

by Vickie S. Kirby

Just the name Anna Laura

has a melodic and uplifting lilt.

In the nearly 15 years Anna Laura Page

has been first lady of Austin College,

many have enjoyed the song

she brings to every day.



Editor's Note: As President Oscar C. Page's announced retirement from Austin College in June 2009 draws nearer, the College community begins the process of saying farewell to Dr. Page — and to his wife, who has been very much a part of campus life. Having met the Pages in February 1994 immediately after the Board of Trustees officially elected Page as president, I've had many opportunities to interact with Anna Laura and offer here a glimpse into the daily life of our first lady.

Those walking on the Austin College campus any afternoon might see Anna Laura Page walking her dog in front of their home just across the street. If they wave her down they will be greeted with her ready smile and a bit of southern charm. She offers no pretense or putting-on of airs; few would guess they were speaking to the wife of a college president. The encounter with her will be genuine, but perhaps brief; she's a busy woman, both in her role as first lady of Austin College and as a sought-after composer, director, and performer of sacred organ, hand bell, piano, and choral music.

Anna Laura's career branches in many directions. She leads hand bell festivals all over the country. She composes music and lyrics or special arrangements for hand bell, organ, and piano. She co-wrote "Creation Will Be at Peace," which has been performed at events ranging from dedication of a Holocaust museum in Arizona to a service at megachurch Coral Ridge Presbyterian in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In addition to these projects, she was hand bell editor for Alfred Publishing Company for 11 years. She writes Easter and Christmas musicals and a variety of special commissions, including pieces for the 50th anniversary of Wynne Chapel, in memory of a child who died in an airplane crash, and in celebration of the dedication of a new church sanctuary.

Many visitors to the Page home have enjoyed Anna Laura's seemingly effortless performance of beautiful piano pieces, ranging from Christmas carols to Broadway tunes to classical compositions. When film director Peter Bogdanovich visited campus and the Page home, Anna Laura played piano and Bogdanovich sang — with Bogdanovich calling out whatever song next came to mind — and Anna Laura never missed a note.

Opportunities to meet many of the people who visit Austin College are among the experiences she holds dear. "All the people have been wonderful. I've enjoyed them and having the chance to see their more personal side," Anna Laura said.

Though she has visited with Barbara Bush and had tea with Henry Winkler, Anna Laura is as gracious to every member of the Austin College community as to "celebrities." "The people in Sherman and in Texas in general are wide open and friendly," she said. "That has been wonderful. People here just accept you."

And Anna Laura has "loved, loved, loved!" living across the street from the College. "I love to see the students, watch the activities, and hear the chimes. I so enjoy seeing the students and faculty work together and then keep up with each other through

their lives. I don't even know where my college roommates are. It has fascinated me how the Austin College community is so connected. And, the trustees have been so wonderful to us. It's an amazing place."

Oscar and Anna Laura's move to Sherman was the first without at least one of their two children, Kristen and Matt. In 1994 when the Pages arrived at Austin College, Matt had completed a degree at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee and was working; Kristen was beginning doctorate work at Purdue University. Matt was married only six months after the Pages arrived in Texas. A few years later, Matt and his wife, Amy, moved to McKinney, Texas, and in 1999, their daughter Cailin — the first Page grandchild — was born. Kristen since has married and she and her husband, Rick, now are expecting their first child. And, in the continuing circle of life, Anna Laura's dear mother, Beulah Cook, known to many at Austin College, died this July at 97 years of age. She had lived with Oscar and Anna Laura the past seven years, since becoming ill during a visit from her Kentucky home. During those years, caring for her mother took some of Anna Laura's time as well, but it was time she gladly gave. "It was wonderful to have that time with her. I left home at 18, married a 'vagabond,' and never got to know her that well. It was fun having her here, but hard watching her suffer through health issues. She had always been so healthy."

As President Page's announced retirement draws nearer, Anna Laura thinks back to her beginnings as a young girl from Kentucky and reflects on all that has come her way since then. "I don't feel a bit different than I did back then," she said. "Oscar and I have never forgotten our roots — first-generation college graduates who got there because our parents worked hard to make that happen. We were blessed — a lot of people don't have that opportunity. I think we all are blessed, and some have more blessings than others, but that doesn't make us any more special."

The Pages have lived in Sherman longer than any other place in their married lives. "This is where we've made friends and really feel at home," she said. Sherman will remain home. They have purchased a house here and look forward to a little slower pace in which to enjoy their lives. Though Anna Laura said they will "stay out of sight and give the new president an opportunity to fly," the College community hopefully has not seen the last of this beloved president or his amazing first lady. Here's to meeting Anna Laura on the sidewalk for a quick update on life and a dose of the charm — the music — that is all her own. 🐾

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Anna Laura Page Photos: The Austin College Years