

Gifts and Gratitude – Jenniffer Hudson Connors

While attending Englewood High School in suburban Denver, Jenniffer Hudson (Connors) was encouraged to apply for scholarships by her high school counselor. This advice proved fruitful, as she soon received a scholarship offer to attend Trinidad State.

“Carol Malone was the journalism advisor at Trinidad State at the time,” Jenniffer said. “After I’d received the scholarship, she visited me personally to let me know I’d been chosen. It was such a personal touch, especially as a high school student.”

“The junior college option was a good choice for me,” she continued. “I was selected to be editor of the college paper during my freshman year. If I’d been on a university campus, a role like that would have been more difficult to achieve, especially as a freshman. I fully appreciated the opportunity to assume this leadership responsibility so early in my college career, even then.”



Jenniffer Hudson Connors

Carol Malone would remain a role model for Jenniffer throughout her time at Trinidad State. “I graduated in 1980. The idea of a woman going out into the world to become a journalist was still like, ‘hmmm...’ She was such a great mentor—just an excellent example of a professional woman.”

Jenniffer’s journalistic spirit was evident right from the start.

“Women living in the campus dorms still had a curfew,” she said. “They’d lock the doors, and if you weren’t back in time people would get in trouble for letting you in. Well, funny thing—the library was open later than the women’s curfew!”

“I remember writing an article in the newspaper stating that the curfew was unfair. I said it was probably a level of discrimination that needs to be reconsidered,” she said, chuckling.



After graduating from Trinidad State, Jenniffer attended the University of Northern Colorado where she would earn a bachelor’s degree in journalism. She eventually relocated to Boca Raton, Florida and joined a publishing company.

“The owners were a husband and wife team originally from Boulder,” she said. “During my interview, they wondered if I knew where Aguilar was, which I did. My roommate at Trinidad State had waited tables at the Aguilar truck stop. It was a nice small world connection.”

Her first position was as a receptionist, but Jenniffer quickly realized that the outside salespeople had the greatest opportunity. “They were the people who made the most money and got to travel, and I decided I want to be one of them.”

The company had sales representatives all across the country. After proving herself in various roles, Jenniffer eventually accepted a sales position based in Port Arthur, Texas. The early years were fun. She traveled a lot for work, visiting different parts of the country. During the summers she would use her frequent flier miles for vacation. But everything changed on September 11, 2001.

“During the attacks I was on a plane,” she said. “It just changed things. I decided I didn’t want to travel so much anymore, and this became clearer as travel become so difficult in the aftermath.”

Jenniffer had worked with the publishing company for 21 years when she decided she was ready for a new chapter. She’d risen to become one of two national sales managers, with responsibility for everything west of the Mississippi. But it was time for a change.

Reconnecting with her roots in journalism, Jenniffer decided to pursue a master’s degree in library science at the University of North Texas, Denton. While finishing her degree she accepted a position with a private foundation in nearby Orange.

“The foundation position allowed me to care for rare books and assist in research,” she said. “It was a chance to reconnect with an important part of myself. I had visited libraries all across the country for work—15-minute sales calls, then onto the next appointment. But becoming an actual librarian helped me establish a much deeper connection to my own community. This was very important to me.”



Living along the Gulf Coast, Jenniffer became a Red Cross volunteer to be helpful whenever disaster might strike. “My husband Joe is former military and he lived in Alaska for a long time. We can take care of ourselves for the most part. We knew we could be of use to others.”

All in all, they would be part of the response effort involving five major hurricanes. But Harvey was the worst of all.

“Although our area didn’t face the heaviest damage, almost 60 inches of rain fell in a day and a half. We’d purchased an old building downtown to renovate and we were living on the third floor, so we were okay. But my brother-in-law’s house was almost fully submerged. Only his roof was above water.”

“We knew many people—I think it was 54 friends, co-workers, and family—who’d lost everything. Damage like that changes how a community functions. I told my husband, ‘this is my last hurricane.’”

The foundation in Orange was building a new library and archive when Harvey hit the Texas coast. “We had materials dating back to the mid-1800s, and I’d been helping prepare the collection for its move to our new facility.”

This expertise would come in handy when the public library in Port Arthur flooded. The library recruited Jenniffer to help rebuild the library. We were able to salvage much of the historic parts of its collection. Items would be gathered, packed up, and taken to be freeze dried. Not everything could be saved—much of the print newspaper collection was lost, although most of it was on microfilm which could be cleaned for future use.

“There were points for me where school seemed really hard—I didn’t like being away from home—but I knew my scholarship came from somebody who believed in me, someone who wanted to help me create my future. Your parents always support you, but when you receive a gift from a perfect stranger—that’s real! I’m glad that I can now give that same gift to someone else.”

“The difference between a fire and flood is that—with a flood—you can sometimes clean items afterwards and they’re still worth keeping,” she explained. “Old photos, for example—they can often be saved. It’s not the same with a fire.”

“After the flood waters receded, we set up on the patio at my brother-in-law’s house and we went through boxes and boxes of old photographs, negatives and other documents. We saved everything we could. I remember a baptismal certificate from the 1800s, which I managed to save and digitize. At the library, people would come by to see if the old yearbooks had survived since many had lost their own copies in the flood.”

Not too long after Harvey, an interested buyer approached Jenniffer and her husband about purchasing the building they had renovated. “I reminded my husband—this was our last hurricane,” she said, chuckling. “We’ve found our buyer and it’s our time to move!”

Family also played a big role in their decision. “It was a chance to be closer to my father,” she said. “He’s in northeast Texas. We bought about 15 acres of land, mostly wooded. We now live about four miles away from him, and my sister lives close by too. It’s perfect—and no more hurricanes!”



In 2020, Jenniffer found herself thinking seriously about retirement. She’d reached the age where you could make withdrawals from a retirement account without penalty. “When I got my first job in 1984, I decided to contribute the maximum amount to my 401k plan. When it comes off the top, you don’t really miss it.”

However, Jennifer’s retirement would not be a quiet one. She knew she wanted to continue contributing to her community in a meaningful way.

“I became more involved with the Daughters of the American Revolution,” she said. “Earlier in life, I’d worked on our family genealogy with my mom and grandmother, and what we learned allowed me to become a member. I’ve since joined the scholarship committee at our local DAR chapter. We offer a scholarship to students at the high school. It’s rewarding to review applications and ultimately present our awards to deserving students.”

Jennifer and Joe also volunteer regularly at their church. “We have both a food bank and a food pantry,” she said. “Three days a week, Joe is wrangling food one way or another. Meanwhile, another team member drives an 18-wheeler and brings in food from all over. Once a month we serve between 200-250 families, and weekly we serve another 40 families. Our food bank serves regional ministries that support 15-20 additional food pantries. I recently wrote a grant that will allow our church to purchase another forklift!”

“We donate a lot of time to the pantry,” she added. “We’re blessed to be able to do that!”



A big moment for Jennifer came when she decided to write her first novel.

“I’ve always set goals for myself,” Jennifer said. “As I graduated high school, I said, before I turned 40 I would buy a Harley Davidson and take my mother to Norway to see where our ancestors came from. Beyond that, I always knew I wanted to write a book someday.”

When asked about her book, Jennifer explained that she had ridden across the country 10 times with a veterans group. They would start in California and ride to Washington, D.C. to visit the Vietnam Memorial for Memorial Day each year.

“Initially, I was a little hesitant, but after learning there were other women riders I joined the effort. The conversations were amazing. I learned that many of our veterans had not shared their combat experiences with their families. They just kept it all inside. But on these trips they would open up—and I would just listen.”

“A key goal in our cross country trips was to raise awareness for those still unaccounted for in Vietnam,” she continued.

“One of my dear friends, her dad is still missing in action. As I was listening to these veterans, trying to process everything—I realized I needed to write a book to honor these experiences.”

Jennifer’s historical research would also inform her book, “In His Hands.” It tells the story of a young woman who discovers a batch of letters in her grandmother’s house. In these letters, she learns about an uncle she never knew, someone who’d never returned from Vietnam.



Jennifer and her first novel, 'In His Hands'

“The stories I heard from our veterans were frustrating and difficult, emotionally draining at times. In part, writing this book was my humble way of honoring those who lost loved ones, and who never experienced closure. Their losses were my inspiration.”

Jennifer is currently working on a second book based on stories that emerge from our family histories.



In 2012, shortly after Jennifer’s mother passed away, she and her husband began considering their own estate planning. “We had discussed all the ‘hard questions’ with my mom ahead of time—to make sure her wishes would be followed. But then someone asked us where to send gifts in lieu of flowers. We didn’t know.”

“My dad then suggested the volunteer fire department since they help everyone. The gifts people shared in my mom’s memory totaled over \$11,000. It was pretty remarkable.”

But the question about memorial gifts also prompted some introspection, Jennifer noted. “Looking ahead, what do I want? What does Joe want?”

Joe had been one of the original founders of a fire department located in Alaska, so that became a top priority. And Jennifer thought immediately of Trinidad State.

“Education makes such a difference in the lives of people,” she said. “I’d received a scholarship to attend Trinidad State and it was such a huge help. I decided that I would create one to help others.”

“This scholarship will allow students to pursue either an academic or vocational path since both are important. Trinidad State did such a good job for me. This was my chance to give back—my chance to help others after someone helped me.”

Jennifer and Joe turned to an attorney to create their estate plan. “If you want your wishes to be respected, you need to think about these things,” she said. “Instead of leaving it for others to figure out, you can formalize it in a trust or some other way. And if you do it right, you can avoid probate—and people don’t have to know everything you did. This was important too.”



Jennifer also still loves to ride her motorcycle, although not quite as much as she used to. “I still have to be back every Sunday night. And I love to do CrossFit,” she added. “If I’m going to live a long time, I want to be healthy so I can do stuff. Like climb a 14er. I’d like to do that someday. Setting goals and working to achieve them will always be part of who I am.”



Jennifer seated on her Harley Davidson motorcycle

In September of 2022, Jenniffer decided to accept a role as the Director of Operations at the Winnsboro Center for the Arts. “I still love being around other creative people, and this offers another way to stay connected in the community.”

She and Joe have also given greater attention to their philanthropy. “Our financial planner explained that we don’t need to wait until we pass away to support causes we care about. We’re trying to make a bigger difference today, while we’re still living and can see the impact of our gifts.”

The Winnsboro Center recently partnered with the Dolly Parton Foundation and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to provide books to children ages 0-5. A book is mailed each month to the child’s home. “Literacy has a huge impact on a person’s success in life. We made a contribution to help get that project started.”

“Our volunteer work at our church to help get food to people in need reminds us of our good fortune in life,” she said. “It’s not the same for everyone. Some people struggle week to week. We can all give back in whatever way is meaningful to us. It all helps build a stronger community—a better world.”

“It all fits together—it includes our legacy gift to Trinidad State. I hope our scholarship recipients gain confidence from knowing that someone believed in them enough to invest in their education,” she said.

“There were points for me where school seemed really hard—I didn’t like being away from home—but I knew my scholarship came from somebody who believed in me, someone who wanted to help me create my future. Your parents always support you, but when you receive a gift from a perfect stranger—that’s real! I’m glad that I can now give that same gift to someone else.”

Trinidad State is grateful to Jenniffer for her support of future TSC students. Her gift will make an impact beyond her lifetime.

For more information about helping students at Trinidad State pursue their dreams, please contact Toni DeAngelis at toni.deangelis@trinidadstate.edu or 719-846-5520.