

Motherhood and college? This dean knows the ropes

Story by TIM RICHARD
Photos by JANE HALE

Chris Gram remembers coming home from school as a little girl and talking about being a nurse.

Daddy — attorney Elmer Groefsema — had bigger ideas for his three girls. "Nurses do all the work, and doctors get all the credit," he said.

After that pep talk, little Chris decided there was nothing she couldn't do. "It never occurred to me that women were in any way inferior to men," she says today.

Her big sisters followed in Daddy's footsteps: the law, Corneille Kennedy is a judge on the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Margaret Schaeffer is a judge on the Michigan District Court bench in Farmington.

And after raising six children in the traditional manner, Christine Gram, at 54, last year became academic dean of the Highland Lakes Campus of Oakland Community College.

BUT THERE WERE a lot of twists and turns first. "We grew up in Detroit, and I went to Redford High School. The property on which I live now was property Daddy bought in 1924, the year I was born. It's on Drake between 11 and 12 Mile, and we used to go there Sundays," Dr. Gram said.

Their mother died when Chris was 7. Daddy raised the three girls.

"We always took trips together. Once he said, 'We have enough money to paint the house or take a trip to Idaho,'" she said, recalling their trip to Idaho.

Elmer Groefsema wasn't political, but he did read to the girls about current events. He handled a lot of person-



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al injury cases and liked to look out for the underdog.

Chris went to Waynes State and then the University of Michigan.

"When I got married, I was quite young — 19. As a condition of marriage, Daddy wanted me to continue in college," she said.

Two children were born by the time she completed her bachelor's work. Her inclination had been toward chemistry and medicine, but those courses required many afternoon lab classes. So she switched to economics in order to take all her classes in the morning.

IN THE EARLY 1950s, when the youngest child was still in kindergarten, she got her master's degree, writing an economics thesis on collective bargaining. It was at a time when Harold Levinson, Wilbur Cohen and Gardner Ackley were big names in the department.

"My recollection is that Lawrence Tech lost a teacher in labor relations

somewhat suddenly," she said. She taught there in 1954 and that fall was a research assistant at the University of Michigan while getting a teaching certificate.

In 1955 she started with the fledgling Oakland Community College, eventually becoming chairman of the economics department at the Orchard Ridge Campus in Farmington Hills. It was quite a different world from Ann Arbor.

"If you view students as being on a spectrum . . ." she began, spreading her hands about 30 inches apart.

"The U-M students are here," she indicated a six-inch band at the top of the spectrum.

"MSU would be here, Hillsdale here," she blocked out other small portions of the spectrum.

"But community college students cover the entire spectrum," Ms. Gram went on, spreading her hands to 30 inches again. "It's challenging, it's interesting, it's sometimes difficult."

"Because OCC has an open-door admissions policy, people think the students are here because they can't get in somewhere else."

"But there are so many women, for example, who can't get an education unless it's at a community college at their back door."

"Our age range is 16 to 65, and the median is about 29. Often, older people who come back as students are the most motivated."

SHE HEADED the faculty union in 1958-9 and 1976-8.

In 1971 she completed work on her doctoral degree, not in economics but in higher education.

"If it were in economics, I'd be so highly specialized," she said.

She had become interested not only in teaching but in the way an institution operates and how well it performs.

So Ms. Gram served on the curriculum committee and the academic sen-

colleges across the United States," she said. "These trips are working assignments, and you learn something just seeing how other people do it."

AS ACADEMIC dean at the Highland Lakes Campus in Union Lake, she is one of four top administrators, the others being the provost, the dean of student services and the director of administrative services.

Ms. Gram is the immediate supervisor of all faculty and has charge of scheduling classes.

It's a different world from teaching, she said, one in which she has less direct control because much work is done through committees.

Her office has prime responsibility — shared with committees, of course — for developing new programs.

Among those either new or on the drawing boards at Highland Lakes are real estate, aviation, child development (for people in child care agencies, dental lab technician and physical therapy technology).

And it started when Daddy talked her out of becoming a nurse.

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