

Dee Oldham



Dee Oldham may not be very tall, but her small stature belies a fierce energy.

Perhaps it's because her childhood mobility was limited by rheumatic fever. Or it might have been the challenge of caring for a disabled child early in her marriage, or maybe keeping up with four rambunctious sons as her husband's job took the family from one new home to the next.

Whatever the reason, one constant defines Dee Oldham's life: staying busy.

Dee was the second of three daughters born to Gilbert and Lucille Jackson, southeast Missouri natives who moved to Texas in the 1920s. Dee's given name was Eula Lee—a tongue-twister for her younger sister, who could only manage to say "Dee." But, the new name stuck.

At the outset of the Depression, Dee's father found work back home in Missouri. It was there that Dee contracted rheumatic fever. As she recovered, the family hired someone to carry her to school, where she began what would become a lifelong passion for learning.

Dee lived at home while studying home economics at Southeast Missouri State University. Applying her friendly, yet assertive nature, Dee frequently demonstrated skills she was still mastering herself. It was at a baking presentation that Dee met Will Oldham, an engineering student. Will stayed afterward to help clean up, and a romance blossomed.

While Will finished school, Dee worked as an extension agent, giving home and family care classes to area farm wives. On the advice of her mother, Dee wore a hat to appear older and taller. Dee and Will married in 1950. He joined the Coast Guard, and Dee found herself back in Texas as the wife of an officer. A year later, she gave birth to their first child, Herbie.

Diagnosed with Down's Syndrome, Herbie struggled with health issues, and lived only nine years. When the Korean War ended, Will took a job designing nuclear power plants, then worked for the Army developing helicopter maintenance procedures. His career required frequent relocations, which became more challenging as the family grew to include sons Tom, Jim, Willy, and Steve. Dee estimates the family moved 25 times, which added packing to her range of "expert" skills.

Will's assignment to the Pentagon in the late 1960s ended the family's gypsy ways. Dee and Will would call the Washington, DC, suburb of Arlington, Va. home for the next 40 years.

To combat restlessness as her sons got older, Dee started a fabric store where she sold material and taught sewing, another skill that she picked up on the fly. Dee later added craft supplies to her offerings. As usual, she did her best to become an "expert," taking up beading, macramé, and painting. The family joked that Dee was competing with her younger sister Jane, an art teacher back in Missouri, to be the "artsiest."

When Will took early retirement in the mid-1980s, Dee was ready to try something different and, in the process, fill her husband's newfound free time. They took classes in massage therapy, with the idea of offering professional services from their home. Home-based businesses were rare at the time, and the county was reluctant to issue a business license. Never one to take "no" for an answer, Dee pressed her case before the county regulators.

To the surprise of no one, she succeeded. Dee also learned about various alternative health treatments, including kinesiology, the study of movement. She helped start an organization that eventually became the International Association of Specialized Kinesiologists (IASK). Dee also eagerly embraced online resources to learn about aroma therapy and essential oils, skills that made her a valuable resource for pain patients who were having little success with conventional treatments.

Will and Dee also enjoyed singing. They joined the "Mosaic Harmony" gospel choir, and performed locally, as well as overseas. Here, they are dressed for a 2006 performance.

By 2010, Will's gradually worsening heart and cognitive issues led the couple to move to Florida. Will passed away the following year, and Dee coped as she always had—learning and teaching, even though she was now in her early 80s.

Dee's passion for activity also sustained her through the deaths of her sisters. But by 2015, Dee had developed cognitive issues of her own.

But though Dee now requires some extra help to get by day-to-day, she bristles at the thought of having to slow down. Dee will gladly share some of the rich trove of knowledge and experience she's acquired over the years. All you have to do is ask!