On Campus

Still in Low

By
Beth Kwon
|
Spring 2005

A week after she retired, Florence Grant sat in the conference room of the visitors' center in Low Library with a bulging purse at her side. A student walked in with a form to be notarized, and Grant fished out a Ziploc bag containing an embosser, rubber stamp, and ink pad.

"You carry all of this stuff around?" asked the student as Grant set up her equipment on the table in front of her.

"Yes, I do," Grant responded, smiling as she stamped the form. "And it's a nuisance."

Grant takes her notary duties seriously even though it's a side job she took on in 1978. Her colleagues call her "Flo in Low," because of her post as administrator in the public safety department, headquartered in Low Library. In January the University celebrated her 44-year tenure with a party of 300 in the Low Library rotunda. But her life in retirement isn't so different from her working one — she has merely moved upstairs to the visitors' center as a part-time volunteer.

Grant arrived at Columbia in 1961 as an administrative assistant in the controller's office. She came to Columbia partly because "my sister-in-law said it was a great place to meet men." She didn't meet the right one, but became a den mother for the University's staff and a natural ambassador. "To be a success at Columbia you have to be able to connect the dots and have a resource who can help you," says Marianne Miller, director of operations in health services, who has known Grant for eight years. "Flo does that. She's the best at making connections."

"She's been here for so long that if you need information, she knows who to talk to," says James Lynch, assistant director of security, who retired in 1999. But Grant isn't

simply a skilled networker. “Flo knows everybody by name, and if she doesn’t, she’ll call you ‘lovey,’” says Lynch.

At just over five feet tall, with graying hair, Grant rarely frowns and has a charming sincerity. “I don’t want to let my customers down,” she says earnestly, explaining that she can be at school in eight minutes from her Riverside Drive apartment if she’s needed outside of her scheduled hours.

Those customers sometimes include some of Columbia’s brightest luminaries. She once notarized a form for Isabella Rossellini’s twin sister, Ingrid ’86GS, ’93GSAS. “I said, ‘Oh, can I tell my colleagues it’s you?’” When asked if she’s met Joseph Stiglitz, University Professor and Nobel laureate in economics, Grant paused and said, “I think he was one of my notary customers.” She has also maintained relationships with those she’s met through the seven different jobs she’s had. In the 1960s she worked for Douglass Hunt, then vice president for finance, through whom she befriended Jacques Barzun. She still sends the 98-year-old former professor, dean, and provost the annual Columbia directory.

At her farewell party, only George Smartt, Grant’s former boss and retired director of public safety, could recall a cranky moment for Flo in Low. Once he had to set up an emergency conference call at 2 a.m. and didn’t know how. “We all said, ‘Let’s call Flo.’ We did so, and she answered, ‘This had better be damned important!’ ”

When Grant finished notarizing the student’s form at the visitors’ center, she announced her fee. “I’m cheap. I charge half of what you would pay on the street.” New York State law caps fees at $2.00 — Flo’s price is laughably modest. She does a bit of self-promotion to stay competitive. “People in the community assume I’m the notary, but there’s no such cat. The telephone operators know me, and when people ask for a notary public they say to call my extension. I hope the person who takes my place forwards my calls. Unless that person is a notary, too. Then, that’s the end.”

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