

Ethel Cleere, her daughter Betty Peacock, granddaughter Carita New, and great-granddaughter Amber Peacock in a family photo from 1996.

Betty Peacock and Carita New last summer in Midland.

Working for HHSC in Odessa: A Three-Generation Tradition for One Family

By Margaret Nicklas

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For Betty Peacock, working for the state's health and human services programs is a family affair.

A program manager for Texas Works in the Midland Customer Care Center since 2007, Peacock has logged 32 years with the state. Several of these overlapped with the tenure of her mother, Ethel Cleere, a secretary with health and human services for 27 years. Cleere worked mostly in Odessa, where Peacock was born and raised.

"Helping people appealed to me, but my mother always encouraged me to work for the state because they are a good employer," Peacock said.

That message carried forward. Peacock's daughter Carita New, now a quality assurance specialist, joined the ranks of the agency about six years ago.

"My grandma and my mom both always said that the people that they worked with were like their family," New said.

Cleere retired in 1989 and New recalled fondly how as a child she would sometimes go to work with her grandmother and help stamp documents. It was fun and everyone she met was happy with their jobs, she said. That later influenced her to seek work with the agency.

"I wanted to go into a job where I knew people were happy at it and I felt that I could do it, also," she said.

Unlike Cleere, who stuck with secretarial work and by all accounts loved it, Peacock did not find a perfect fit right away. She first went to work for the state in 1974, not long after graduating from high school. But the job with the Texas Rehabilitation Commission did not offer the advancement opportunities she wanted and she left to try other things.

By 1977, she was back with the state, this time working for the Department of Public Welfare - a precursor to HHSC. This job started Peacock on a path, which - with a few more stops and starts - became a long and rewarding career.

As a case worker back in the late 80s and early 90s, Peacock was not sure how much further she could advance.

“I probably thought that I was going to be a case worker forever,” Peacock said.

“I didn’t expect that I would manage people instead of the case loads. But I find it has its own rewards. And I still have client contact. I get to satisfy that as well as encouraging my people to take care of their clients, their customers,” she added.

Cleere, a native Texan and daughter of the Republic of Texas, passed away in 2006. When she got her start with the state back in 1946 as a secretary she worked for what was then called the Commodities Program, Peacock said.

“It was before the food stamp program. They would give out ... cheese and bread and just some flour – basic necessities to help families eat back then,” she explained.

Cleere took time out to have children but came back in the 60s and worked for several other programs, including Children’s Protective Services, Aged and Disabilities, and Income Assistance.

Peacock, like her mother before her, saw programs reorganized and names changed. But the huge increase in the scope of work the agency does is what stands out most.

“I can remember back when I was clerk first with the agency in Income Assistance. I had the whole county’s case load in filing cabinets in my little office – five or six filing cabinets. By the time we went to electronic, it would have probably taken 40 or 50 five-drawer filing cabinets to cover all those cases. So, just the amount of people that we serve is almost mind-boggling, sometimes,” Peacock said.

Despite the changes over the years, one thing remains constant, she added. “The underlying philosophy that we are serving Texans that need us has always been the same.”

Cleere was an excellent employee according to her daughter, and set a certain standard within the agency for those who came after.

“I had to deal with my mother’s reputation,” Peacock said.

And there were a few awkward moments, she recalled, when she and her mom worked in the same building.

“We had overhead speakers in the office. She would get on the overhead sometimes, you know, and just (announce) ‘Whoever took my stapler needs to bring it back!’ And I would kind of crawl under my desk,” Peacock said, laughing.

Now, Peacock’s daughter has two reputations to contend with.

“When she came to work for the agency, I told her, ‘you have to be better than everybody because you are related to me and your grandma!’ It does put a little bit of pressure on, you know!” Peacock explained.

But no one seems to be complaining.

“I really do love my job,” said New, who was promoted to a quality assurance specialist in 2012 after spending five years as a Texas work advisor. New said she originally decided to apply for work with the state after working in a call center for a contractor because she felt HHSC would offer more stability. After years spent working in a variety of low paying jobs, caring for her own small children, and then her ailing grandmother, New said she was ready for a “lifelong job” which would offer better pay and opportunities for advancement. Her decision paid off.

“My mom tells me all the time that I’ve done in five years what it took her 15 to do,” New said with a laugh.

Peacock, like her daughter, had tried other things before settling into her career with the state. But Peacock always preferred working for the state, she said, and encouraged her daughter to join the state, partly because the organization is so understanding about families. Employees are allowed time off to care for a sick child or family member, which was important to her, and something she did not find in private industry. Moreover, she added, “This is the type of work that I love. I wouldn’t still be coming back to it if it wasn’t something I really had a heart for,” she said.

So far, New’s 22-year-old daughter has no plans to follow in the family tradition, New said. With her current job in the local oil fields, New’s daughter wears a hard hat all day and steel-toed boots.

“She’s always been a tom boy. She likes to be outside,” her mom explained.

But that does not completely leave out the possibility of public or even state service. According to Peacock, her granddaughter has been thinking lately about a job with law enforcement.