It is often said, "If you have something important which must be done, give it to a busy person." In Okeechobee, that busy person is Shirlean Graham, director of the renowned Chobee Steelers, a Martha's House educational trainer, a tireless worker in her community, a mentor of young people, a trustee and choir member at her church and, well ... you get the idea. Though it is hard to rate the importance of what she does, her passion lies with her creation of and work with the Chobee Steelers.

Shirlean is a woman who learned a hard lesson at only 16 and used it to become a community leader and problem solver; a woman you will be proud to know for her ingenuity, her laughter and the confidence that she can do anything.

Shirlean grew up in St. Petersburg in a family of 10 natural and three adopted children. She was born with a drive to excel, and in sixth grade at Perkins Elementary she became the first Miss Perkins. That made her determined to be the first at doing everything. She said, "You get on the bandwagon when necessary but make your own mark whenever you can."

At 16, while in 11th grade, she got pregnant and dropped out of school, as was common in that era. She married the boy but still felt ashamed. Through a teacher's influence and the encouragement of her loving parents, Willie and Willie Mae Graham, she went to night school and got her diploma. She also continued having children — three girls a year and a half apart — April, Crystal and Kawana.

Shirlean has handiwork for her community has shown up at region-wide charities ranging from the YWCA in St. Pete and PANDA in Belle Glade to Martha's House in Okeechobee.

Drive to Excel Has Made Shirlean Graham Tireless

Shirlean never graduated from college but probably has more educational certifications than anyone you may know. Hungry for learning, she took a fashion merchandising class, earning an associate of arts degree. She went on to a second course, graduating at the top of her class as a nursing assistant, and then completed further study to become a physician assistant. At her first job at a hospital, Dr. Fred Alsup recognized her work and offered her a job as his assistant, a position she held for 10 years.

Her marriage had been very rough for at least five years. When Dr. Alsup gently inquired, a story of abuse poured out. Remembering her father saying, "You don't ever have to settle,"
The St. Petersburg Y had a lot of women who wanted to work in police and fire services. They qualified in training but could not qualify in upper body strength. Shirlean approached Publix to help buy equipment to meet this need. With their $2,000 donation, she created a program that led to women achieving that qualification. Her growing involvement with the Y led to her leaving Dr. Alsup’s employ.

At the Y, she became a certified aerobics instructor and created a “Fitness after 50” program. She instituted “Punkercize” for teens and became director of an emergency shelter for families. Outgrowing the shelter’s space, she soon found a two-story house that needed renovation. She persuaded a Navy SEALs volunteer group to do the renovation. That project, since expanded, is still serving the city.

Shirlean retired after 15 years, earning the Y’s very first Woman of Valor Award, the AME Church of Okeechobee Community Activist Award, and many others. She said, “While these are not insignificant, awards mean nothing in comparison with life when you choose to serve.”

“Shirlean has the patience of Job. She is a very giving person with a huge heart.”
—Retired teacher Shirley Johnson
Never one to sit idle, Shirlean opened a hot dog shop called Shirlean’s Designer Dogs. Of course, it was a success. About this time, she met a nice guy, Rodney Stevens.

But still eager for something new, she moved to Belle Glade, where she worked for about five years with PANDA — Pregnant and Addicted Women. Her girls were now grown, and she and Rodney Stevens maintained contact, eventually marrying.

She decided to close Designer Dogs in St. Pete and open it new in Belle Glade. As time passed, Rodney decided he wanted to open a nightclub. A friend suggested Okeechobee, and they moved here, where she opened Klassy Lady’s Beauty Salon and soon met retired teacher Shirley Johnson.

Shirley said: “Shirlean has the patience of Job. She is a very giving person with a huge heart.” She later worked with Shirlean while a board member for Martha’s House. She is also on church committees with her and sings with her in the choir.

Shirley said: “She is a lady who knows no color. It doesn’t matter who you are or who you know, she is willing to help.” Rodney was busy with the new club, and Shirlean made out paperwork to help at Okeechobee’s Park Street Mission, but they never called her back. She soon received a call from Priscilla Smith, then-director of Martha’s House, which, at that time, had only three employees. “After a day of working together,” Shirlean said, “we gelled.” The next morning, she came in at nine and didn’t leave until four the next afternoon. Long double days continued. Each would bring breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as a change of clothes.

At that time, Martha’s House was a converted chicken coop divided down the middle with the abused residents living on one side and the business operating on the other side. When Jonathan Bean...
came to Martha’s House, he recognized the need for an administrator and hired Shirleen as outreach director. He said: “She was a natural. She didn’t deal in drama and was a stabilizing influence with remarkable wisdom.”

“She was calming with people in any situation and could offer individualized plans for that person, never relying on a generic solution. Unique in every way, she faces life directly and doesn’t stress out. Committed to all the people and cultures of Okeechobee, she doesn’t deny the differences, which to her do not matter; instead she seeks a commonality between people.”

When Hurricane Jeanne destroyed the “chicken coop” in 2004, a new Martha’s House was born. Today the business proudly stands on U.S. 441 North, with the facility for abused women and children in a secret location.

Today, though semi-retired, Shirleen still works a 20-hour week at Martha’s House, which she says still leaves her time to continue to serve our community.

At First Missionary Baptist Church, she sings in her church choir, is on the board of trustees and works on church projects. Her in-school community outreach is violence-prevention education. She does community work in Douglas Park, organizes the annual Martin Luther King Parade and many other events, both in the black community and throughout Okeechobee.

One resident inspired and affected by Shirleen is Sylvester Whitaker, owner of an auto detailing shop and host of Sunday Morning Gospel on WOKC. He said: “She is a mentor and a counselor, a warrior strong in the spirit. Never boastful, she has done more for this community and its people than anyone else, never seeking accolades.”

As a consultant for the 2014 Chobee Courage Project, Shirleen inspired
Whitaker to become a mentor in the project. He said: “This was a program to mobilize men and boys to take a stand against violence against women and girls through bystander intervention. For boys 11 to 17, it had a strong influence on Okeechobee youth.”

In 2009, LeRoy Smith, pastor of Shirlean’s church, was looking for a way to assist some very rowdy boys so they wouldn’t go down the wrong track. He sought Shirlean’s help. She remembered when she and some ladies in St. Pete pretended to be from Trinidad and performed at the beach, accompanied by a steel drum band. Pastor Smith said: “She took the idea of that music and made something phenomenal out of it. Summing her up, you could say that when faced with a challenge, she is not the person who would see through you, but will see you through.”

She loved music, so she played the boys a tape of the steel drums and they were hooked. Of course, she had no drum nor money to buy one. She searched online, bought one and a friend bought another. But then what? She couldn’t play it, didn’t have music and didn’t have an instructor.

Back online, she sought an instructor; a man from West Palm Beach responded. She said: “Carlton Lambert, I learned, was classically taught and talked just like the kids. He loved the idea and has been with us ever since.” When Carlton suggested they seek grants, Shirlean contacted Cathy Blair of the Children Services Council of Okeechobee. Cathy advised Shirlean of a Summer Activity Grant, which they received. Shirlean raised additional money, much of it from her church, and the boys began drumming. Further monies raised helped them do three weeks of drums and two weeks of art, expanding their opportunities.

That first year, they learned three songs and performed at their church and also in Fort Pierce. Pastor Smith said: “We have seen many good things come out of this program. The church has contributed financial support, transportation and encouragement. The Steelers often perform at our special events.”

The next summer and every summer since, Carlton has come back to teach. The membership in the band, limited to 13 children from 12 to 16, today features boys and girls. While they play at events...
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Shirlean expects much from the band members. They must pledge no involvement in bullying or disrespectfulness in school or with each other. Shirlean said: “Not one of my babies has gone to jail or dropped out of school. Some come to the program with anger issues, but I do for them what my parents did for me — I love and encourage them.” Rodney also works with her in her efforts with the Steelers. She said, “Rodney is my best friend and my biggest supporter and volunteer.”

Often, grades go up when teens enter the program. Two were on medications when they joined; now, they no longer need them. Two have graduated from Florida A&M University, one with a degree in pharmacy. Currently, one Steeler is at FAMU, one at Bethune Cookman, one at a college in Orlando, two in college in Miami, one in the Navy, two at Indian River State College and several others employed here in Okeechobee.

The Summer Grants Program still continues, but all other expenses rely on community and personal donations. They do not charge for performances, but all monies raised are deposited in a special account. Each year, everything in that account is divided among that year’s graduating seniors, with each receiving an average of $500. Then the account begins to build for the next year. Their only actual “pay” is community service hours.

Rosalind Brown, director of the Okeechobee One Center of the East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, has collaborated with Shirlean on many committees involving teens, including the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Task Force, and has been her friend.
While these are not insignificant, awards mean nothing in comparison with life when you choose to serve.

Shirlean Graham, about honors she’s received

Out of her own resources, “Mama Shirlean” takes her “babies” to see places and events to let them know there is a wide world out there. Her aim is to develop productive, violence-free citizens. She even teaches etiquette classes.

Though her youngest daughter, Kawana, died of cervical cancer in 2010, daughters April, who works at Eli’s Hair Salon, and Crystal, who has served as Martha’s House shelter director for 18 years, are Shirlean’s best friends. A life of service is its own reward.

April proudly said, “Growing up, she allowed me to express myself and speak my mind — in a respectable way — to be able to talk to people even about how I felt. My feelings matter. I’m still growing, but I hope I’ll be just like her.”

Daughter Crystal said: “Growing up was an exciting, adventurous time. My mom allowed all three of her daughters to have her own individuality. Nothing ever shocked her because she had a calm, even spirit. She has always had a drive and ambition.”

Shirlean says: “If I had it all to do again, I wouldn’t change a thing. An abusive husband gave me what I needed for this work. Having children as a teenager prepared me to help all kids now.”

And through her outreach with the Chobee Steeler, she is able to make an everlasting mark. “I’m not developing great music, I’m developing great kids.”

James Kirk awoke from a deep sleep with pain in his chest and arms. He also experienced a racing heart, a familiar symptom for him, due to his Atrial Fibrillation or A-Fib.

Atrial Fibrillation (A-Fib) is a quivering or irregular, often very fast, heartbeat. In A-Fib the upper chambers of the heart, the atria, quiver and do not fill and empty efficiently. This inefficient pumping of the heart can lead to blood clots, stroke, heart failure and other complications. Symptoms of A-Fib include shortness of breath, lightheadedness, chest pain, weakness or a racing heart.

Mr. Kirk was rushed to Raulerson Hospital’s ER, where the physicians and nurses on staff promptly provided him with emergency care for his racing heart, which had climbed as high as 151 beats per minute. Kirk, who was experiencing A-Fib, needed a cardioversion to convert his heart back to a normal sinus rhythm.

Cardioversion medication administered by the ER staff was successful and his heart reset. The cardioversion medication administered by the ER staff was successful and his heart reset. He was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit for more than 10 years.

Mr. Kirk commented, “I have been in many hospitals, but I have never been in a hospital where the nursing care was any better than Raulerson Hospital. The nurses were outstanding! I could not have gotten better care anywhere I would have gone. My wife and I are proud of our hospital.”

Louis E. ‘Red’ Larson has done many things in his life. He was born at home in South Dakota. As an eight year old, he turned the profit from his newspaper route into a dairy business with the purchase of a cow, selling its milk in mayonnaise jars along the same route. He skipped his high school graduation ceremony to attend training for the Army Air Corp, where he became a pilot of an aircraft known as the widomaker, but Larson was 91 years old before he was ever a patient in a hospital.

After two recent stays at Raulerson Hospital, Mr. Larson is proud to have Raulerson Hospital in our community. Mr. Larson commented that Raulerson Hospital’s ER, the nurses and his doctors helped diagnose him and develop a treatment plan. While Mr. Larson was unfamiliar with being a patient until recently, some of his company’s employees were not. Mr. Larson explained that with 350 employees working with machinery and large animals, Larson Dairy has relied on Raulerson Hospital’s Company Care services. “Even though we have an excellent safety program, accidents and injuries sometimes happen,” he said. “Our business utilizes Company Care because they are friendly and help make the process of occupational health run smoothly. Company Care is really a great advantage to business owners in our area,” according to Mr. Larson.

Raulerson Hospital - ER patient and customer of Raulerson Company Care