

Juanita Strait bequeathed her home for KU. The home will be refurbished into a community center (below right).



A Farewell Bow

Strait bequeaths her home for use by KU students

During the 60 years Juanita Strait lived next to KU, she was as much a part of the lives of many KU students as their classrooms and professors. A piano teacher for two generations and surrogate mother to students, she made room for all of them in her living room at 1346 Louisiana Street.

Before her death in 2002 at the age of 93, Juanita and her late husband, KU Physical Education Professor Reginald “Reg” Strait, made certain that her surrogate kids would have a final bit of support from her. She bequeathed the couple’s home and half of their estate to KU Endowment for projects designed to make life easier for KU students.

“The most important thing about Juanita was the way she attracted and cared for university students,” said longtime friend Robert “Bob” N. Hammer of East Lansing, Mich. “The hundreds of students who knew her in so many cases stayed in contact with her. They all became her children.”

The Strait estate will fund the Reginald and Juanita Strait Classroom, a multimedia enhanced classroom located in Joseph R. Pearson Hall, home of the School of Education. The gift also will create a scholarship in Juanita’s name for female fine arts students and add additional support to the Reginald G. Strait Physical Education Scholarship. She created the scholarship in 1974.

The Strait house will be restored into a community center for residents of KU’s scholarship halls. Donors Tom and Jann Rudkin of Sunnyvale, Calif., are funding the restoration with a gift of \$300,000 to KU Endowment [see page 7.]. The large lawn around the home will incorporate park benches within a fenced green space dedicated to the Straits.

Bob said his friendship with Juanita started when he was a KU student in the 1940s.

“I was walking up 14th Street past Juanita’s house, and I saw a sign in the window that said ‘Room for Rent,’” said

Bob, liberal arts ’47 and master’s in chemistry ’49. “This vibrant, red-haired woman bounced to the door when I knocked. I took the room for \$15 a month – a stretch for me then – and had no idea that I’d be calling this woman daily to talk 50 years later.”

Like so many of the students who rented a room from Juanita or met her in the community, Bob stayed in contact with her even after he left Lawrence. When her sight began to fail later in life, he helped her keep track of the more than 300 people listed in her address book.

Many of the people she knew were former piano students. Juanita, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in music education from Ottawa University, taught piano in the Navy V-12 program at KU during World War II and offered private piano lessons for three decades. She also served as choir director of First Christian Church in Lawrence for 32 years.

An active member of the University Women’s Club, the Retired Faculty Club and the Lawrence Music Club, she was inducted into the KU Women’s Hall of Fame in 2000. In a nomination letter, Ken Stoner, director of the Department of Student Housing, noted that she had friends all over the world.

“This university has no greater ambassador of good will than demonstrated through the life of Mrs. Strait,” Ken wrote. “It is hard to conceptualize that the immediate neighborhood of one woman residing at the corner of 14th and Louisiana in Lawrence, Kan., extends around the world. Indeed, for those who know Mrs. Strait, you just become part of her ‘caring neighborhood.’” ■

