



Virginia Merritt Grantham

Virginia Merritt Grantham is being honored as a 2013 Town Treasure for her life-long commitment to education, teaching at least two generations of local residents at Carrboro Elementary School.

Virginia Merritt Grantham holds the record as the oldest fourth-grader in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public Schools. For 35 years, the Chapel Hill native taught fourth grade at Carrboro Elementary School, spanning two generations of students. Her love of teaching was innate and student teaching at the old Chapel Hill Elementary School solidified her career choice. “The University was still on a quarter system then, and I student-taught from August through December,” she recalled as if it were just yesterday. “I got a good dose of it. I loved every minute of it and knew that’s where I wanted to be.” The following November, in 1953, Grantham got her own classroom of fourth graders at Carrboro Elementary School when a teacher moved mid-year. “I had 46 students and no teacher’s aide, and we got along just fine,” Grantham said. “I could make things correlate if we were studying a particular country, for example, because I could play the piano, I could draw, I could play ball and I could umpire. I was in direct contact with each student. I could see their bright eyes. I could see them catching on.” By the time she retired in 1988, Grantham had 26 students and she had taught most of their parents. She also had a teacher’s aide, and teachers specializing in music, art and physical education gave that instruction outside of Grantham’s classroom. Despite the additional assistance, Grantham always shouldered the full responsibility for her students’ learning. “I was still

the one accountable even if I was giving instruction to an aide,” she said. A highlight of the school year was a trip to Raleigh to visit the State Capitol and various museums. Students’ parents were enlisted to assist primarily with street crossings because discipline wasn’t an issue with Grantham’s students. “I had so many students whose parents wanted to make that trip again, I had no problem getting chaperones,” she said.

Grantham’s family has been in the area since the late 1700s. Her father, Eben, owned and operated Merritt’s Service Station on South Columbia before it became the popular sandwich shop it is today. She met her late husband, Ben, when the 23-year-old UNC student on the GI Bill stopped by the service station as the 16-year-old Virginia had run across the street from the Merritt home to pick up a loaf of bread. They married when she was 20, just before she transferred to UNC after a year at Meredith College and two prior years at Mars Hill, then a junior college.

- For Grantham, “teaching was always such fun”. Today, the gratitude comes from running into former students weekly and catching up with what’s new in their lives. “The girl who does my hair was my fourth-grader. So is my yard man and my furnace man. I still love them all.”
- Her fondest memories of her hometown include swimming at Mrs. Sparrow’s pool in Carrboro, after having had swimming lessons—which were available to all town residents—at the U.S. Navy pre-flight school pool behind UNC’s Woollen Gym. “Sparrow’s was a beautiful pool and lots of Sunday School classes would go there for picnics,” Grantham said.
- The biggest change she has seen over the years is the influx of residents from other cultures, especially people of Hispanic and Asian origin. “I welcome that diversity, and I want them to feel at home.”
- For the future, Grantham hopes that Chapel Hill and Carrboro “will merge with a little dash between them like Winston-Salem. We’re already one school system. Why not be one town?”