

Preston resident dispenses humor to ease life's load

By Ron Page

Move over, Charles Kuralt. Preston's Jimmie Butts will soon be "On the Road Again."

Most people who spend 39 years in a job often fantasize of the more serene aspects of life...like taking long trips to places they've never seen before, a cruise to an exotic island or a trip into the wilderness, even a simple walk on the beach.

Jimmie Butts does all those things. But if you think it's fantasizing, think again. For 12 of the first 17 months after retiring from SAS Institute's health-care center in 1994, she's been on the road (when there was a road to be on), off to some speck-on-the-horizon place for short-term assignments where her clinical services as a motivational humorist and health care provider were needed.

When she left SAS, she formed her own company, Health Spectrum, which offers primary care consulting on cost efficiency, health care, or related problems. Her travels provide personal hands-on health care, many to people in impoverished areas. As a self-employed nurse practitioner, she found herself in places such as the tundra in Alaska, a quaint fishing village huddled at the edge of an island in the Aleutians, another off the coast of North Carolina, a rural community in Indiana, even on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma.

"I've always had a strong interest in preventive health care," she says from her home at Preston Crossings which has a picturesque view at the edge of a large, peaceful pond. But picturesque views are nothing new to this 60-year-old mother of three and grandmother of seven.

One of her trips last year took her 400 miles west of Anchorage to a blur on the Alaska map called Bethel, where she spent three months from April to July. Here she was in charge as nurse practitioner at a 50-bed hospital operated by the Yupik and Athabascan Indian tribes in a rugged, desolate area. "It's a place away from everywhere, no roads, with access only by plane, boat, or snowmobile," she says. "Some 19,000 native Americans live there in 49 villages in an area roughly the size of North Dakota. They came to the clinic only for care or emergencies." So on her off days at the emergency room she visited homes in the village.

She calls Bethel an area of contrasts. "The most beautiful thing is the sky. But once the snow is gone, all you see is trash everywhere," she says.

On another journey last July to the Aleutian Islands, she accepted a month's work in a fishing village located in a quiet harbor at a place called Popoff Island where she was the only health provider. "It's located closer to Russia than the state of Washington," she says.

While she administered health care with her ever-present humor, she found the patients equally adept. "They told me the island was named Popoff because its active volcanoes pop off at times. I later discovered it was actually named after Ivan Popoff, the Russian who founded the village," she says, laughing.

Earlier that spring another call came from closer to home, tiny Ocracoke, the smallest of the three barrier islands on North Carolina's Outer Banks. The only way to reach the island is a 40-minute ferry ride. She took off in April and returned in June under the auspices of the N.C. Rural Health Services. "The island has a population of about 750 and the medical facility where I attended to patients was manned entirely by nurses," she says.

Ms. Butts describes a nurse practitioner as an RN who is working in advanced practice, performing some medical acts that go beyond the scope of an RN. That means while she is not a doctor or physician, she performs a high percentage (about 85 percent, she estimates, at half the cost) of the care a physician does. She provides such services as a nurse practitioner across the country through assignments she gets through the Indian Health Service, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the N.C. Rural Health Services, and occasionally from Comphhealth-Kron, an agency which fills such temporary positions.

To understand Jimmie Butts' work is to understand she is not only a nurse practitioner, but a motivational humorist as well. Put the two together and you have what a friend, Dr. Tom Brown, a member of the Cary Town Council, calls "someone who has a gift of humor and uses it as a kind of medicine to



SPREADING LAUGHTER—Jimmie Butts likes bringing home exotic souvenirs from her trips—like a twig from a prickly tree, the skull of a deer she found in a creekbed and a piece of Indian pottery.

help people relax, deal with stress and learn to enjoy their lives."

When she married Carl Butts she was a student nurse, and he an engineering graduate of the University of Tennessee. They traveled to his job locations in Massachusetts, then to Baltimore, and finally in 1967 to the Triangle when he joined IBM. "We consider ourselves North Carolinians," she says, smiling.

After graduating from a nursing program at Mid-State Baptist Hospital in Nashville, she joined Rex Hospital where she rose to head nurse. It was in 1976 that she earned a nurse practitioner degree at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Nursing and then worked at Wake Health Services Inc. before joining SAS Institute. She was manager of the company's health care center when she retired in 1994, deciding she wanted to do more on-hands medi-

cal care for people in needy areas and devote more time to being a humorist. That's when she formed her own company, Health Spectrum.

Ms. Butts says she became interested in the link between humor and healing in 1982 after seeing a workshop "The Healing Power of Laughter and Play." She says it taught her how managing health can be enhanced by adding humor to the equation of disease and treatment. She feels humor can help people deal with pain by causing the body to release endorphins, pleasure-causing proteins, changing someone's outlook on having a serious illness or disability, and speed healing. She said she learned a lot about this from dealing with terminally ill breast cancer patients at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. She worked there three months at the beginning of last year.

Council of Nurse Practitioners Awards for service.

As a member of the National Speakers Association, she emphasizes her talks are not just funny. "I talk about human relationships, what's the same and what's different, from Alpha to Omega, Alaska to Oklahoma. People take things too seriously and fail to see the humor in such things. There are serious times and that only increases the need to be able to laugh," she says.

That's one of the reasons for the humor and healing workshops she gives various business and civic groups. "They are not just funny," she says. "I talk about human conditions. People in the audience may cry as well as laugh."

Her husband is retired from IBM and today is a commercial real estate broker who runs his company, Margin Services, from their home. He visits her at the far-flung assignments, and between those oc-

casions they keep close touch with their three children and their families.

For the next several months, she'll be staying at home. "I'm working in downtown Raleigh in the inner city serving an indigent population, helping out at a health practice, and still go back to SAS while in town." She's also writing two books about her travels and feelings.

Ms. Butts says she manages to bring home souvenirs from her travels, "but never T-shirts or caps," she says with a smile. "Usually it's things like turtle shells, special rocks, or perhaps an Indian artifact. Every so often, though, it may be an armadillo tail or the deer skull I found in an Oklahoma creek. That elicited a 'Yuck' from some of the kids, a 'Wow' from others and then a laugh from us all."

Humor, it seems, is not confined to the places she visits.

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