

The Legacy of Mama Sandi

In the summer of 1965 Upward Bound was launched as a result of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty". The primary goal of this program was to generate the skills and motivation necessary to complete and succeed in high school and post-secondary education. Thirty years later this program was offered to first generation and low income students at Central High School in Morgan County, Tennessee.

Sandra Harris (or Sandi as she prefers to be called) was teaching 3rd grade at Central Elementary at the time. Unfortunately, her position was about to be cut due to the school census but the Superintendent had a plan. He recommended that she apply for the new Upward Bound position that was opening up at the high school until another teaching position became available. Sandi officially began working for Douglas Cherokee Upward Bound on September 10, 1998 and she never looked back. It was a perfect alliance of fate, destiny and circumstance that lasted twenty-two years.

On December 31st Sandi will walk out of her Upward Bound office for the last time as she heads into a well-earned retirement. We wanted to take some time this month to celebrate this amazing woman's achievements. So to begin this tribute piece we asked Sandi to share a few life stories, memories and lessons.

Q: What did you want to be when you were a child?

SH: I adored my father so I wanted to be a business manager like him.

Q: Who has influenced you most when it comes to how you approach your work?

SH: My parents. Dad and Mom were great Christian people and it shined throughout their daily lives.

Q: What are you passionate about outside of work?

SH: My grandchildren! I kinda, sorta spoil them every chance I get. Okay...I spoil them all the time!!!

Q: What's one thing most people don't know about you?

SH: I'm not really sure. Maybe people don't know that I'm an animal lover. I particularly love dogs and horses.

Q: What have you like most about working with Upward Bound?

SH: *I love the UB students and my coworkers! We have awesome advantage over the teacher's because we actually have the opportunity to work with the students throughout their entire high school years not just one or two semesters. It's great!*

Q: *You've taken many trips with this program. What was your favorite trip?*

SH: *My most favorite trip is always Boston. I love, love, love the city's history. Second favorite trip is Philadelphia. I enjoyed seeing the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall.*

Q: *What do you know now that you wish you would have known years before?*

SH: *To stop worrying so much. Especially stop worrying about things that I can't control. (I still work on this one.)*

Q: *What's the best advice you were ever given?*

SH: *My mom told me "To have friends, you have to be a friend first. But always remember you can't please everyone all the time."*

Q: *What will you miss most about Upward Bound?*

SH: *My students and coworkers!!!*

In twenty-two years Sandi has had a front row seat to many changes throughout the program. She has sat under five different grants and four different directors. David Alvis, the current TRIO Director, began working with Sandi when he took the Upward Bound Adviser position in Hawkins County, Tennessee thirteen years ago. We asked him to share a few memories and moments from their decade long journey together.

Q: *What is a favorite memory you have of working with Sandi?*

DA: *Riding across the tree tops on swings at Bush Gardens Williamsburg.*

Q: *What is one lesson that Sandi taught you that will always stay with you?*

DA: *To always make copies of all forms, as the Director usually loses them. LOL*

Q: *What will you miss most about her?*

DA: *I will miss her laughter.*

Q: *What do you think Sandi's legacy is?*

DA: *Sandi is 100% committed to her job and the students she serves. She balances the line of being a great friend and mentor to her students and coworkers while at the same time ensuring policies are followed and program objectives are met. Her students know she means business.*

Even though she is often compared to the wise owl who gives great life advice, the one thing Sandi loves to do the most is laugh, celebrate and have fun with her coworkers. Whether it's asking for every little detail about their upcoming wedding, showing her competitive spirit at the staff holiday parties, or just simply having her giggle box turned over by a funny story that is being shared, she instantly makes the team a family. Over the past two decades there has been various ebbs and flows of staff changes but Sandi remained as a steady constant. Many of the full-time staff moved on and took different jobs. As each year goes by, remembering those Upward Bound days may have become a little hazy but what has eternally left a mark on their lives is Sandi's smile and laughter. We reached out to one of her former coworkers, Phil Blevins, to speak about his time with Sandi.

Q: How long did you work with Sandi?

PB: *I would guess 8-10 years.*

Q: What is a memory you have working with her?

PB: *My memory has forsaken me. There are many wonderful and funny stories. We were always playing pranks and jokes on Sandi and doing crazy things. A memory that is not lost is that Sandi is one of the kindest souls I know. I will always remember that smile of hers.*

Q: Have you learned any lessons from Sandi?

PB: *Not sure I learned this from her but something that I took from her is the way she looked at the upside of things. She was almost always positive and had more patience than anyone I know. Sandi is simply the best. The number of student lives that she has changed and impacted in a positive manner is more than any of us can even imagine. She will be missed by students and everyone around her.*

Sandi has had the opportunity to watch many students work their way up the Upward Bound ladder. She has witnessed many become facilitators and peer mentors while some have even become full-time staff. This growth is exactly what Sandi experienced with Amy Brown over these past twenty-two years.

Q: How long have you worked with Sandi?

AB: *I have worked with her for fourteen years as a full-time staff member but I have known her the entire time she has worked here. She was an adviser when I was a student and I worked with her when I was a facilitator in college.*

Q: What is a favorite memory you have of working with her?

AB: Sandi and I have memories going back to the late 90's so picking just one is almost impossible. I can share one where she surprised me. On our first trip to New York, I did not want to explore too much away from anyone. Sandi, on the other hand, had no qualms about buying purses from store backrooms. I remember being almost shocked that she would so willingly and without fear do that. The more I think about it though, I should not have been because she does love getting purses for herself and her family.

Q: What is one lesson that Sandi taught you that will always stay with you?

AB: The way she cares so deeply about her students. She is there for their joys, trials, and tribulations. She celebrates with them for all the good moments, listens and guides them when they are trying to figure out what their next move is, and empathizes with them when things are hard. It is one of the most important parts of our job and does it so well and naturally.

Q: What will you miss most about her?

AB: I have enjoyed being mentored by her. I would not be the person I am today professionally and personally without her. I will also miss how we would reminisce about old Upward Bound days that only we can remember. I am so thankful that we live near each other and can continue to remain friends and visit with each other.

Q: What do you personally think Sandi's legacy is?

AB: She is Mama Sandi. She has helped so many students just by being herself. She has a way of really listening to someone and trying to put herself in their place. She is calm, steady and gives students a friendly smile and words of encouragement. I am so thankful to have had her as my friend and mentor.

As hundreds of students have circulated through the program, many began echoing Amy's sentiments and the nickname "Mama Sandi" gained traction. She is nurturing, loving, patient and she always listens. When it is called for however, she can also be stern and lay down the law. She has watched many students grow, go to college, begin their careers and start their own little families. We reached out to a few former students who wanted to share some words of celebration for Sandi's milestone.

"I mean what other than nice things can you say about Mama Sandi! She has given her life to better high school student not only in Morgan County but all the other counties covered by Upward Bound. She was always willing to help and listen. I hope she gets to enjoy retirement! I want to thank her for the support and dedication she has given to me and others." - David Brown

"So I've thought back on my many years with Upward Bound and Sandi. Yes, the two go hand in hand for me. She was and will always be looked at as a bonus mom for me. She was there for me when I started in 8th grade and helped me navigate through high school.

She is a support system all on her own for many children. She was always the first person, besides my parents, in whom I shared my successes with because I wanted to make her proud and hear her excited laugh. Upward Bound will not be the same without her, but I am hopeful her influence will carry on to the next generation."

-Rose Young Lawson

*"If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have been able to go to college. She helped me with every application I put in, my FAFSA and stayed on my tail about everything. She is one of the main reasons I started college and she has been a great blessing and inspiration in my life. If Ms. Sandi hadn't talked me into joining I wouldn't be where I am today. She is one of the greatest people I have ever met." - **Jared Hancock***

The legacy that Sandi leaves behind is very evident. It's the countless lives changed, the hugs, the laughter, the tears, the joy, and yes the smile that will forever be a part of Upward Bound. When we asked everyone interviewed what they wished for her in her well-earned retirement, the answer was always the same. They wish nothing but health, relaxation, to continue to spoil those grand-babies, and to have many fun adventures.

*"Sandi, I just want to say thank you so much for welcoming me to the Upward Bound family with open arms last year! You have truly been a blessing to get to know and I hope you enjoy every second of your retirement. I know we will all miss you, but wish you the best." - **Brandy Greene, Grainger County Education Specialist***

"Sandi, my goal after graduating college was to find a job where I would be able to settle in. When I started Upward Bound I immediately took note of how long you had been here. I thought it was amazing and on top of that you looked so happy to be working here. I think you have an incredible work ethic and you have been everything I'm trying to be as

Scott County's Education Specialist. I'm glad I got to meet you while I was a student and even more grateful I have had the honor of working with someone as driven as you. Good luck in retirement and please take that trip to Disney when it's safe!"

- Summer Botts Wilkins, Scott County Education Specialist

We just want to thank Sandi for being such a great mentor, counselor, friend, and mother figure to so many throughout these past twenty-two years. We think that it is only fitting that we give Mama Sandi the last word. When asked if she had any advice she would like to pass on, here is what she had to say:

"Don't give up on your dreams. When college or life becomes challenging, remember that you are strong and can overcome any obstacle thrown your way!!! I believe in you, now and forever."- **Mama Sandi**