

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Judith Haney – First Lady of the Arts

As a fifth generation part of Tyler County, Judith Kay Die Haney has had a special love for the entire Big Thicket and Woodville all of her life. One of her aunts ran the old Raney Hotel, another aunt ran the Grammer Grocery.

After growing up in Bridge City, she moved to Houston and taught school there for twenty years. Judith and Sam met in Houston and were married two weeks later – yes, love at first sight. They will celebrate their forty-first anniversary in November of 2011.

They have a wild history, even infamous, as the house they bought on Lake Houston came under national scrutiny when the pool they were digging turned up dead bodies! Many of them. As it turned out, their property was the old Black Hope Cemetery, and stories of hauntings began to spiral, dare I say, out of this world. Ben and Jean Williams told the story to John Bruce Shoemaker who wrote the book, *The Black Hope Horror: The True Story of a Haunting* (1991), though the Haney's are quick

to note that the book is 90% fiction. Check it out at the Allan Shivers Library. CBS made a movie based upon the book called *Grave Secrets: The Legacy of Hilltop Drive* (1992). The Haney's appeared on both Geraldo and Oprah. Usually, around Halloween, the movie can be seen again.

For the last twenty-four years, she has taught in the Woodville ISD (WISD); that is a total of forty-four years teaching when she retired. Coming as an elementary school teacher, she became a *go-to* person in many areas, becoming an administrator and leading the Parent Learning Network that helped kiddos with their TAKS tests and parents with raising kids. She is always helping.

Judith never tires of helping others.

In 2007 she became the Woodville City Judge. It was never on her radar, but it became another place to help others. The last impression she wants to leave is to be known as “a fair



judge” in all things. She works closely with the WISD and Officer Bubba Sheffield to help kiddos who have trouble staying in school. She handles the magistrate duties and all the Class “C” criminal offenses in the city, taking a personal interest in the welfare of all.

Judith has had a life-long passion for the arts, teaching it early in her career. Seeing none in Woodville, she could not wait to start one. She led the school in 1987 to start an arts course one Friday afternoon, in lieu of a movie; eight students showed up. The following Friday *eighty* kids showed up! It was a hit after that. Some students liked their Friday art classes better than their Saturday free time.

She championed the effort that secured full-time WISD art teachers. Yet, she fearfully admits, the arts are the first to be threatened when finances are short. When it is threatened, though, one can count on Judge Judi to be an advocate, which leads to the rest of this story.

One winter day some years ago, Judith and Sam met with June Reid, Tina Duoto, Gwen Forestal, Jim Powers, Yvette McManus, and B.J. Fink to talk about formally organizing the Tyler County Art League, Inc. (TCAL), and the founding meeting included those seven with John Craig and Whittlin’ Sid Owens in 2003. It has grown to over 450 members.

Judith is the founder and president of the TCAL that focuses on the visual arts, like painting, sculpting, and writing. She and Sam also founded the Emporium for the Arts that focuses upon the performing arts, like music and drama. The TCAL and Emporium now form the heart of the official Tyler County Arts District – a whole city block. No small achievement for a county seat the size of Woodville.

For the past few years Judith and Leeza Blanchette have led the Dickens on the Square Christmas gala that now draws about a thousand persons to the Tyler County Courthouse. Of course, the Arts District is especially lit up.

In 2007, Judith was selected by the Tyler County Chamber of Commerce to receive its prestigious Citizen of the Year Award.

Judith was chosen by the National Park Service to design the White House Blue Room Christmas tree ornament for the Big Thicket in December 2007, and her ornament made it into George W. Bush’s Oval Office in 2008. The trip to Washington, D.C., was unforgettable, and her ornament still shines with 350 others at the Smithsonian Institute.

A tireless worker and advocate for the arts, one of her mottos is: “if I have a student, I’ll find a teacher; if I have teacher, I’ll find a student.” One such teacher is Missouri Hall of Fame drummer Kevin Miller, who teaches several kinds of guitar and drum lessons, ever ready to help any student learn music from seven to eighty years old.

As the Arts District grows, Judith has never ceased to find ways to improve, grow, and otherwise nurture and help the city and county grow.

The first Emporium of the Arts play was held at the local Woodville Lions Club, “Steel Magnolias,” a real hit. Many dramas, concerts, and specialty shows have been held around the area. With the continual renovation of the Emporium for the Arts and the TCAL, the best is yet to come. As Judith likes say, “We have a play, then we buy some sheetrock.” Hopefully, in a few short years, there will be seating for 250 as renovation proceeds on the Emporium for the Arts.

Any visual artist or aficionado is welcome to join the TCAL (give them a call at 409.283.2788). As a member one can showcase their visual work in the TCAL gallery. Any performing artist is also welcome to join the Emporium (409.283.3832).

Judith and Sam live on the penthouse of the Arts District. From the balcony of their home on the square, they sip a cup of coffee with a couple of friends and enjoy the growth of *our* fine piece of paradise in Tyler County.

When asked who her best friend was, immediately Sam came to her mind. He is the “wind under her wings,” she said. All that she has done, can do, and is doing, is “because of him.” He has been the light of her life, as she has been both the spark and the light of the Tyler County Arts District.

Truly, Judith is the First Lady of the Arts for Tyler County.