

NOW FOND A WANDA

Connect with: Wanda Wilkinson

So, when did I first lay eyes on her? Oh yeah, she was brand new to the club but was up front calmly leading the reading of the Pilot Club Code of Ethics, as if she did this every day. I thought, "Who is this cute, spunky thing? Did Jane ask her to do this so she could get over any join-a-new-club-of-people-I-don't-know jitters?" Not sure, maybe Jane did. But my guess is she offered to do it. There doesn't seem to be any nervous, shy, angst in this gal. She is as cool & calm as she is cute! So, I very wisely & strategically asked her if she would be on my kitchen team for the upcoming Bunco. She arrived, quickly & quietly assessed the situation...which was me, trying so desperately to figure out the entire enterprise in an instant, that I could not speak, much less assign tasks. Wanda then created her own position as Buffet Table Expediter. She decided food placement, removed empties, combined as plates dwindled, replaced utensils/napkins/plates, brought items into the kitchen to be reheated. She was invaluable!

I was excited to interview her. I figured she must be a worldly gal that has lived in many places, adapted to many venues or tasks, maybe an "army brat" or certainly one of many, many siblings. Wrong. Wanda is a hometown girl who beautifully attributes all of her attributes (just realized that is the same word) to her very much-loved mother. Her mother was a very hard worker & a loving happy woman. Wanda is part of three generations of native Palatka residents. I commented that often people from small towns get a hankering to get out of it. I asked if she could explain the family's contentment to stay. She laughed... & gave a two-word answer, "Poverty, really." She then added that her mom instilled in her the belief that if "you have good work, friends & family, you have all you need". Thus, Wanda set out on a journey of engaging in "good work", which took her to impressive heights.

Before legal working age, Wanda babysat every chance she could. In high school, she worked at Jerry's Drive-In (which is now Colee's). From there she went to Beauty School & was a stylist for about three years. Higher education began to beckon & Wanda went back to school. She thought she wanted to be in accounting, so she started in business coursework. But when she transferred to UNF & entered upper-level accounting, oh boy, a change in plan was required. (FYI, anyone that thinks accounting is math, is in for a devastating, demoralizing surprise.) But the world came out ahead as she got an Education Degree, teaching elementary for 10 years, then middle school & high school. She advanced to a Reading/Literacy Coach, then Teacher Trainer for the district & on to Federal Programs as a Family Engagement Worker. It was in preparing for

education leadership in the TOSA program (Teacher On Special Assignment) that she worked with Jane at the high school. Continuing to emulate her mother's hard-working ethic, she went on to get a Master's Degree at age 50! She retired almost three years ago & cannot believe this story covered 30 years.

Having the "good work" part down, Wanda also enjoys friends & family. She has one daughter, Daisy Joy (can't you just picture her?), one grandson, three sisters & brother. She has a loving husband of 50 years who by her admission, makes her "feel like a princess". Hearing she has been married for 50 years, I asked the obvious question, "What makes a marriage work?" Answers included mutual respect for each other, having shared life goals, caring & giving from both mates & "sticking it out. It is just too easy to not stick it out." She added that hub, Jake, has always been supportive of whatever she wanted to do from going to school (repeatedly), skiing, quilting, whatever. "Comfort with each other in a relationship that makes it easy for the other to do what they want & be who they are."

What makes her happy? "Well, family & friends – I guess that's a given", she said. (Oh no, Wanda, it is so not a given. Don't we wish it was?) Now that she is retired, she drives to Gainesville to spend Wednesdays with her 16-year-old grandson, Earlie. She maintains a regular quilting relationship with a longtime friend. She & her daughter are now planning regular live music trips.. wherever the favorite tunes might be playing! Next up: seeing Cake in DC! She loves to cook.. "big family dinners with a lot of people, a lot of dishes & with the table set up all pretty."

One wouldn't guess by looking at her lovely light skin that her favorite activities are working in the garden, boating, beaching & snow skiing! Words from the wise on preventing the dried-up wrinkled sun damaged look – aside from sunscreen & a good dermo, "Put on clothes!" The gym, with weightlifting & aerobics, has always been a staple in her life. We talked about trying to find a good Zumba class we could go to together. "We've got to stay strong", she exclaims, "it is more important now than ever."

Of what is she most proud? "That I raised a daughter to be the good person she is, although I'm not really sure I had everything to do with that," she replied. "And with Jake's help, we created a good life from poor beginnings. I stuck out going to school while working & raising a family – graduating summa cum laude from UNF. I earned my Master's at 50. It took three years, but I am proud that I reached this goal I had set for myself."

To what is she now looking forward in later life? Her words were simple, but powerful. "Right now, it is not having to do anything. We spend most of life doing

stuff in which we don't have a choice. Women do a lot of things for others in their life. Now, I don't have to do what I don't want to do. Now I can say no."

This statement makes the next question answer so poignant. I asked why she joined Pilot & she replied, "Jane. Jane said, 'you have to do this & now you have the time.'" With Wanda's long ingrained work ethic, I think maybe she doesn't know a task she doesn't want to do!