significant contributions to education in North Carolina although she did not spend her career in a classroom. Smith recently retired as vice-president for educational support services at Guilford Technical Community College.

Smith made a positive impact not only on GTCC but also on the N.C. Community College System during the past 27 years, said GTCC president Dr. Don W. Cameron.

“Kathy dedicated herself to higher education and truly believes in the mission of the community college,” said Dr. Alison Wiers, dean of enrollment services. “She was extremely student focused and made every decision at the college based on what was in the best interest of the students,” Wiers said.

At a retirement reception at GTCC on June 17, Smith was awarded one of the state’s highest honors, membership in “The Order of the Long Leaf Pine.” Cameron made the presentation on behalf of Gov. Beverly Perdue for Smith’s “extraordinary service to the state.”

Smith, 63, spent much of her 44-year career in education, mainly in leadership roles that helped students and teachers attain their goals. “She spent her professional career mentoring women and helping them to realize their potential,” Wiers said.

“I did teach economics one year when they needed teachers,” she said.

Economics is a subject Smith knows well, having obtained both a bachelor of arts degree and a master’s degree in economics from the University of Texas at Austin. Her thesis for her master’s degree, “Public Service Employment,” was a signal to how Smith would spend her career.

Smith earned her doctorate in adult and community college education from N.C. State University in 1996. She was honored by being awarded “dissertation of the year” from the Colleges and University Council, American Association of Community Colleges. Her doctorate, about the economic impact of community colleges also reflected that her career path had moved into community college education. She went to work for the N.C. Community College System in 1982.

Administration, not teaching, was on her mind. “When I was growing up, I saw how my mother worked so hard as a teacher and didn’t make enough money to make ends meet.

“She kept looking for something better. We moved several times so she could make more money and I changed schools often,” she said. Smith finished high school in Albuquerque, NM. Her mother, Mildred Walker Eatmon, never quit trying to improve her career. She earned her master’s degree at age 50 and was able to get a job in a junior college.

“My father left the family when I was two-years-old and I never saw him again,” Smith said. “My mother’s ambition for me was that I would get married and stay married to a good man.”

Smith held some unique jobs for several years before settling into community college work.

Her mother’s ambition for her took a backseat when she and her first husband divorced after 13 years of marriage. Smith said she put her own education on hold in order to help her husband through law school. She completed undergraduate and graduate degrees after the birth of her son, William Hugh Baker IV, now 39 and a special education teacher and trainer in San Antonio, TX.

She later would realize her mother’s ambition for her when she married a distinguished author and now freelance writer R.C. Smith in November 1979. “I look forward to us being able to spend some quality time together now that I ’m retired,” she said.

Smith has held some important jobs with some well-known people – like former President Lyndon B. Johnson and former N.C. Governor Bob Scott.

Working at the LBJ Library in Austin, TX, she read LBJ’s public mail and wrote replies for him even before she earned her first college degree. She held the job as correspondence assistant at the library from 1969 until 1973 – and even helped answer the multitude of mail the Johnson family received when the former president passed away on Jan. 22, 1973.

“One of Kathy’s great talents is her writing ability,” Cameron said. That ability has served her well throughout her career and she presented many programs on a variety of subjects – as an administrator, consultant and researcher.

Among the many honors she received was being named the staff person of the year for the N.C. Community College System in 2002.

Her early career also included volunteer work as executive secretary for a statewide youth political organization, being an instructor and curriculum director for a state political program and working in a presidential primary campaign, all in Texas.

She worked in various research positions in Austin and as a field research associate for MDC, Inc., a Chapel Hill-based “think tank” before becoming statewide coordinator for Policy, Planning and Programs (1979-82) for the N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development.

In 1982, she became an assistant to Larry Blake, then president of the N.C. Department of Community Colleges. When Scott became system

president, Smith was put in charge of planning for the state system. After 13 years with the state community college system, the last six as associate vice-president for planning and research, Smith had earned her doctorate at N.C. State University. "I wanted to become president of a community college," she said.

Smith moved into the "hands- on" work in a community college by becoming executive liaison to GTCC's Don Cameron.

"She brought a wealth of experience about the state community college system and many other things to GTCC," Cameron said.

Again, necessity caused her to abandon her latest goal.

"I realized I could not chase the dream of being a community college president when I became responsible for my mother's care," she said. "Mother had married again and when her husband passed away, I took over her care," Smith said.

Smith doesn't complain about not achieving that goal. Smith reached many other significant goals, including becoming a respected leader at GTCC where she spent nearly 15 years and held two different vice-president positions.

One of the gems among her accomplishments was shepherding GTCC's successful involvement in the "Achieving the Dream" program, which is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers, including students of color and low-income students. GTCC is one of 27 "first round" colleges that joined the initiative in 2004. More than 100 colleges now participate.

Smith is proud of that program and her many other experiences at GTCC, she said. "It's a great place. I loved the opportunity to serve people there. There are so many good people working there. Many of them take money out of their pockets to help students."

Smith also has left a mark that will help future students. "Kathy worked with the mentoring program and with her cousin, setup a scholarship for college transfer students in honor of her mother – a true reflection of her commitment to students," Wiers said.

Even in retirement Smith is not turning her back on education. "I have a lot to contribute. It's just not going to be fulltime," she said.

Smith has plans to become a part-time educational consultant, which means she will be a teacher with a wealth of experience and dedication to share.

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