

By Margaret Howell

They call her "Ma."
And, she looks the part: A tall, big lady with an enormous smile, and hair that has grown the silvery white that bespeaks the wisdom time has given her.

The "Ma" part started, she said, with one of her patients years ago on Halsted Ward.

"He named me," she said, "and now, most people out here don't know me by any other name."

Maybe the nickname describes her more completely than anything else.

Now on Welch Ward, she has spent the last 30 years as an advanced patient care assistant on three other medical center wards and in Unit Administration. During the same time, Mildred Booth reared six children and always found time to "mother" an ever-expanding variety of community action and church groups.

She can tick off the list of projects in which she's involved as smoothly as she can tell you about her husband and her six children.

"My husband, William, works with the City of Durham," she began. Then she delightedly went on to the children:

"Marie is an LPN and she's going to have our first grandbaby in November," she said, stopping her monologue only long enough for an anxious smile.

"George works at Duke in Environmental Services. He works on one of the psychiatric wards. I've forgotten which one.

"William works with Winn-Dixie, and the twins, Antonette and Antonio, are seniors at Durham High.

"Josephine is the baby. She's a junior at Rogers (Rogers-Herr Junior High).

"I've had no problems with my kids," she said resolutely. "I laid down the law to start with."

"Ma" Booth's community and church involvement have been a long time going. She helps just about everyone, mainly because she's happiest that way.



RECEPTION FOR A LADY—"Ma" Booth, who has worked at Duke as an advanced patient care assistant for 30 years, was given a party by Nursing Services in the medical center Board Room last week to celebrate her long and devoted service to the hospital. In the 30 years she has spent here, she has only missed two days. In this photograph, Chris MacDowell, head nurse on Welch Ward, where Mrs. Booth works, shares a few moments with her friend and colleague during a lull in the festivities. (Photo by David Williamson)

here how to do things and instructed them some, too," she said quickly. "That was back in 1948 or '49.

"Back then we had to eat downstairs in the Carousel Room. Things were all different then. There was no escort service, so we had to carry the patients all over, help with the AM care, serve trays and ice and see that the trays were returned to the kitchen.

"Nursing service has changed a lot since then," she conceded. "I work harder now than I ever did. I think there's more work to do and it's harder."

When "Ma" does manage to get away from the medical center, she takes a complete vacation.

"Whenever I get on my vacation," she said, "I like to quilt, but I don't try to do too much. I don't even go to any meetings," she added, "and they know it, too. They know not to even call me."

She spends other bits of hobby time tending to her "pot flowers" and her garden. "I do like my flowers," she said. "When I die, I want just one flower, that's all. I'm enjoying mine while I'm living."

Right now it seems that neither dying nor retiring is part of "Ma" Booth's immediate plans.

Missed Only Two Days in 30 Years

'Ma' Booth: A Tradition at Duke

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Duke University

She's a new Bethel Baptist Church Sunday school teacher who gladly chaperones student trips to the shore; a member of its senior choir and its missionary department.

There are also community affairs. Among them, a number of activities in Durham's Crestview community. She has been very active in supporting and working for voter

registration over the years.

"We have a day care center there and a tutorial program," she said, explaining that she has worked with the tutorial program for 10 years. "Many of our tutors come from Duke," she noted.

School-wise, "Ma" has left her mark on many a slate. She is treasurer of the Durham High Parent-Teacher Association.

She is a board member — the secretary — of the Lincoln Hill Center and a member of Durham's Mental Health Board.

Any free time she spares finds her filling in volunteer positions at local nursing homes or collecting clothes for needy children.

Mildred Booth was an end-of-the-war graduate of H.B. Suggs High School in eastern North Carolina's small Farmville in 1945. One of 10 children who have scattered from Farmville to San Francisco, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Jamaica, she stayed in her native Pitt County until she finished high school.

"It's hard when you're sharecropping," she remembered, with a slight shake of her white head. "I came to Durham because I had friends here who worked at the hospital. They told me they could use some help.

"My mother was sick so I felt like I had to work and help out."

So, "Ma" Booth came to the medical center. It's home to her now and she talks about her experiences here with the love of a veteran.

"I fuss all the time here," she said with a laugh. "You have to fuss on this floor, but I fuss with the doctors more than the nurses. They think I'm sick if I don't fuss up here and it's the same with my children."

"I helped show the first LPN class

They've given her a reception in honor of her 30-year milestone here, but, as she says, "I've got a good while yet."

When she does hang up her nursing shoes, she and William are planning to take a trip to England. But it's a little doubtful that she will ever hang up the apron of love and concern she's worn all these years. After all, didn't somebody say that "mothers" never retire?



EXPRESSION OF AFFECTION—LPN Margaret Scarlett of Holmes Ward was one of many who had more than words for "Ma" Booth. (Photo by David Williamson)

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