



## “Blondie”

In the fall of 2015, I was preparing for a Saturday afternoon Habitat work shift. I knew that I was going to be the lone supervisor for a group of about twelve graduate students from the College of Forestry at Mississippi State University. The work at hand that afternoon entailed using two or three small groups of three to five volunteers each to work at separate locations around the jobsite. I was a bit concerned as to how I was going to manage these without any of our volunteer supervisors on hand. I figured on a slow start as I trained each group while the others looked on waiting for instructions.

The volunteers, along with their professor, arrived a little before the one o'clock start time. I was chatting with them as they were signing in while still thinking about where to start. As this was happening, I noticed a car park just down the street. Out stepped Blondie and began walking towards the jobsite. I then knew how to split the crews and arrange the work for the afternoon; Blondie was here. I now had an unexpected supervisor on hand. You see, Blondie never signed up for work shifts. She just appeared whenever she felt like working.

As the volunteer coordinator for Habitat, I meet around five hundred MSU students during building two houses in a calendar year. Usually, about five of these stand out and become long-term friendships. Blondie is one of these.

Blondie stopped and stood off to the side of the group to whom I was speaking. I looked at her and said, “Do you know what is needed to outfit a shingle crew of five people?” She nodded and began gathering all the necessary tools and nails. As I was finishing my introductory talk with the volunteers, Blondie returned and stood patiently. I said, “I am going to give you five volunteers. I want you to teach them how to install siding. Start working on the south side of the house. You do all measuring and cutting while they do the nailing. I will handle the shingle crew.” She nodded and off she went with five volunteers in tow.



What I had just done was to put an eighteen-year-old female freshman, barely one month into her first year of living away from home, in charge of a construction project for which I was responsible. I did this with no reservations. This kid had earned my full confidence.

Blondie is from Houston, Texas. She arrived on campus for move-in day at the freshman dormitory which occurred about ten days before classes began. This gave freshmen time to orient themselves to a new environment and, through the Maroon Volunteer Center at MSU, be involved in community service projects. Habitat uses this week to begin framing what is known as the Maroon Edition House sponsored each fall by MSU. We worked six full days that week and Blondie was there every day.

One week is enough time to learn where tools are stored, how to stack lumber at the end of the day and how to navigate the tidal forces of the strange and quirky personalities one must endure at Starkville Habitat. This gave Blondie opportunities to demonstrate a mental acuity which presented as the talent of “see it done once; no need to show me a second time.”

As the build progressed that fall, when Blondie was present she was usually the person in charge of measuring and sizing lumber; she had become our resident sawyer. This facilitated matters greatly because the volunteer supervisor who normally wanted to do this job has the nickname “plus or minus.” Which, of course, yields wasted lumber and a whole lot of shouting.

In other words, Blondie had had enough time to demonstrate to me that she had skills with our tools, used them safely and was dependable. I trusted her. So, yes, I sent her to do a job managing five older volunteers.

I probably spent an hour with my shingling crew on the roof. When I was satisfied that they could carry on without me for a few minutes, I came down to visit with their professor. We were talking when Blondie walked around the corner of the house to cut another piece of siding. The professor, a female, nodded toward Blondie and said, “She’s your daughter, isn’t she?” I didn’t see that coming. I responded that she is just one of many student volunteers. “You



certainly had me fooled,” said the professor. “I’ve been watching you two and both of you have been acting exactly like father and daughter.”

As I thought about this it occurred to me that the only things, I had said to Blondie all afternoon were in the form of commands. It also occurred to me that she, in fact, had said absolutely nothing to me. There was just a nod of the head and then it was off to fulfill my instructions.

Blondie volunteered with us on a consistent basis until graduating in 2019. She has become an adjunct member of the Construction Crew and is now a legendary figure in the ever-growing canon of Construction Crew lore. I think the feeling among the old men is that Blondie has the status of an adopted little sister.

Honoring this legacy, in November 2021, the Construction Crew instituted its first award for volunteer excellence; *The Starkville Area Habitat Olivia Williams Construction Site Volunteer of the Year Award*; destined to be hereafter referred to as “The Olivia.”

So now you know Blondie’s name. Olivia’s presence and friendship has been, and will continue to be, a blessing to us who know her personally and to our organization for many years to come. Thanks, kid.