

# Virginia Grimes, "God gave me the opportunity to be happy"

When Virginia Grimes first came west to Martin, the Knoxville native cried for a year and a half. She and husband of two years, Bud, had just built their first home in east Tennessee. She was working at Pellissippi State Community College where they met. And, within a week of Bud's accepting a new role in communications at his alma mater, the University of Tennessee at Martin, she discovered she was pregnant.

A rented house in a small college town with no friends and a pending birth produced the watershed moment for the young woman who had learned early on that life was not easy. Her family was poor. Her father died when she was 12. Her mother, after an illness that cast Virginia as caregiver and high school student, passed away when Virginia was 21.

She was accustomed to hard work and knew exactly what it meant to be "responsible." But to face all the newness after having only just acquired the things she had longed for? Well, cue the tears.

Virginia smiles as she relays the story now. Because, after more than 30 years, raising two children, establishing lifelong friendships at Martin's First Methodist Church,



and helping to shape one of Tennessee's premiere leadership programs, she says she can't imagine living anywhere else.

As each WestStar class focuses on leadership and travels across the state for hands-on learning opportunities, Virginia is by their side

**"I wouldn't go back to the big city. This is home."**

— overseeing logistics from nametags to registration packets, lining up speakers, ensuring that transportation, food and lodging is covered. She's seen four administrators assume the head role of the program as she remains the constant. She's content with her fulltime, nonexempt status because she loves the flexibility and, she says, "the more I worked, the more I fell in love with

leadership."

Like a mother speaking of her children, she brags on the many class projects that have turned into ongoing components helping WestStar achieve its mission to identify, encourage and equip community-minded people. She says she has never been about a title, and in fact, initially only wanted a job rather than a career.

She spent more than a decade actively involved in the youth program at her church and saw her own children, Ashley and Wesley, grow into young adults now living and studying in Nashville. Having known so much sorrow in her own early years, she says that after meeting Bud, "God gave me the opportunity to be happy."

With 30 events a year to coordinate, the self-described one-time helicopter mom, now hovers happily over groups of leaders from business and education, of varying ages, and diverse backgrounds. And, with no tears in sight, easily attests that she would not trade her life for anyone else's, "I'm happy. I'm learning constantly. I love what I do."

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-- to be focused on, to be cared about. That's what we want. But in the midst of all that, we forget to do it.

"Andy might say I look nice, but I don't say it back

**"... more than anything girls feel like they are important. They don't sit back. They go for what they want."**

to him. I do it to people at school, so I'm trying to be better with that."

She's also trying to remember a lesson she discovered when going through cancer treatments. She kept every note or card sent her way. She still recalls the texts sent that included photos of the school clothed in pink on the day of her surgery and a later "pink out" at a ballgame. But when it came to people doing for her in the same way that she tries to take a meal to someone who is sick or in need, well, that was something this can-do woman wasn't always that good at doing.

Until, that is, she was asked during her own illness what she was holding onto. Since the question came from a survivor, she took it seriously and eventually responded. "I can't stand for people doing stuff for me, for them to trouble themselves."

She says the woman's response was something she hasn't forgotten, "Sherry, you are taking away their joy."

So now?

"I'm trying to do better about that," she concludes.

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