



Bill Snead/Journal-World Photos

JUANITA STRAIT, 93, CENTER, VISITS WITH FIVE OF HER FRIENDS from the Lawrence High School Class of 1957 in her home last week. They are, clockwise from top, friends John Shenk and Anna Wiley, and former piano students Doris Evans Williams Roulier, John Brown and Marcia Haines Roulier.

Piano teacher, students reunite

By Bill Snead

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Juanita Strait used to charge a dollar for a piano lesson. Love, motherly advice, and verbal kicks in the pants were free.

She gave up teaching piano years ago, but she's still handing out the freebies.

Former students and otherfortunates who've crossed her path are quick to call her "a second mom," "my inspiration," "my best friend," or some simply say, "isn't she wonderful?"

Strait describes herself as "just an old 'pee-anna' teacher with a bum leg who can't see worth a darn." But at 93 years old, Juanita can still draw a crowd.

Holding court in her living room just off West 14th Street, a block from her beloved Kansas University, propped up with big, yellow cushions in her late husband Reginald's favorite easy chair, she is all smiles



JUANITA STRAIT, seated right, taught piano to these Lawrence High School seniors since they were in the first grade. This photo ran in the Journal-World in 1957. The students are, from left, John Brown, Marcia Haines, Ann Kirkpatrick, Jane Perry, Doris Evans and Lorain Clark.

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Piano teacher beloved by students

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and fidgets as she rubs the backs of her hands.

"Oh my, I'm so excited. I'm not sure I can stand it," Strait said. "My children are coming home."

Her "children" are former piano students who now are just a short step away from Social Security and senior discounts. They entered her life as first-graders in 1945 and studied with her until graduation at Lawrence High School. This day, they were coming to see Juanita and to attend their 45-year high school reunion.

Coming to KU

As a KU chemistry student, Bob Hammer rented a room in the Straight home during World War II ("when we were encouraged by Chancellor Malott to do so"). He recently retired as head of the Michigan State University department of chemistry in East Lansing, Mich.

He telephones Juanita every day.

"I just love Bob, and he helps me in so many ways," she said. "When my wonderful Sugar Baby died (her 20-year-old cat), I was so upset that Bob flew out to be with me the next day."

The Straits, who had no children, came to Lawrence in 1943 after Reginald got a job in KU's department of physical education working for Henry Shenk.

"By law, wives or husbands of KU faculty were forbidden to teach at KU back then," said Juanita, an Ottawa University music graduate.

Exceptions were made because of World War II and a shortage of teachers. She taught a piano crash course to young men headed overseas. It was frustrating for her.

"Heavens to Betsy, they really only wanted to know how to play a song or two," she said. "I asked the dean how I was going to teach piano in eight weeks, and he said just do the best I could."

The lessons weren't entirely in vain. Some of those former students still stay in touch with their old "pee-anna" teacher.

Moving back home

In 1945 she began giving private lessons in her home.

"I could no more do a lesson



Bill Sneed/Journal-World Photo

JUANITA STRAIT TAUGHT PIANO in Lawrence for more than 20 years and directed the First Christian Church choir for more than 30. Today at 93, she still practices on her baby grand for 30 minutes a day. "When I was teaching, my middle name was practice," she said.

in 30 minutes than I could fly to heaven," she said bobbing around in her chair. "We'd talk about boyfriends, or they'd show me how high they could jump before cheerleader try-outs, or we'd talk about a friend's new car or a new bicycle or some little problem they might have ... you can't do that and practice piano in 30 minutes."

According to her old pupils, practice is Juanita's middle name.

"I'm Juanita Practice Strait," she said. "That's the one word ... practice is it ... you can't do anything without practicing."

She hasn't taught piano since Reginald died in 1978, but still spends 30 minutes a day at her baby grand piano.

"My hands are old, and I make noises on the piano I don't like very much," she said softly in her sing-song vibrato. "But, this old lady still practices. I make myself do the scales whether I want to or not. I'm blessed, and I'm blessed with lots of friends."

Henry Shenk's sons, John and Robert, have known Juanita all their lives. Each phones and visits regularly; John from Bangkok, Thailand, and Robert from New Orleans.

Woman of the Year

Last Oct. 29, more than 100 of her neighbors, residents from

Douthart, Pearson and Amini scholarship halls, dropped by to serenade Juanita on her birthday. Many of those students visit regularly as well.

Vocals are nothing new for Juanita. She was choir director of Lawrence's First Christian Church for more than 30 years.

In 2000, she was named a KU Woman of the Year, cited as "a perfect example of a role model for students, staff and faculty at the University of Kansas."

Last Saturday morning, Juanita was more than ready to see her "class of 1957" students.

Jackie Shmalberg, considered a daughter by Juanita, was putting out coffee and pastries for the guests.

Juanita "had her dress laid out for days," Shmalberg said.

The piano teacher was soon hugging former students Marcia Haines Roulier, John Brown and Doris Evans Williams. Her vibrato reached new heights.

John Shenk and old acquaintance Anna Wiley joined the group.

John Brown, retired chancellor of Coe College, was asked to play for the group. He'd brought a songbook for the occasion and played "Skylark."

When he finished Juanita asked if that was a Johnny Mercer song.

"Yes, it is," Brown said, looking pleased.

"I really don't care for Johnny Mercer," his old teacher said.

Everybody laughed, but Juanita wasn't smiling.

While watching her guests chat among themselves she said, "I loved them, but I wasn't always easy on them. But, that's what you do with people you love."

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