

Longtime parks employee moves into the top post

Employees City
By DAN WHITE
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The Beatles were still together and Neil Armstrong had yet to plant his boots on the moon when Dannettee Shoemaker started working for the city.

It was the Summer of Love, 1967, and she was pulling in \$1 an hour as a part-timer at the parks department.

On Tuesday, after a 35-year streak with the city (minus an 18-month interruption), she got to the top of the heap. City Manager Dick Wilson named her city parks director.

She's one of the longest ranking city employees, trumping even Wilson, who started in 1979.

A parks supervisor since 1974, Shoemaker took the lead when Laurel Elementary School was converted into the Loudon Nelson Community Center a quarter-century ago, and she led the way last year when the city opened its Teen Center. Severe budget cuts now imperil many of the programs she helped create. She said her latest goal is "survival."

The council slashed \$1 million from its general fund budget last month, forcing Shoemaker to lop 10 positions, though she isn't sure if there will be actual layoffs.

Her new job also means Shoemaker can look forward to a new round of people botching her first name, which looks like a typo, but it really does have that extra "e" hanging off of it.

And yet, it's pronounced "Dan-ette," not "Dan-uh-tee."

"It's just the way my parents spelled it," she said, laughing. "And it's been a problem ever since. Every document I've had to sign, including my marriage license, had to be redone because people couldn't believe that's how it was spelled."

Shoemaker is described as a serious and detail-oriented administrator, but she doesn't mind joking about herself. So many well-wishers have sent flowers to her office this week that she apologized "if it looks like a funeral parlor in here."

When a photographer came in to take her picture, she said she didn't mind posing for a shot, "but I'm not going to stand on my desk like Jim." She was referring to predecessor Jim Lang, who leapt on top of a desk top, with a golf club, for a final picture before leaving office.

She also jokes about the fact that she "tried to retire" when her child was born.



Dannettee Shoemaker is the new Parks and Rec director for the city of Santa Cruz.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Shoemaker, 51, has come a long way from picking up \$38 paychecks every two weeks. The finance department said she'll earn in the \$105,000- to \$120,000-a-year range.

The city even hired someone to take her place, "but the lady who replaced me took a job in Germany and they asked if I'd fill in in the meantime. I said yes. I've been here ever since."

Shoemaker, 51, has come a long way from picking up \$38 paychecks every two weeks. The finance department said she'll earn in the \$105,000- to \$120,000-a-year range.

Wilson said he was so impressed with her ability, practicality and long tenure that he took an unusual approach to the hire; instead of advertising the position, he just appointed her.

"This was easy," he said. "She's just done a splendid job."

She remembers when the parks department had just three employees. Now there are 130, and parks and recreation costs \$10 million a year, in part because it takes on so many responsibilities: overseeing 2,000 acres of open space, running the Civic Auditorium, cleaning beaches and downtown bathrooms, and running

recreation classes. Last year, parks drew praise from its employees, and startled some Santa Cruzans, when it installed so-called "Sharps" containers in 13 city-run public bathrooms for safe needle disposal.

The parks budget consumes a fifth of the city's general fund, which made parks a target during an attempt to roll back the city's \$8 million-a-year utility tax.

Shoemaker interpreted the voters' defeat of the rollback attempt, by a 75 percent margin, as a vote of confidence in parks and recreation and other city services.

The Fort Ord native's mother, father and sister still live in town. Her longevity extends to more than just her job. This past week she celebrated her 30th wedding anniversary with Bob Shoemaker, a swimming pool contractor who was her high school sweetheart.

Her son, Christopher, 27, lives in Capitola and teaches English at Harbor High School in Santa Cruz.

She said she's grateful she fell so quickly into a job that has lasted so long. But she expressed regret when she said she never had a chance to finish up her education at Cabrillo College because there wasn't any time.

"It just never happened."

Shoemaker's predecessor, Lang, who retired in the fall, called her a positive people-person who "always goes out of her way to make sure the right thing is done, and it rubs off on everyone who works with her."

He said she's done well as interim director since he stepped down.

Lang said she has the grounding to take on some tough issues.

While the city expects to break ground this year for the park at the old train depot site, Lang said he's nervous about how the city will pay to maintain it once it's finished.

He also worries about how the city will pay to maintain the newly landscaped downtown path that winds along the San Lorenzo River.

Shoemaker said she'll just have to handle each situation as it comes along. "We'll just have to get more done with less."

Contact Dan White at
dwhite@santa-cruz.com.