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## Denise Knighton Retires After Almost 40 Years

UM associate registrar leaves legacy of dedication

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022 BY CLARA TURNAGE

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Denise Knighton (second from right) is joined by (from left) her son, Jonathan Knighton; daughter, Nikki Williams; and husband, Johnny Knighton, at a retirement reception on campus earlier this week. Knighton, a longtime employee in the admissions and registrar's offices, retires from the university Sept. 30. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – Denise Knighton is leaving the **University of Mississippi** nearly 40 years behind schedule.

In 1980, Knighton moved with her sister, Sandra Alexander, to Oxford. Her intention was just to finish up her bachelor's degree before moving back to south Mississippi, Knighton said.

"That's how we got here, and I never left," she said from her office in Martindale. "I was going to stay long enough for her to graduate, but that wasn't in God's plan."

After 39 years working for the university, Knighton is retiring Friday (Sept. 30) as a longtime associate registrar. Friends and longtime colleagues say Knighton's career at the university has been marked by passion for the campus and dedication to its students.

"There is almost no more important role than registrar, and Denise has performed her duties with grace and humility, never seeking recognition," said Carmen Riggan, assistant to the dean of the **College of Liberal Arts** and longtime colleague of Knighton.

When Alexander was recruited to play basketball for the Rebels, Knighton said she thought she might as well go, too. She could finish up her degree in education before moving back to Enterprise, where she grew up.

But she graduated before her sister, and Knighton said she didn't want to leave Alexander behind. So, she applied for a job at the university's Office of Admissions and Records, which would later be split into the **Office of Admissions** and the **Office of the Registrar**, where she would spend the better part of the next 40 years.

"I think it's the opportunity to help students," Knighton said when asked what kept her in the registrar's office. "We're also able to help students and advise them. I love that part of it."

Knighton said she quickly made friends in the office and developed close relationships with those



Denise Knighton is retiring as associate registrar after nearly four decades of service. Photo by Thomas Graning/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

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around her. When Alexander graduated and it was time to go, Knighton said she realized she wanted to stay.

"I really think after I worked with the university for a year or two, I decided that's what I wanted to do," she said. "We became friends, and I made the decision to stay a little bit longer."



Denise Knighton (left) met her husband, Johnny, on a blind date arranged by a coworker. Submitted photo

One of those friends convinced her to go on a blind date, where she met Johnny Knighton, the man who would become her husband. The couple married in 1985 and raised two children, Johnathan and Nikki, in a home not far from campus.

The children grew up going to all sorts of Ole Miss sporting events, and no one wears colors from the university's opposing teams, she said.

"Everybody teases me about that," Knighton said with a laugh. "We don't wear the color maroon."

Nikki would eventually graduate from the university with the same education degree as her mother, and Knighton is the proud grandmother of two granddaughters and, in not too many months, a third grandchild. They live in Kentucky, where Knighton said she will be making frequent trips.

"That's what I plan on doing after retirement – traveling to Kentucky a lot," she said.

In 1994, Knighton met Charlotte Pegues, who was since named the university's vice chancellor for student affairs. At the time, Pegues was newly hired in the admissions and records office, and Knighton was an analyst in the information technology department.

"We just jived," Pegues said. "We worked well together, and I think we complemented each other's skill set."

When Pegues was promoted to registrar in 1997, she invited Knighton to come back to the office as an assistant registrar for technology support. Knighton's computer expertise made her invaluable when the office went from physical to digital records, but her personality made the office fun, Pegues said.

"She likes to have fun, likes to laugh," Pegues said, recalling tales of fake spiders and mice. "But she's very serious about work when it's time to work. She doesn't play around when we have work to do."

Pegues said the office will lose a huge source of institutional knowledge when Knighton retires.

"She is the go-to for so many different processes and functions," Pegues said. "And also, she was so easy to get along with. I'm going to miss having her around and talking to her regularly."

Knighton has always been available to help someone in need, be it student or another staff member, regardless of how busy she was, Riggan said.

"She is one of the most selfless people I have ever met and it's been a pleasure of mine to see how this shines through in her work with students and colleagues," Riggan said. "I'll miss her insight, patience, kindness and resourcefulness."

"She is always great at solving problems, but she is also just a lot of fun to talk to."

As Knighton spoke earlier this week, the office that had gathered so many signs of decades of service looked peculiarly empty. A couple of keepsakes and picture frames sat in boxes, and the walls were strangely empty.

"I loved it here," she said, voice catching as she spoke. "This is a great office to work for. The university as a whole is a great place to work."



The staff of the Office of the Registrar gather to wish Denise Knighton well on her retirement. Submitted photo

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