

Walter Lee Sharpe – Servant Leader

Walter “Lee” Sharpe, owner/publisher of *The Taylorsville Times* in Alexander County, is a servant leader. For the past 70 years, Lee has gone about providing empathy, encouragement, and leadership to the continued improvement of Alexander County. He has little interest in self-promotion but prefers to deflect his leadership impact to the work of others in numerous areas such as his business, his church, his community, and Alexander County.

So many people do things because it feels good or because of what others might say. Lee constantly gave his time to community service for the good of all those in his sphere of influence. He lives a mantra that an individual does little by himself, but in concert with others, opportunities are then magnified and endless.

Family has always been important for Lee as he speaks lovingly of his recently-deceased wife, and sons, and the servant heritage that was taught to him by his parents, Conway and Irene Sharpe. At an early age, they helped develop his work ethic and service to community through their ownership and support of the county through *The Taylorsville Times*. Lee began part-time work at *The Taylorsville Times* at the age of 10 as a floor sweeper and errand boy.

Without exaggeration, Lee has written thousands of articles and columns in support and recognition of individuals, recreation groups, civic clubs, churches, and community development groups. He has also served on dozens of county and community improvement projects in education, health, recreation, churches, economic development, Chamber of Commerce, chronicling county history, civic clubs, county improvement initiatives, Red Cross, county sesquicentennial celebration, and so on.

Background

Lee was born on April 9, 1942, to Conway and Irene Hendren Sharpe. A graduate of Hiddenite High School and Lenoir-Rhyne College, he married the former Jane Fox in 1964. Jane was a servant leader in her own right as she supported Lee in his endeavors. Lee would agree that his successes were made possible through the many sacrifices by Jane.

Two sons, Wesley and John, were born to Lee and Jane. Two grandchildren, Evan and Taylor, lighten and enrich Lee’s life.

Lee had just turned 22 and graduated from Lenoir-Rhyne when he became managing editor of *The Taylorsville Times*. Today, he serves as owner and publisher of the local newspaper. Just six months ago, Lee lost his beloved wife Jane due to complications from a fall.

Operation of County Newspaper

The Taylorsville Times provided historical supplements on anniversaries of the county. The issues included the sesquicentennial edition, the 150-page 1976 bicentennial edition highlighting Alexander County and its people, and most recently the 100-year anniversary of the publication of *The Taylorsville Times*. Lee initiated the launch of *The Bethlehem Star* newspaper, a monthly publication in the fastest growing section of the community.

To keep up with changing needs, he worked to modernize the printing and publication of *The Times* including the advent of linotype, computers, computer-to-film, and now computer-to-printing plate. This modernization assisted the paper with sharing the successes of individual communities, clubs, churches, and individuals. Printing services to local businesses, schools, and individuals included special inserts for the Hiddenite Celebration of Arts, Taylorsville Apple Festival, Alexander County Schools Report to People, etc.

During Lee’s tenure, *The Taylorsville Times* was named a National Blue Ribbon Newspaper by the National Newspaper Association.

School Operation and Improvement

Lee understood the importance of providing strong school facilities and programs as he served on numerous education committees. In 1966, Lee was active on an education committee that encouraged the

Division of School Planning Study to build a completely new consolidated high school on a new site. He was active in the bond referendum to pay for a new school and on the site selection for the school location.

In the 1970s, Lee played a key leadership role for school facility improvement. He again was instrumental in the passage of a bond in 1980 with funds used to replace schools in disrepair. His leadership provided the impetus for plans to replace facilities built in the 1920s and 1930s at the end of the 20th century and even continues improvements today including new schools and a county auditorium.

He also served on the Catawba Valley Community College Alexander Center Advisory Board. His sons' schools reaped the benefits of his guidance as he served as president and other offices in school PTAs.

Church

As a lifetime member of Hiddenite United Methodist Church, Lee served as a lay leader, Sunday school teacher, council chairperson, finance chair, and other positions. A quote from a fellow church member said it best -- "Lee goes quietly about a task, and no one knows he does it. He doesn't ask for fanfare."

Civic Clubs, Chamber of Commerce, and Recreation

Leadership positions in the Taylorsville Jaycees included president, vice president, and state director. He received special awards including the Distinguished Service Award and Spark Plug of the Year. During his leadership, the Taylorsville Jaycees provided direction for the development of community projects such as Jaycee Park.

The Alexander County Chamber of Commerce received the benefit of 25 years of service as Lee collaborated with other community-minded persons. He served as retail chairperson, secretary, director, vice-president, and president. In 1984, he received the Alexander County Citizen of the Year Award.

His involvement in recreation included coaching league sports in t-ball, baseball, basketball, and football for his son's teams. He served as president of the Taylorsville Recreation Association and a leader of the Alexander County Recreation Commission. Special assistance was provided for the development of East Alexander Park and Bethlehem Park. He also helped promote a plan to pay off a large debt for Bethlehem Park. He advocated for additional open space for recreation as new schools were built.

The Sesquicentennial Celebration in Alexander County, the Alexander County Christmas Parade, and the Miss Alexander County Pageant were also developed with his leadership.

Health Care and Hospital

Appropriate health care was important to Lee as he chaired the Alexander County Citizens for Expanded Health Care, served as president of the non-profit Alexander Cares, and served 14 years on the Alexander County Hospital Board of Directors. Lee understood the importance of recruiting doctors to Alexander County, Red Cross Blood Drives, and health clinics. Lee worked diligently in the last half of the 20th century to develop the Alexander County Hospital through a county-wide initiative. Unfortunately, the hospital did not survive during the 21st century because of financial issues despite his diligent efforts.

State and Regional Committees/Awards

Lee expanded his influence in areas such as the NC 2000 Committee in Alexander County, North Carolina's 400th anniversary committee, and as a finance volunteer for the Piedmont Council Boy Scouts.

Lee received the North Carolina Governor's Award for Outstanding Volunteer Service and was selected as one of the 1970 Outstanding Young Men of America.

County History

The history of Alexander County was chronicled through thousands of *Times* articles published on the topic personally and through encouragement of writings by amateur historians. In 2006, Lee coordinated the 128-page book entitled *A Pictorial History of Alexander County*, which was produced by *The Taylorsville Times*. The

newspaper received the NC Press Association's first-place award for Full Color Retail in the community newspaper division.

Other awards included the Barrier Award of Excellence from the North Carolina Society of Historians for the Golden Anniversary edition of the Hiddenite High School. As president of the Alex History Group, LLC, the book, *Alexander County Treasures: A History of Remarkable People and Precious Gems*, was published in 2012. The 368-page history book on Alexander County received the 2013 Willie Parker Peace History Book Award from the North Carolina Society of Historians.

Summary

Lee Sharpe is one of those special people who understands that community improvement comes by the efforts of people. He emulates many of the characteristics learned from his parents that individuals have a God-given intelligence and should use it wisely. Lee exhibits a quiet, gentle manner, which shows his love of family, God, and community. He believes that God has blessed him during life's journey. He deflects personal recognitions, preferring to tell how people have been gracious in sharing their love, knowledge, and time. A few special people show up in our lives who bring about change through empathy, encouragement, and service leadership in our communities. Alexander County is a better place because of our friend, Lee Sharpe.