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'Miss Cul' mothered Hardin-Simmons co-eds for more than four decades

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ABILENE—For 41 years, “Miss Cul” pampered, admonished and consoled thousands of young women under her care as a dorm mother at Hardin-Simmons University.

Even after Aileen Culpepper retired in 1985, she was a regular on campus, eating one meal a day in the cafeteria.

“I give it credit to my good health,” Culpepper, 84, said of the cafeteria food, which is traditionally scorned by students.

Last month, Culpepper received a reward for her many years of keeping a sharp eye on her girls. She was awarded an honorary doctor of humanities degree during a graduation ceremony in Behrens Chapel on campus.

“My mind still doesn't comprehend it,” Culpepper said. “I was about as ordinary as anybody could be.”

Several thousand young women who were under Miss Cul's watchful eye from 1944 to 1985 would disagree.

One is Dorothy Kiser, a 1962 graduate who is now the registrar at Hardin-Simmons. Kiser recalled the strict curfew and dress code that were in place at HSU when she was a student. "Miss Cul" had a keen sense of time and hem lengths.

"I can still remember seeing her with her arms crossed and giving you that look," Kiser said.

Times have changed. Hardin-Simmons no longer has curfews or a dress code. Culpepper knows the girls didn't like those restrictions, but she still thinks they're a good idea.

"I don't think any 18-year-old is ready for full responsibility," Culpepper said.

However, she was pretty responsible herself at that age. She grew up in Anson, attended junior college two years and then earned an education degree from Hardin-Simmons in 1940.

She taught school two years at Ira and Spur, but then World War II changed her plans. With no brothers in the service, Culpepper felt compelled to represent the family in the war effort.

She got a job in Fort Worth as a file clerk with Consolidated Aircraft, which was turning out planes for the war.

"My mother wasn't too happy about the idea," Culpepper said.

But she stayed on the job for 14 months until the president of Hardin-Simmons, the late Rupert Richardson, asked her to come back to HSU in 1944 as director of Mary Francis Hall. She spent 11 years in that job before moving to Behrens Hall, a residence hall for freshmen women.

Culpepper lived in an apartment in the dorm and was on duty year-round. She estimates 6,000 students passed through her dorms over the years.

One of Culpepper's favorite tricks was to get a list of the new girls each year a couple of weeks before school started. She would memorize roommates' names. When the girls arrived, she would ask one her name and then turn to the other and say her name.

The young women were happy to be known on campus already , but also a little concerned about what else the dorm mother knew about them.

Miss Cul has plenty of happy memories to share. But she also had more than enough tragedies to deal with, beginning soon after taking the job in 1944. One young woman in the dorm had three brothers in World War II. Each eventually was killed in action.

“I got the message and had to tell her three times,” Culpepper recalled.

She remained active on and off campus until she fell and injured herself in September.

She has received numerous honors from Hardin-Simmons and letters of thanks from “her” girls.

But she still is in disbelief over the honorary doctorate she received.

“I would have to say it exceeds any expectations I ever had,” she said.

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