



TRAILBLAZERS
Women in Hood County's history

The ADVOCATES:

These women have fiercely protected children

BY KATHY CRUZ
Senior Staff Writer

Nelson Mandela once said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

Over the years some of Hood County's women have stood as a shield for the community's youngest and most vulnerable, protecting them from some of life's harshest realities.

Each has represented their own keen revelation, raising the awareness of others and, in doing so, bettering the soul of Hood County.



JEAN CATE
Mission Granbury's Jean Cate has been a relentless courtroom warrior for abused and neglected little ones who previously had no voice.
PAGE C2



ELIZABETH WELLS
Elizabeth Wells donated land for a church, a school and a cemetery and, as a single woman, petitioned the courts to adopt a boy rejected by his mother and stepfather.
PAGE C4



DIANA SIMONE
Diana Simone refused to believe that there was nothing she could do about kidnapped children and brought about groundbreaking change that has saved more than 1,000 children.
PAGE C5



WENDY BONNELL
Ruth's Place pediatrician Wendy Bonnell has been a combatant against sicknesses that threaten youngsters whose parents have little or no health insurance.
PAGE C6



HELEN BEST
Social worker Helen Best has been a humble soldier with the wisdom to know that perhaps the best way to save a child is to provide a lifeline to their parent.
PAGE C9

TRAILBLAZERS

Women in Hood County's history



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FREEWHEELING: Jean Cate basks in the accomplishment of bringing a skate park to Granbury. Creating a safe place for young people to hone their skateboarding skills was years in the making and a passion for the longtime chair of the Granbury Parks Board.

'EVERYBODY'S HERO'

Jean Cate has been a courtroom warrior for children

BY KATHY CRUZ
Senior Staff Writer

The whiteness of the sheet covering Bobby Wayne Woods from the neck down was stark against the backdrop of the execution chamber's institutional green walls.

The 44-year-old former short order cook and roofer had years earlier been found guilty of the 1997 abduction, rape and murder of 11-year-old Sarah Patterson of Hood County. This night would bring his final reckoning.

Woods, the ex-boyfriend of Sarah's mother, had also abducted the girl's 9-year-old brother Cody, beating him and leaving him for dead in a cemetery. The boy survived, and testified at Woods' murder trial in Llano.

On this cold night in Huntsville, prison officials shepherded witnesses to their designated viewing areas as the executioner prepared his lethal cocktail.

Cody, no longer a child but a young man of 21, paced on a parking lot of the Huntsville Unit, preferring the nighttime chill to laying eyes on the last face his sister saw before her throat was slit.

Justice for Bobby Wayne Woods came at 6:48 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 3, 2009. While his death brought some measure of relief for Cody and his family, it never truly brought closure for Hood County.

The community had endured, just months apart, two shocking incidents of domestic violence that left children brutally murdered.

In January of 1998, Donald Wayne Martin of Rolling Hills Shores shot and killed his wife Patty and 19-year-old stepson, Chris Cantwell. He then checked his 13-year-old stepdaughter Ashley Foster out of school and drove her to the Stroud Creek area where he shot and killed her, too.

Martin attempted to find another stepson, 17-year-old Granbury High School student Carlos Ortiz, but the boy had left school grounds to walk with his girlfriend to a convenience store. Doing so saved his life.



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SECOND HOME: Jean Cate walks out the door of Mission Granbury, where she continues to work despite having turned 90 last year. Cate now puts in part-time hours as the nonprofit's Community Outreach liaison.

Cate served as director of Hood County CASA for 14 years. She rounded up volunteers, got them trained, supervised them and made sure that every child in every CPS case had a CASA to speak on their behalf.



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OFFICE HOURS: Jean Cate behind the desk in her office at Mission Granbury, where she headed the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program for 14 years.

A LIGHT MOMENT: Jean Cate enjoys a laugh while standing on the balcony overlooking the lobby at the historic Granbury Opera House.

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WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE: Jean Cate walks down the stairs after paying a visit to the theater where she used to occasionally perform.

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CENTER STAGE: Jean Cate's long tenure as a high profile member of the community includes back-in-the-day performances at the Granbury Opera House under the leadership of Joann Miller, herself an important footnote in Hood County's history. Cate's stage credits included the classic "Arsenic and Old Lace."

JEAN

FROM PAGE C2

Martin detailed his deeds, and his disappointment at not having found Ortiz, in a recording before killing himself.

That incident was "the tipping point," according to Micky Shearon, a community volunteer and court administrator for the county Court-at-Law. Less than two weeks after the murders, Shirley Hooks and Norma Wright scheduled a community meeting at the old Methodist Church on the square, which is now Granbury Square Plaza.

"It was from that meeting that Mission Granbury was born," Shearon stated.

The creation of Mission Granbury led to the start up of other things: the Ada Carey Center, a shelter for abused women and children; a Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program for children in CPS cases; and the Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.

Shearon, Wright and Jean Cate worked with Jerry Prather, a local resident who served on the state CASA board, to get the Hood County program up and running. Prather currently serves on Mission Granbury's board of directors.

Cate served as director of Hood County CASA for 14 years. She rounded up volunteers, got them trained, supervised them and made sure that every child in every CPS case had a CASA to speak on their behalf.

"She's a stayer. She stuck with it," said Wright, who moved from Hood County about 10 years ago after spearheading Hood County Christ-



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LOWERING SUN: Jean Cate casts a long shadow at the Granbury Skate Park on Crossland Road on a mild February afternoon. She recently ended her 30-year tenure on the Granbury Parks Board after having served as the advisory panel's chair for most of that time.

mas for Children for many years.

Said Shearon, "When Norma Wright and I started the CASA program here in Hood County some 20 years ago, we knew it would take someone with the heart and determination of a lion to get it off the ground and make it work. There was literally no one that fit that description better than Jean Cate."

He continued, "Jean took the Hood County CASA program and made it not only successful, but one of the top CASA programs in the state of Texas."

The website for Texas CASA shows that Hood County CASA, one of 72 local CASA programs throughout the state, served 172 children in 2019.

LIFE OF SERVICE

During the years she was affiliated with CASA, Cate was a fixture in the courtroom of 355th District Judge Ralph Walton.

Walton presided over CPS hearings for years, but David Evans, administrative judge for the 8th Judicial Region, handles them now.

Although Walton was all business in his dealings with Cate in the courtroom, he was so impressed by her years of service to the community that he wrote a brief biography of her for the Bridge Street History

Center. In it, he stated that her life "defines the word servanthood."

Born in Detroit in 1930, Cate, Walton wrote, developed a dry sense of humor thanks to the influence of her mother.

She attended Catholic schools and, after reaching adulthood, landed a job with American Airlines where she met the man who in 1957 became her husband.

Charlie Cate spent 30 years as a captain for American Airlines. He died in January 2013 at age 93.

During their 56 years of marriage, the Cates renewed their wedding vows every time they moved to a new city. Their final move was to Granbury in the early 1970s, where they bought the historic Aston house on Bridge Street. Both became involved in the community.

In 1974, the husband and wife team helped create the tourist-

During their 56 years of marriage, the Cates renewed their wedding vows every time they moved to a new city. Their final move was to Granbury in the early 1970s, where they bought the historic Aston house on Bridge Street.

PLEASE SEE **JEAN** | C8

TRAILBLAZERS

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'A GREAT LADY'

Wells donated land, adopted unwanted boy

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AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN: Women had few legal rights back in the 1800s, but Elizabeth Wells didn't let that stop her from claiming separate property after she and her husband split. Wells donated land for a church, a school and a cemetery in the Elm Flat community near where the back entrance to Pecan Plantation is located today. As a single woman she also petitioned the court to serve as guardian to a boy who was unwanted by his mother and stepfather.

BY KATHY CRUZ
Senior Staff Writer

What Elizabeth "Bettie" Stone Anderson Wells did in the late 19th century was unusual considering that women had so few legal rights.

She boldly declared sole ownership of property after separating from her husband, which went unchallenged by the courts, and took in an unwanted little boy, raising him as a single parent.

Wells donated acreage to Elm Flat, a community overlooking the Brazos River where Power Plant Court near the back gate of Pecan Plantation is located today.

She provided land for a church and a school as well as a cemetery to serve as the final resting place for the community's infants and children.

Local historian Karen Nace wrote a brief history of Wells with information provided by Wells' grandson, Floyd M. Wells, who himself wrote about the generous and independent woman.

In his history of the Wells Cemetery at Elm Flat, Floyd wrote that "to give the history of the Wells Cemetery is to give a bit of the history of the great lady that created it."

The following history of Bettie Wells is based upon information compiled by Nace and Floyd.

Wells was born in Copiah County, Mississippi in 1831. She came to Texas with her mother, siblings and other family members following the death of her father in 1835. They settled in Grimes County in the College Station area in southeastern Texas.

Wells' first husband, with whom she had four children, died from wounds sustained during the Civil War.

In 1874, she married Thomas B. Wells. They moved to Hood County where they purchased land in Walters Bend on the Brazos River.

After 1879, Thomas' name no longer appeared on Hood County tax records in the Chenoweth Sur-

vey where the couple's property was located. From 1880-1909, only the name Bettie Wells was listed on those records.

In an 1892 affidavit Wells stated that she was "a married woman living apart" from her husband "for about 13 years." In that affidavit, she described the Hood County land as her separate property.

In 1883 Wells donated 1.5 acres to the county judge "for school and church purposes" for the Elm Flat community.

That same year, she petitioned to become guardian of William E. Miller, a young boy who had been born out of wedlock and who had become a source of discord between his mother and her new husband.

Wells adopted the child in 1884 and changed his name to William Alvin Wells in memory of her son Alvin, who had died in infancy.

William was five when he was adopted, and Wells was in her early 50s.

Wells raised the boy as a single parent at a time when women "had only advocacy and activism to promote the welfare of children, family and community," wrote Nace. "The right to vote and share in political power was still years in the future."

Shortly before her death in 1908,

Wells returned to Grimes County. Before leaving Hood County she deeded two acres to the county judge for expansion of the Wells Cemetery.

Wells had started the graveyard with the burial of the two children born of her union with Thomas. The boys died in November 1877.

Over the years Wells had allowed other infants and children from the community to be laid to rest there. In 1889, Lucinda Wells, a freed slave who had chosen to remain with Wells after the Civil War, was buried at the head of the boys' graves.

In 1891, Wells' grandson was laid to rest at the foot of those graves.

In May 1928, Wells' adopted son was buried there.

According to Nace, no records exist of a church having been built in that area, but school records held by the Hood County Historical Commission state that there was a school.

It was called Pleasant View and was part of the Mambrino District. No records for the school exist after 1925-26.

kcruz@hcnews.com | 817-579-1886

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COMMUNITIES MOBILIZED: Following the abduction and murder of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman of Arlington in 1996 by a man in a black pickup truck, Diana Simone came up with an idea for alerting motorists and others in real time so that they could aid law enforcement in the search. The AMBER Alert is now used in 22 other countries besides the United States.

ONE ORDINARY WOMAN

“If one child isn’t safe, then no child is safe”

BY KATHY CRUZ
Senior Staff Writer

Diana Simone will be the first to tell you that she doesn't have an ivy league college degree, a fancy title or an unusually impressive resume.

But in 1996 she did have something that she still feels is better than any of those things combined: An idea.

The massage therapist came up with the concept for the AMBER Alert, a notification system that galvanizes the public to help search for children determined by law enforcement to have been abducted.

Alerts are sent via radio, TV, road signs, cell phones and other data-enabled devices.

As of December 2020, the AMBER Alert had led to the safe recovery of 1,029 children in the United States alone. The system is also used in 22 other countries.

The acronym stands for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response. It honors Amber Hagerman, the child whose abduction and murder triggered Simone's idea.

Jan. 13 marked the 25th anniversary of the day the 9-year-old little girl was pulled off her bicycle on the parking lot of a closed Winn-Dixie in Arlington and thrown, kicking and screaming, into a black single cab pickup truck.

A man who lived across the street witnessed the abduction and phoned 911 but authorities were unable to locate the child.

The witness described the man as in his 20s or 30s, White or Hispanic, less than 6 feet tall, of medium build and having brown or black hair.

Four nights after her abduction, Hagerman's body was found in a creek bed behind an apartment complex less than five miles from where she had been forcibly taken.

An autopsy revealed that she had been kept alive for two days and had been beaten and sexually assaulted before her throat was cut and her body discarded.

The man who kidnapped the little girl has never been apprehended. However, in a press conference on the 25th anniversary, Arlington police officials expressed hope that advanced DNA technology will lead to a resolution in the case.

A lab has agreed to re-examine the evidence.

A reporter at the press conference asked participants how they feel about the AMBER Alert.

“It's just become a household name,” said Kevin Kolbye, Arlington assistant police chief over the Support Operations Bureau. “It's just a legacy that has helped many thousands of children be recovered.”

Hagerman's mother, Donna Williams, also weighed in, saying that she is very proud of the alert system named in memory of her daughter.

“She didn't die in vain,” Williams said.



COURTESY TEXAS STATE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

SIGNED INTO LAW: Diana Simone was among those invited to the White House in 2003 when President George W. Bush signed the PROTECT Act into law. Among other things, the law calls for use of the AMBER Alert when children have been abducted. Donna Williams, mother of murder victim Amber Hagerman, is shown at left in a white top with pastel flowers, her son Ricky Hagerman beside her. Behind them is Elizabeth Smart and her parents, Lois and Ed Smart.

TAKING ACTION

When Simone came home from work on Jan. 13, 1996 — a Friday — the TV was tuned to a local station. The evening news was on, and the station was airing a video clip of a little girl excitedly showing off her Christmas presents.

Curious as to what the child had done to warrant news coverage, Simone began watching. She was heartbroken to hear that the little girl, Amber Hagerman, had been abducted that afternoon.

Simone was further devastated when, a few days later, Hagerman's body was found.

Simone became obsessed, convinced that surely there was some way to help law enforcement when such crimes occur. Plenty of people had to have seen the black pickup; they just didn't know the relevance of what they were seeing.

Simone remembered a time when she lived overseas and a mother panicked when she became separated from her little girl in a crowded marketplace. She told those around her what the child looked like and what she was wearing, and word spread quickly from person

to person.

Within minutes, the little girl was reunited with her grateful mother.

Simone felt that a similar type of communication, in which many people are enlisted to help, might be the key to thwarting child abductions.

Simone's friends weren't very encouraging, though. They told her that she had to stop obsessing over Hagerman, that one person was unlikely to make much of a difference.

But one day when Simone told a client, the late Rev. Tom Stoker of Fort Worth, about her belief that surely something could be done to quickly mobilize entire communities in the event of an abduction, Stoker responded, “Well, what about the radio? They (make announcements) for civil defense and things like that.”

Before leaving her office that day, Stoker made Simone promise that she would act on the idea.

Simone phoned KDMX-FM 102.9, a Dallas-based radio station, and spoke to midday host Kim Ashley. Before picking up the phone, she

PLEASE SEE DIANA | C8

Simone became obsessed, convinced that surely there was some way to help law enforcement when such crimes occur. Plenty of people had to have seen the black pickup; they just didn't know the relevance of what they were seeing.

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NOW HOLD STILL: Pediatrician Wendy Bonnell looks inside the ear of a young patient at Ruth's Place. Bonnell has volunteered at the free clinic since 2009, providing care for children whose parents are uninsured or under-insured. Her husband Ric Bonnell, also a pediatrician, volunteers at the clinic as well.

A REAL 'GEM'

Wendy Bonnell shines at Ruth's Place and in Tolar community

BY KATHY CRUZ
Senior Staff Writer

Anyone prone to comparing themselves to others is pretty much guaranteed to come up short, probably way short, if they compare themselves to Wendy Bonnell.

The pediatrician and 1995 Texas Christian University graduate has been a steady and reliable volunteer at Ruth's Place since 2009. The free medical and dental clinic serves those who are uninsured and under-insured.

Bonnell and her husband Ric, a TCU assistant professor who is also a pediatrician and Ruth's Place volunteer, have raised three children and adopted five – yes, *five* – Haitian children.

Bonnell's concern for the welfare of children has also extended to public office. Last year she ran for the Place 6 seat on the Tolar School Board and won.

She's even a good cook, according to Ruth's Place medical director Romeo Bachand, though Lord only knows how she finds the time.

Ruth's Place Executive Director Patricia Green said that Bonnell can always be counted on to help a sick child and has even instructed Ruth's Place colleagues to give parents her personal cell phone number.

"She's very dedicated to everything that she does," Green said. "She'll stop anything that she's doing to see a sick child. So she's basically on call for us all the time. It's been a huge blessing to have her on staff because she's just so dedicated to what she does."

"TCU Magazine" featured photos of Bonnell along with an article



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THE DOCTOR IS IN: Wendy Bonnell can be counted on to drop everything when a child is sick and needs to be seen, according to Ruth's Place Executive Director Patricia Green.

about her work with Ruth's Place in its spring 2019 issue.

When Bonnell and her husband first began volunteering for the free clinic, it was being operated out of a double-wide trailer in the Oak Trail Shores community. Ceiling fans had to be removed from the mobile home because both Bonnells are taller than six feet.

The trailer is now used as a food

pantry and, before the pandemic hit, English as a Second Language classes. The Ruth's Place clinic now operates out of a more centralized location on Crawford Avenue near the Granbury Lakeside Center complex (the former Kroger site).

In 2009, the year the Bonnells began treating Hood County children free of charge, the Hood County News named them its Man and Woman of the Year. The article stated that in addition to their volunteer work with Ruth's Place, the couple participated in medical missions to Haiti.

"My husband and I both started care in pediatric emergency rooms," Bonnell said. "We developed a heart for patients who didn't have access to care."

Bonnell said she sometimes is able to "see somebody really quickly" while in Granbury to shop at Walmart.

"Our goal was to keep those kids out of the ER," she said of the volunteer work that she and her husband do. "And that's why we make ourselves available."

A LOVE FOR HAITI

Just weeks after the Bonnells were featured in the HCN for their volunteer efforts, a catastrophic 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti, killing an estimated 250,000 people and injuring another 300,000.

The Bonnells, who already had developed a heart for Haiti through their mission trips there, adopted a little girl named Laney who was 18 months old when the earthquake struck on Jan. 12, 2010.

"After we got her home we found out that she had four biological siblings still in Haiti, and so we started the process to adopt them," Bonnell

When Bonnell and her husband first began volunteering for the free clinic, it was being operated out of a double-wide trailer in the Oak Trail Shores community. Ceiling fans had to be removed from the mobile home because both Bonnells are taller than six feet.

“To me, Wendy Bonnell exemplifies the concept of a servant leader,” Tolar School Superintendent Travis Stilwell said. “She cares deeply for others and this is shown consistently through her actions. The community of Tolar and the Tolar ISD are truly blessed by her compassion and willingness to serve.”

WENDY

FROM PAGE C6

said. “We’ve known the whole time that it was God’s plan for us to do it. He made it clear very quickly that we were to pursue them as well.”

Adopting all four of Laney’s siblings took a while because of complications caused by the earthquake. For about eight months, the Bonnells took turns with one living in Haiti while the other stayed in Hood County with Laney and their three biological children — Elizabeth, Will and Jack.

“We alternated month to month,” Wendy Bonnell said.

The entire blended family was finally under one roof by March of 2013.

The children’s ages today are: Elizabeth, 24; Will, 22; Jack 19; Laney, 12; Lina, 15; Yolette, 19; Dieuner, 20; and Mackenson, 25.

Yolette was Homecoming Queen at Tolar High School last fall “because our God is that awesome,” Bonnell said.

Christa Hoffman, who teaches eighth grade English at Tolar Junior High and knows the entire Bonnell family, said that Yolette is “just precious” and “a wonderful child.”

She stated, “She is just such a kind and sweet person that everybody loves her. She’s a lot like Wendy.”

Hoffman said she has been impressed with all eight of the Bonnell children.

Three of the kids are still living under the Bonnells’ roof.

While it might be tempting to assume that the Bonnell Bunch has been the proverbial one big happy family, Bonnell eschews that stereotype.

“I would hate to portray adoption as rosy all the time,” the mother of eight stated.

“We have eight incredible kids but there were bumpy times along the way. We were just able to love each other through the struggles and figure it out.”

TRUSTED FRIEND

After moving with her family to Tolar in the fall of 2012, Gina Trammel observed Bonnell on the sidelines as their sons played football together.

When she found out that, like her, Bonnell is an adoptive mother, Trammel immediately felt drawn to her. The two are about six months apart in age.

“Coming down to small-town Tolar and finding another adoptive mom really spoke to my heart,” said Trammel, who has an adopted daughter from China. “Wendy and I started talking and attending the same church and I would say that she has become one of my dearest, dearest friends.”

About six or seven months after her family moved to the town southwest of Granbury, Trammel’s mother, who lived an hour away, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. She later died.

“Wendy stepped in and helped with my kids and just really showed a lot of love to our family at that time,” Trammel said.

An incident in 2016 left Trammel relying on her friend even more.

Trammel was in China doing advocacy work for orphans and her husband was in Austin on a mission-related matter when their two daughters, Trammel’s sister and Trammel’s brother-in-law were involved in a horrific car accident in Tolar.

The girls sustained serious injuries. One had a broken femur and was air-lifted to a hospital; the other had a concussion.

“As soon as that happened, I reached out to Wendy from China,” Trammel stated. “She dropped everything to go to the hospital because she knew she could get there before my husband could.”

Wendy stayed with the girls, communicated with doctors and texted photos to Trammel.

“I’m so thankful for Wendy,” Trammel said. “She’s a gem, that’s for sure.”

One of the qualities that Trammel admires the most about her friend is her humility.

“You can find a lot of selfless and giving people but to find them paired with humility and privacy is a rare find,” she said.

“You’ll never find her pointing to herself, to what she has done. She has helped people in desperate need of anything from groceries to a car — a million different things. And I



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ALL BETTER: A little girl scampers back to her mother after being examined by pediatrician Wendy Bonnell at the Ruth’s Place clinic on Crawford Avenue. Bonnell’s love of children is evident in her personal life as well. She and her husband Ric have three biological children and five children that they adopted from Haiti.

know, probably, a small amount. I just love that she’s so humble.”

PUBLIC SERVANT

Tolar School Superintendent Travis Stilwell said that Bonnell “is very deserving of recognition” because of all she does for the community.

“To me, Wendy Bonnell exemplifies the concept of a servant leader,” he said. “She cares deeply for others and this is shown consistently through her actions. The community of Tolar and the Tolar

ISD are truly blessed by her compassion and willingness to serve.”

Tolar School Board President Dalton Nix said that Bonnell has been a welcome addition to the school board and that Bonnell and Place 4’s Rhonda Knight, the board’s only two female members, often offer perspectives and insights that the men in the group have not considered.

“I was excited that she was able to get on the board with us,” said Nix, who had heard of both Bonnells’ philanthropic work. He said that

Wendy Bonnell is “very thoughtful” and shows “genuine care” for others.

Hoffman, the eighth grade English teacher, said that Bonnell is the type of person who will help anyone.

“She has a presence about her, she really does,” Hoffman said. “She is truly a kind person — kind, good and brave. To be those together is amazing. She’s a trailblazer, that’s for sure.”

kacruz@hcnews.com | 817-579-1886



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STILL TRUCKIN': Not many soon-to-be-91-year-olds drive a big Ford F-150 pickup truck, but Jean Cate's vehicle of choice is perhaps appropriate for a woman who has made a bold, larger-than-life impact on her community.

JEAN

FROM PAGE C3

drawing Old Fashioned Fourth of July Celebration and Hometown Parade. Sponsored by the chamber, the celebration's Fireworks Spectacular is considered one of the best fireworks shows in the nation.

For years, Cate and Dan Coates served as announcers for the Hometown Parade. In 2005, following Coates' death, Walton teamed up with Cate for those duties.

After the historic Granbury Opera House went through a restoration in the mid-1970s, Cate performed in a number of shows under the leadership of Joann Miller, another woman whose contributions are considered important in Hood County's history.

From January 1991 until January of this year, Cate sat on the Granbury Parks Board and was its chair almost the entire time.

According to City Secretary Carla Walker, she also was appointed in 2001 to the Citizen Planning Committee and the Charter Review Commission. During the 1990s, she was one of two people appointed by the City Council to a five-member Hood County Sports District board.

Mayor Nin Hulett said that Cate has been one of the city's longest-serving board members. Even though her long tenure on the Parks Board ended in December, in January the council appointed her to the Ethics Commission.

Cate was instrumental in the creation of the Granbury Skate Park, a cause for which she was particularly passionate. She wanted a safe place where children and young people could hone their skateboarding skills.

"She took ownership of that skate park," Hulett said, adding

that Cate also "took the bull by the horns" when it came to creating the Granbury Dog Park and other recreational areas that have enhanced the quality of life in Granbury.

When park projects were placed on the City Council agenda for approval, Cate would show up at City Hall.

"She would be at the council meetings to answer questions and make sure that we understood what the Parks Board was wanting to do," which made the council feel comfortable when it voted to approve the initiatives, Hulett stated.

According to Walton, Cate also served on the Bicentennial Commission, the Leadership Granbury board, and the Planning Committee at St. Francis Cabrini Catholic Church.

She was also instrumental in the creation of the Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center and the former Hood County Boys and Girls Club, he wrote.

J.C. Campbell, 88, who served on the Granbury City Council many years ago, said that Cate is "just a neat lady."

He stated, "Anything she's done, it's been to help people. When you hear about Jean Cate, you think about service."

Cate was once honored with the chamber's coveted Howard Clemmons Distinguished Service Award.

Mike Scott, the chamber's long-time and soon-to-retire president and chief executive officer, said that Cate was one of the first chamber volunteers he met when he arrived in Granbury in 2006.

"Through the years I have been constantly amazed by Jean's energy and consistency of purpose in everything that is Granbury," he said.

"However, most amazing has been her total dedication to CASA and being an advocate and anchor

for those most in need. It takes a special person to do what Jean does on a daily basis and she deserves every accolade we can offer."

'A REAL JEWEL'

Cate no longer heads the CASA program — Justin Rossner does — but she's still involved despite having turned 90 last year.

She works part-time as Mission Granbury's Community Outreach liaison, recruiting volunteers, speaking to community organizations, and organizing fundraisers. "I cannot believe the energy she has," said Carmine Esposito, former board president for Mission Granbury and current board member.

Mission Granbury's executive director, Dusti Scovel, said that Cate is "a real jewel" and "everybody's hero."

She said, "The thing about Jean is, she flies under the radar most of the time. She finds donors and partners to help us with special projects for clients, like working with Walmart, Home Depot or Lowe's to get heaters, air conditioners and other building supplies for those projects. She does so much that people never know about."

Mission Granbury's leaders had planned a party at Celebration Hall on the square to honor Cate on her 90th birthday, but the event had to be canceled because of the shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Plans included surprising Cate with a big announcement: that Mission Granbury's board and staff had pitched in to create the Jean Cate Children's Fund.

The account is being used for everything from football shoes to music lessons to tutoring, according to Scovel. The money benefits not only children in the CASA program,

but those living in the shelter or whose families are receiving emergency assistance.

Over the years, Mission Granbury has trained several hundred CASA volunteers. Cate said that she started the program with six volunteers and that currently there are about 45.

Cate said that when she first began leading the CASA program, CPS workers joked that her middle name was "Termination." She usually didn't want children to be returned to homes after they had been removed due to abuse or neglect.

But over the years Cate's viewpoint changed, and she realized the value of helping adults become better parents. She found that more often than not children "would really rather be back with mom and dad, no matter how bad it was."

As for intervention efforts, "Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't," she stated in a recent HCN podcast.

The former CASA director likes to tell the story about a couple who were CASAs to three siblings placed in homes in three different cities. One city was so far away that the couple was told they could visit that particular child less frequently, once every three months instead of monthly.

The couple ignored that recommendation, though, and visited the child every month, driving more than 300 miles each way.

On their seventh visit, the boy asked them a question.

"How much do they pay you to come and visit me?" he asked. "Why do you come?"

The man and wife told the boy that they were paid nothing and that they came to see him because they cared about him.

"It turned that child around. He broke out crying," Cate said.

The boy was later adopted and graduated at the top of his class.

Cate believes that if the CASAs had not shown him that he was important to them, "he never would be where he is today."

CASA volunteers undergo background checks and 30 hours of classroom training. They commit to at least one year of advocacy, and undergo continued training during their service.

Mission Granbury strives to accommodate those with jobs so that the program isn't just available to those who are retired, Cate stated.

CASAs write reports and testify in court.

Information about the CASA program, as well as a downloadable application, can be found at mission-granbury.org. The agency's phone number is 817-579-6866.

Anyone who would like to donate to the fund named in Cate's honor can write Jean Cate Children's Fund on the memo line of their check and mail it to Mission Granbury at 3611 Plaza East Court, Granbury, Texas 76049.

Cate said that serving in the CASA program is a way for one person to make a difference.

"People don't think they can do anything. Yes, they can," she stressed. "CASAs are everyday people that go through a training and they make incredible differences in children's lives."

In Cate's view, the impact that CASAs have is reflected in the eyes of the children they serve. Their eyes light up with hope and trust, and a realization that someone cares about them, she said.

"What could be more important to a child?" Cate asked. "That's a gift you can't wrap, but it's the best one they'll ever get."

kacruz@hcnews.com | 817-579-1886

DIANA

FROM PAGE C5

felt "this tidal wave of self doubt."

After Simone shared the concept with Ashley, the DJ asked her to contact the station manager. Simone did so, sending the station manager a letter on Jan. 27.

"I would like to suggest an emergency system be set up," Simone wrote, "so that when a verified 911 call is placed all the radio stations in the area would be notified immediately and they would interrupt programming to broadcast an emergency alert."

The station manager liked the idea and shared it with managers at other radio stations. They "immediately went to work turning it into a life-saving reality," Simone said.

Speaking at a TEDx Wilmington-Women conference about how

one person can make a difference, Simone stated of the collaboration: "Strong competitors became partners. Media and law enforcement worked side by side. Valuable air time was relinquished willingly."

Within about nine months, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) gave its blessing and the first AMBER Alert was issued in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, said Simone, who feels that "if one child isn't safe, then no child is safe."

The first two AMBER Alerts yielded no fruit, and there were thoughts of scrapping the plan. (The first child was found dead, but his cause of death was determined to be an accident.)

The third time, though, proved to be the charm. An emergency broadcast was issued after an infant was kidnapped in November 1998. A driver heard the announcement and realized that he was driving be-

hind the suspect.

The baby was safely recovered and returned to her parents within 45 minutes.

"And as they say," Simone said, "the rest is history."

NATIONAL LAW

Over time, Simone slipped into anonymity. KDMX went through personnel changes and Simone's original letter was lost. The origins of the AMBER Alert were chalked up by radio stations to a listener idea.

Simone said that in 2002, when the AMBER Alert was on the verge of becoming national law, Bud Kennedy of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram wrote a column in which he stated that it was too bad no one knew the identity of the person who had come up with the idea.

Stoker, Simone's friend and agent, saw that column and dug up a copy of Simone's follow-up letter to

the KDMX station manager. He contacted Kennedy, who located the original station manager and confirmed the letter's authenticity.

Simone was anonymous no longer.

When President George W. Bush signed the PROTECT Act into law on April 30, 2003, Simone was there in the Rose Garden to witness it. She treasures a special memento from that occasion: A photo of her with the president.

Hagerman's mother was there, as were children who had been rescued through the AMBER Alert and their family members. Among them was Elizabeth Smart and her parents, Ed and Lois.

"It was amazing," Simone said of the experience. "The most amazing part was meeting some of the children that had been rescued."

These days perhaps the most important transmission of the AMBER

Alert is via cell phone. As Simone told columnist Kennedy when she spoke to him again in 2016, around the 20th anniversary of Hagerman's murder, people might not listen to the radio so much anymore, but they "take their cell phones everywhere."

Sometimes people complain to Simone about the loudness of the alert on their cell phones.

"Please don't turn those alerts off," she said. "I know they can be very annoying. They have had to make changes to where we don't wake people up at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning anymore."

She continued, "I said to someone who was complaining about how shrill the siren was that I wish we could change it to the sound of a child screaming. Because that's actually what you're hearing."

kacruz@hcnews.com | 817-579-1886

TRAILBLAZERS

Women in Hood County's history



DAVID MONTESINO | HOOD COUNTY NEWS

RELIABLE ASSISTANCE: Diane Crum picks up a box of food left for her on a table outside the Ruth's Place Outreach Center in Oak Trail Shores. Due to COVID-19, Helen Best and her daughters Mia Best-Ruiz and Melissa Gonzalez have been placing food on an outdoor table rather than having families come inside the facility on weekly food distribution days. Best has even delivered food to families in quarantine.

'SUPER' WOMAN

Helen Best hasn't been the face or voice of social work, but has been its heart

BY KATHY CRUZ
Senior Staff Writer

Candace Parker was 18 and on probation because of a marijuana charge when she first encountered Helen Best.

Now a 32-year-old mother of two, Parker met Best after she chose Granbury First United Methodist Church for her community service hours. The church has long been active in food distribution, a cause close to Best's heart.

Best's passion is social work, whether it be supervising a food pantry, teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, helping people apply for Medicaid or spearheading children's activities.

A former employee of Head Start, she was snatched up by the local nonprofit Ruth's Place because of her dedication to serving others.

Back when she was on probation, Parker took Life Skills training from Best, learning such things as assertiveness, banking and meal preparation.

"From there we became really good friends," she said.

In Best, Parker found not only someone who wanted to help her succeed in life, but someone who didn't judge her for that time she messed up. The same could not be said for some of her own family members.

"She acted like nothing ever happened," Parker said of how Best treated her. "She let me get better, and helped me get better."

When Parker, at 19, lost her beloved grandfather, Best attended the funeral and sat beside her, an act of kindness that "meant the world" to the young woman.

Best was there for Parker in other ways, too. She gave her rides when she needed them, helped her connect with local food pantries, and advised her on how to dress for job interviews.

"She taught me to take pride in myself," Parker stated. "She said,



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MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND: Helen Best hugs her daughter Mia Best-Ruiz, who is taking over her mother's work at the Ruth's Place Outreach Center in Oak Trail Shores. "I think doing the Lord's work is very important to her," Best-Ruiz said of her mother.

dress for the part you want when going to a job interview. She told me to look as if I had the job already."

Today Parker has a career in home healthcare, thanks in part to the woman who has been her steady friend and mentor.

"She's just an amazing human being," the young mother said of Best. "She's super giving. Super humble. Super selfless. The world needs more of her, for sure."

VISIONARY

"Sometimes I wonder, how did I get here?" Best said. "I'm just a little Hispanic girl, raised in West Dallas."

Best's career in social work has included night shifts at the Ada Carey Center (Mission Granbury's shelter for abused women and children), MHMR, March of Dimes and Ruth's Place, which provides dental and medical care as well as commu-



DAVID MONTESINO | HOOD COUNTY NEWS

NOURISHMENT: Feeding families has always been important to beloved social worker Helen Best.

nity outreach services.

She helped feed kids through the Granbury ISD's Healthy Kids program, and worked resource fairs for Operation School Supplies, an annual event held just prior to the start of a new school year.

Although she has always been paid for her work, Best is beloved because people feel that she has genuine compassion and she never

turns anyone away, even when they knock on her door at home.

"I think doing the Lord's work is very important to her," said Mia Best-Ruiz, Best's daughter.

Justin Jeter, senior minister at Granbury First Christian Church where Best is a member, said that Best is "a visionary and strategic

"Sometimes I wonder, how did I get here?" Helen Best said.

"I'm just a little Hispanic girl, raised in West Dallas."

Best was set on a course to help others in large part by her family of origin. Her father and all six of her siblings were diagnosed with schizophrenia, but for some reason Best was spared from the illness.

HELEN

FROM PAGE C9

thinker" who is trusted by those who are "hurting and hungry and alone" because of how she treats them.

"She looks at everybody and sees the light of God in their eyes and treats them accordingly," he said.

Amy Piatt, the church's minister of family life and mission, said that when she first came to Granbury, "I was told that if I really wanted to learn about grassroots service in the community, (Best) and her daughter Mia were the people I needed to talk to."

Best was set on a course to help others in large part by her family of origin. Her father and all six of her siblings were diagnosed with schizophrenia, but for some reason Best was spared from the illness.

All but one of Best's siblings have passed away. Best is caregiver for her last remaining sibling.

"I help people because that's what I've always done," she said. "It just came naturally to me."

Best quit school in the 10th grade because her mother told her that she was just going to get married and have kids, so why bother graduating?

Best wanted an education, though, and her failure to complete high school bothered her. In 1975, as a single mother raising two children, she earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

She also met Patrick, the man who would become her husband. The two moved their family from Dallas to Fort Worth and then to Granbury. They hoped that living in a small town would mean they wouldn't have to worry as much about drugs and crime.

At the time Best moved to Hood County 34 years ago, she was a mother of three. Mia, the youngest, was one year old.

Best was a stay-at-home mom for years but decided to rejoin the workforce when Mia was 10. She applied at Head Start.

Best walked into the Head Start offices to find a supervisor struggling to communicate with a couple who could not speak English. Other employees were of no help. They were scurrying out the door because it was lunchtime.

"I just starting translating," Best said. "and I got a job."

Working at Head Start caused Best to cross paths with Norma Wright and Toni Brown Belew, two powerhouses in local charitable work.

For years Wright was the face and voice — and the velvet strong arm — of Hood County Christmas for Children. She took the reins from founder Rusty Ross when he was ready to step back.

Brown Belew was longtime executive director for United Way of Hood County.

The three women found themselves working various events together, such as GISD's annual school supplies giveaway. Then one day Wright and Brown Belew told Best they wanted her to come work for Ruth's Place, at that time a fledgling organization.

That was about 15 years ago.

Best became a fixture at the Ruth's Place Outreach Center located on Maplewood Drive in Oak Trail Shores. She also became fast friends with Wright.

"I liked her right away because I recognized what a good person she was, and how pure her heart was and how much she cared about people," said Wright, who moved to Padre Island with her husband David about 10 years ago but has maintained the friendship.

Wright said that Best would often accompany her to speaking engagements but would always say, "Don't make me talk." She wanted to remain in the background.

"She's an angel, she absolutely is," Wright said of her friend. "And she never asks for anything for herself. She never asks for recognition on anything because that's not what it's about with her."

Best's parents may have chosen an apt moniker when they picked "Angelita" as their daughter's first name. It means messenger of God, or angel.

IRREPLACEABLE

Ruth's Place Executive Director Patricia Green said that whether



DEDICATED AND COMMITTED: Helen Best has served the people of Hood County in many ways, but she has a special passion for food distribution. For years she has worked with Granbury First United Methodist Church to provide food to families in Oak Trail Shores and nearby neighborhoods.

Best is on the clock or putting in volunteer time, "she continues to give her heart and soul into everything she does for the people."

Green stated, "They all know her, they love her, and if she finds out that a child or a family is in need of something, if we don't have it at Ruth's Place, she'll network with churches and other places until she fills that need. She's unstoppable."

Green said that Best has even delivered food to families in quarantine due to COVID-19.

"She's amazing. Absolutely amazing. I can't say enough good about her. She's irreplaceable."

Though she may seem irreplaceable to some, Best doesn't feel that way about herself. Now 69 and with her brother to care for, she has been grooming her daughter, Mia Best-Ruiz, to take over for her. In

fact, Best-Ruiz is now director at the Ruth's Place Community Outreach Center, and Best has shifted to the assistant director position.

Best said that she puts in about 15 hours a week assembling food boxes for the weekly food distribution day. Due to the pandemic, clients no longer come inside to pick up their boxes. With help from Best-Ruiz and her other daughter, Melissa Gonzalez, Best places boxes outside the center at each family's appointed pick-up time.

David Stockbridge, a member of Granbury First United Methodist Church who has worked with Best for years in food distribution service, said that "hundreds of families" in Arrowhead Shores, Oak Trail Shores and the surrounding area have benefited from her hard work.

Stockbridge said that Best always has a smile and a joyful greeting for food pantry clients, and they respond positively to her.

"As a result of that, I think she's responsible for the success of the food pantry at OTS," he said. "Helen's contribution to what I consider the food ministry of Hood County — ensuring that people have food — has been outstanding."

Gabriela Gamez, a former employee of Mission Granbury who has known Best for years, said that Best is "an awesome person" with "a big heart."

"I've been listening to her for many, many years talking about retirement," Gamez said. "And she hasn't retired yet."

kcruz@hcnews.com / 817-579-1886