Carroll set to leave Andrews Center family to spend more time with hers

BY CLIFF SMELLEY

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Shelley Carroll wears many hats in her role of administrative assistant at the Santa Fe College Andrews Center, but she’s ready to let them adorn someone else’s head as she will retire at the end of this month.

Carroll, who has been administrative assistant for eight years, began working at the Andrews Center 20.5 years ago. Though she’s looking forward to this next stage of her life, she admitted she has mixed feelings about leaving her co-workers — co-workers who have become friends.

“This is really like part of my family,” Carroll said. “It really has been a wonderful place to work — a great atmosphere and all the people I work with. We just all get along so well.”

Andrews Center Director Cheryl Canova said Carroll will be missed by all and described her as a “blessing.”

“You bond with somebody that you spend that much time with,” Canova said. “She’s not just an employee. She’s a dear friend of mine. I know I’d do anything for her, and she’d do anything for me. It’s a special relationship.”

A reception in Carroll’s honor will be held at the Andrews Center on her Tuesday, Jan. 30, from 2 p.m. until 4 p.m. All are invited.

Carroll grew up in a suburb of Boston. A cousin who was going to school in Gainesville asked her to come to Gainesville, too, so Carroll left Boston behind and enrolled at Santa Fe College. When asked if she was nervous about traveling that far from home, Carroll said, “I think I was more excited. I didn’t know enough to be nervous. Looking back on it, I felt so bad, especially for my mom. I can relate now. My kids are fairly close by. I wouldn’t like it (if they were far away).”

She did return home for a short time, working in a corporate law firm, but she described that experience as a “nightmare.” It was still dark when she left for work. She drove part way and took the subway the remaining distance. She worked in a tiny cubicle.

“That didn’t last very long” Carroll said. “I ended up coming back and staying here.”

Carroll got a job at a law firm in Gainesville, which is how she met her husband, Wayne, a Union County native who worked as an attorney before his retirement. She laughed about their early interactions.

“I really couldn’t understand him at all,” Carroll said, adding, “I had a strong Boston accent, which, now I realize, is a really funny sounding accent. I talked a mile a minute.”

It wasn’t just Wayne she had trouble conversing with. She recalled how she was in a store when she asked if they had a bubbler, which down here is a water fountain. Another time, she was in a store and asked if they sold common pins, which down here are called straight pins.

“They looked at me like I was totally crazy,” Carroll said.

She said she wound up losing most of her accent, but her kids have told her that it would resurface whenever she got angry with them.

Carroll and her husband have been married 41 years. They have two children: Craig and Jamie.

After she got married, Carroll worked for the Union County School Board for more than two years, while living in Providence. Then she wound up leaving Florida again when the family moved to Vermont. She worked various jobs there, including as a property manager and at an elementary school and a trucking company.

Carroll said the good thing was she wasn’t far from her childhood home, but the bad thing was it was just hard to make a living there.

And then there was the weather.

“It was beautiful, but cold, cold, cold winters,” she said.

After five years, the Carrolls returned to Florida.

Carroll was working part-time for her husband, but as their children got older, she looked for a full-time opportunity. She found out about a job opening at the Andrews Center, which would work out well since she lived in Keystone Heights. Also, she had relatives who worked at Santa Fe’s Northwest Campus in Gainesville and had heard good things about working for the school.

She didn’t get the job, but several months later, she saw where the center was advertising for the same position as things apparently did not work out with the person who was hired the first time. This time, Carroll was hired.

“I felt like it was going to be a good fit,” Carroll said. “It was really close to home. I knew it was a good place to work.”

She said she didn’t necessarily possess a certain skill set that would benefit her in the job, which was working in student services, but added, “I guess if you can work for your husband, you can work for anyone and do anything.”

Carroll didn’t have much of a learning curve. She began working at the Andrews Center on Aug. 1 as preparations were being made for the fall term.

“I probably learned the job more quickly than I normally would because in the line of fire you had to,” Carroll said.

The staff at the Andrews Center, including such people as Christy Reddish and Betty Wilcox, were a great help to her, helping her to overcome any intimidation she felt about her new job.

“Everybody, right from the get-go, was very supportive,” Carroll said. “I would write down every little thing. There was a lot to remember. I was nervous. It took a little while. Because it was so busy, I guess, before long, I felt pretty comfortable.”

Over time, Carroll came to enjoy her interaction with students. She liked hearing about their successes, especially those of older, non-traditional students.

“Just to watch them evolve and gain confidence ‘— that made me feel good,” Carroll said.

Though she described herself as the kind of person who wasn’t fixated on another position at the Andrews Center, she did indeed end up filling another position when she became the administrative assistant. Her duties are varied, ranging from assisting on the budget and course schedules to just being that person who first greets staff, instructors and visitors who want to see Canova.

“I wear a lot of hats in this position,” Carroll said.

Canova said Carroll has proved to be that calming influence when things get hectic at the center.

“Not that we have any problems, but she’s just the calm,” Canova said. “Sometimes things get a little crazy. She kind of keeps us all in check.”

Kathy Combass, the Andrews Center’s student development specialist, described Carroll as the “peacekeeper.”

“Out of all of us, Shelley is the one who has the sweetest personality,” Combass said.

As she prepares for retirement, Carroll said she looks to get more reading done as well as do more gardening. She said she plans to try her hand at making candles and looks forward to doing a little more traveling with her husband. Carroll said she and her husband have friends in Virginia, so they’ll probably travel there. Plus, Carroll said she’ll probably return to New England, where her brother and sister live.

She also wants to get out and explore more of this state.

“Just explore Florida — little, off-the-beaten-path places,” Carroll said. “I love the beach, so maybe spend a little more time at the beach.”

Carroll has two grandchildren, so her retirement plans also include making more time for them.

Thinking about what she’s going to miss most about not working, Carroll said it would be not being in the loop in regard to the happenings in Starke and Bradford County and, of course, not being around the people at the Andrews Center.

“What I’ll miss most, really, I think, is just the interaction with the employees and the students,” she said.

They’ll miss her, too.

“We love Shelley. We don’t want her to go, but we want the best for her,” Combass said, before adding, with a smile, “which I think is staying.”

“She’s family,” Canova said. “I think we all feel like family.”