

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: DONNA COOK

You've seen her around Treemont in the dining room, chatting with people at different tables . Or volunteering at TreeMart, the gift shop. Or attending various entertainments offered in the lobby. Or visiting friends in Health Care. Or gathering material for Treemont Treasures. Or attending classes in jewelry-making or creative writing. Or displaying her art—charcoal, pastels, or oil. She is a woman of many talents.

When you first meet Donna Cook you might assume that she is a woman who has led an easy life, untouched by sorrow and protected from the storms. You would be wrong. Her ready smile, soft voice, and gentle demeanor remind you of a



favorite librarian, perhaps, or a first grade teacher who made you feel loved and comforted in those first uneasy days of separation from home and mother. Donna's life has been difficult to say the least, yet it has brought her to an enviable place—a place of acceptance and serenity. And it has given her an ability to communicate that peace and security to others in her own quiet way.

During the Great Depression jobs were scarce and Donna's father, a photo-engraver, was on his way to a job with a newspaper in Washington, D.C. With his wife and six-year-daughter (Donna's only sibling) the little family stopped over in El Paso, Texas, and Donna was born there. They resumed their trek to D.C. and she spent her early childhood in the D.C. area, moving to Houston when she was 12 and her father's work brought him here.

She describes her family as "plain, nice middle-class people, but not Christian." Listening to Fulton Sheen on the radio brought on a vague awareness of a void in her life, even as a teenager. She graduated from Milby High School , took a business course and went to work as a secretary. When she was 21 a co-worker invited her to First Baptist Church, which was then downtown near her office.

Gradually she began to come to life spiritually, and as best she could understand the concept she accepted Jesus and “began a honeymoon with Him, His church, and His music which lasted for several years.” She acknowledges, however, that with no serious training or commitment she had little spiritual growth and gradually drifted into a form of legalism that had little connection with life plans or day to day existence. In that state of misguided zeal she succumbed to the ardent courtship of Ted, a young man she had met at church and agreed to marry him.

The marriage was a mistake from the beginning, and certainly not led by the Lord. “I thought I was smart,” she describes that period, “but I didn’t really understand anything.” Eventually they both enrolled in college with the thought of going to the mission field, but she soon realized he was not going to make it. By now disillusioned she left husband, college, church, and then her job.

A lawyer friend helped her get a divorce and after a miserable year she met and married Jay, a very good man with whom she enjoyed 21 years of happy marriage. In her late 30s she gave birth to a wonderful son, her only child. But Jay died in 1980, and with her grief plus the responsibility for a 12-year-old son she began her journey back to faith.

A cousin of Donna’s had died young of cancer, leaving widowed her handsome Army captain husband Adam. Available now after Donna’s bereavement he sought her out, and Donna and Adam were married in 1981. Handsome and impressive though he was, he was also 20 years her senior, and in less than a year he had died of complications after heart surgery.

Truly devastated now, Donna was led to seek the Lord with all her strength. She joined a church and began attending every retreat, Bible study, and spiritual conference she could find. She also joined a group called Women Aglow and took part in their meetings and prayer group, all of which provided real spiritual growth. Enrollment at the American Center for Christian Counseling led to her certification as a counselor to “share with others the comfort with which she herself had been comforted.” Further counseling training and Bible Study Fellowship helped deliver her, she feels, from two sins that had been strongholds

in her life for as long as she could remember—rebellion and a critical spirit—both of which she had always considered just an independent, strong will.

While all this was going on, Donna worked at American Rice for 21 years. In 1994, after retirement, she volunteered as a counselor with Crisis Pregnancy Center. She left that only when her car gave out and to pay for a new one she needed to go to work at two part-time jobs: one with the Museum of Natural Science as a ticket taker for the Butterfly Center; the other job was with the Afro-American Sheriff's Deputy League. In both jobs she enjoyed treasured relationships with widely diversified but all wonderful people. She retired from both jobs five years later when her Honda was fully paid for.

So goes the story of the petite, quiet, pleasant lady we know as Donna Cook. She can laughingly say in response to almost any topic, "been there, done that." She's learned from it all, and is still learning. Here at Treemont she's been involved in the Creative Writing class, which gave rise to the collection of stories from the lives of other residents, Treemont Treasures, now on sale at TreeMart. She is always cheerful, usually smiling, and considers herself an unusually fortunate person. "I've never had a serious or lasting illness," she notes, "nor experienced crime or violence beyond a stolen purse. I did have a praying grandmother, though, and probably her prayers protected me."