

One big 'family'

ZBT housemother cares for brothers like they were her own sons

By SUSAN HUDSON

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. . . She looketh well to the ways of her household and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up, and call her blessed.

Proverbs 31: 10, 27, 28

"I'm just like a mother at home. But instead of three or four, I have forty children," said Elsie Shapiro, housemother for the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity.

She is barely five feet tall and her snowy white hair and kind smile brought to mind the picture of the perfect grandmother. Her accent immediately revealed her Brooklyn youth. Like some restless electron, the energetic woman was in constant motion.

Her eyes widened and sparkled behind her glasses as she talked about "her" boys. "They're just like my own sons," she said.

The brothers of ZBT should seem like Shapiro's family because she's been their housemother since 1964. The ZBTs had just built a new house on Finley Golf Course Road and their housemother had left. They needed a new housemother before the house could be opened.

Shapiro's son, then president of ZBT, talked his mother into taking the job temporarily. September 17, 1981, was the anniversary of her seventeenth year at the ZBT house. "He

sold me a bill of goods," said Shapiro of her son.

"At first I acted as a chaperone," she said. "But there are not strict rules as to what I do."

Discipline is no longer Shapiro's function. "All my boys are so good, why should I discipline them?" she asked earnestly. "Sometimes you call a boy down for something," she said, but she insisted that most discipline comes from the officers of the fraternity.

Shapiro is in charge of the ZBT kitchen. Her job includes drawing up menus, purchasing food and even cooking during emergencies.

But she does more than any job description could imply. ZBT brothers trooped in and out of her room at the front of the house all day. One came to use her phone. Another wanted a sheet of paper. Some came in just to say hello and to give and receive a friendly hug.

"I'll be in PTA all my life," Shapiro laughed as she described her role as mother to roughly forty boys who are perpetually between the ages of 18 and 23. She lovingly displayed the brown paper bags in which she packs lunch for those ZBT brothers who cannot make it to the house for lunch.

Shapiro said she tries to keep up with the brothers of ZBT. She usually joins them at their parties and rush functions. "When I get tired, I say goodnight and close the door," she said.



Elsie Shapiro
... ZBT Housemother

DTH/Al Steele

And she always goes with the brothers to the Homecoming football game. If she's a little slow, the boys tease her as they would their own mother, she said. "I just tell them that I'm coming and so's Christmas."

Last spring the brothers of ZBT surprised Shapiro with a free trip to Israel. "It was a total surprise," she said. "One of the boys said, 'Can you see Mrs. Shapiro on a camel?'"

So Shapiro made sure the boys would see her on a camel. She had some of the pictures of her taken riding a camel, planting a tree and visiting famous religious and histor-

ical sites in Israel mounted and framed for the brothers at ZBT.

Since 1964 Shapiro has seen many ZBTs come and go. "There's a change in the way they dress," she said. "They used to have patched dungarees and long hair. Now they're well-groomed." She showed pictures of the brothers through the years to illustrate her point.

"But the boy itself is the same," she said. "There's no change in the mannerisms of the boy. They're the same gentlemen, the same sweet boys in 1981 as in 1964," she said.

As she gazed fondly at the old pictures, Shapiro said, "The greatest thrill in the whole wide world is to see a freshman grow up. I'm so proud of them," she said. "They're just like my own sons."

And that's why Elsie Shapiro has become an institution at the ZBT house—she cares. "It's a dedication. It couldn't be the pay or hours. They're not attractive," she said. "Being a mother to a boy away from home—that's my reward."

Susan Hudson is the Features Editor of The Daily Tar Heel.



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