



The University Florist staff stays busy preparing arrangements for weddings, parties and other special occasions. Lynette McDougald is preparing these floral arrangements for an event at the Union.

The University Florist Celebrates **75** Years

By Leighton Spann and Karen Templeton

The unique enterprise known as The University Florist has operated for most of its history in the heart of Mississippi State University, where it serves as both a full-time business and a design laboratory for students.

The University Florist began 75 years ago and predates the professional program by quite a few years.

"The flower shop started in 1934 at the old greenhouses located by Allen Hall," said Lynette McDougald, The University Florist business manager and instructor. "It was a place where horticulture students sold what they were growing in their classes. It developed, and in 1939 the flower shop became the first FTD Group Inc. member in this area."

The shop stayed in its original location, fulfilling its original mission, for about 36 years until Ralph Null joined the horticulture faculty. Null successfully spearheaded an effort to develop what is now the floral management major at MSU.

"One of the things that I started looking at was how we could be more visible. We eventually got the space that's next door to where we exist now," said Null, professor emeritus. "Along with that, we opened a branch shop, which was a tiny kiosk under the front stairs in the student Union building back in the early 1970s."

At that time, the main florist staff members worked close to the area now occupied by the State Fountain, and the floral design lab was located upstairs at the north end of the cafeteria. Although the new location was a vast improvement in visibility and space, even better quarters were just down the street, and another move took place.

"When the dairy science building was being built on the west side of campus, the old dairy products area became available," Null said. "We were able to get relocated here right in the center of campus."

In every location, The University Florist has remained first and foremost a teaching tool. Working at the shop gives floral management majors unique learning opportunities.

"I worked at the florist two semesters. It was a great experience getting to see how a florist works on a university campus that has large events. I might not have gotten to experience that at an everyday florist," said Brandi Smith, MSU floral management major from Memphis.

The shop operates under a student manager, who is typically a senior in the floral management program. The student manager is involved in all phases of the operation, working at least 20 hours a week under the supervision of the florist business manager.

"We are the only working flower shop associated with a floristry program. There are floristry programs, which are more

or less design schools, but this program is a blend of the business aspect, the horticulture and floral arts. Students get a taste of it all," McDougald said.

For student manager Christy Babin, the shop helped point her in the direction of a major and future career.

"I ended up working at The University Florist, fell in love with it, and changed my major after only a semester," Babin said. "I'm now a College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) ambassador spreading the word about what we're doing here at MSU because it's such a great program. We are learning so much and getting prepared for our futures in the floral industry."

The program's alumni have distinguished themselves in various careers in the world of floral design, and a number of them have published books.

"One of our graduates, Brandon Branch, works closely with Paula Deen of the Food Network," said James DelPrince, professor in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences. "He aids in creative contributions to Ms. Deen's media outlets, including her magazine, television show and home entertaining products."

MSU alumnus Joe Gordy owns Natural Decorations Inc., a manufacturer of permanent botanical plants, trees and floral designs and serves as a CALs alumni fellow.

For these and many other graduates of horticulture, floral management and the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, The University Florist has been a cornerstone of their educational foundation.

"Part of the strength of our program is we have the shop, where students can participate in a small business model that needs to operate at a profit for it to stay in place," DelPrince said.

Many students' first exposure to the shop and to the floral program comes through an elective course in basic floral design and a design studio lab adjoining the shop. Associate professor Susan Tomlinson said the lab component ties naturally into the classroom portion of the course.

"Dr. DelPrince does a demonstration during the lecture, and then there is a sample students can examine while making their designs," Tomlinson said. "I then grade and critique their designs to help them better understand their strengths and weaknesses."

For 75 years, The University Florist has provided real-world work and management opportunities that enhance students' academic experiences to become future leaders in the floral industry.

"Flowers can say things people can't find the words to say. That's what I love to think about, everything, all the emotions, all the events, all the things that have occurred and passed through here in those 75 years," McDougald said.