A Full Life of Service

Lillian Arrants ’42 Followed Her Heart to Benefit Others

By Jill Stuckey

As a young woman, Lillian Kirby Arrants’ life followed a pattern of new adventures to unknown places. Taking a path that took her from a small farm town to the halls of Winthrop and then to serve her country during the height of World War II, Arrants embraced each new journey.

Arrants’ path began in the small community of Lynchburg, S.C., where she grew up the oldest of four children. Leaving her home and family as a girl of 15, Arrants chose to attend Winthrop during a time when not many women attended college. Arrants’ aunt loaned her the money to attend, and Arrants spent four years studying history and learning to become a teacher. Her journey to Winthrop proved to be a pioneering one for her family, as each of her two younger sisters, Nell Kirby Player ’45 and Jean Kirby Plowden ’55, later followed in her footsteps.

After graduating, Arrants taught for one year in Greenville, S.C., before realizing that her salary of $108 a month would never allow her to pay back the debts she owed for her education. At the end of that year, she decided to join the U.S. Navy, where she could contribute to the war effort and earn enough to get a start in life.

Arrants joined the Navy without knowing where she would serve or how she would help, but she was excited nonetheless. She was sent to training in Massachusetts, where she worked hard to prove she belonged.

“I worked like the dickens in class,” Arrants said. “You can’t imagine the competition because there were girls from every state of the union that you were competing against.”

After training, the Navy sent Arrants to Washington, D.C., and stationed her in communications where she began deciphering the Japanese messages that told U.S. troops where the enemy ships were headed. The work was difficult and involved stripping the codes from a foreign language that Arrants did not know.

“It was like a puzzle. The messages were not only encoded, but they were re-encoded,” Arrants said. “Sometimes you would work half the day and not get one word to fit.”

Arrants served in the Navy for four years. Two years after she began her work in Washington, the war ended, and she was transferred to Jacksonville, Fla., to continue her work in communications. During her service, Arrants progressed from the rank of ensign to full lieutenant.

Following her stint in the Navy, Arrants returned to school and earned a master’s degree in political science from the University of Tennessee. She returned to teaching and taught history and other courses related to political science for nearly 10 years before serving as a principal for three years. When her daughter was born, Arrants retired from teaching and embarked on the adventure of raising a family.

Today, Arrants lives in the Lexington, S.C., house that she and her husband built together 50 years ago when they were just starting out. Years have passed since her days as a Winthrop girl and a Navy intelligence officer, and Arrants, who loyally supports Winthrop through generous financial gifts, has experienced a lifetime of love and joy, sadness and pain since then. And yet when she laughs, you can still catch a glimpse of that young girl who always willingly embraced new adventures.

While celebrating her 65th reunion over Alumni Reunion Celebration weekend, Lillian Arrants visited her former home away from home — Withers/W.T.S. Building — where she fine-tuned her skills as a student teacher. After graduation, she served a four-year stint in the Navy.