



When asked what it felt like to be the 2021 Lakewood Influencer, Phyllis Wilson said it was amazing. She feels that outreach is just part of who she is and how she was brought up. It feels natural to help other people, because when Phyllis moved to Lakewood in 2016, she knew that she would eventually need help from others, so she wanted to get a jump on the helping.

Phyllis has macular degeneration, and she knew that her sight would continue to get worse over time. She said that when you lose one of your senses, you have to compensate in some way. Her way is to be prepared and to stay active. Phyllis is a voracious learner, and she quickly learned her way around, reading every sign and knowing every hallway because she knew that after a while, she wouldn't be able to see her way around. The Lakewood construction threw a wrench in her directional capabilities, but she found her way again.

She found others in the community that had the same challenges and formed a support group. Speakers would come to Lakewood from all over the state to share with the group their experiences and expertise. While the speakers have stopped because of COVID-19, the support still continues.

After finding a home in the Lakewood community, Phyllis especially wanted to make it feel like home to new residents. She would find people struggling in the halls or in the café, looking lost or like they needed help. She invites singles and new folks to join in at the community table for her building, to make sure no one is left out. She felt like it was moving back to college.

Originally from Kingsport, Tenn., Phyllis was born January 31, 1934. She was an only child. Her dad was superintendent of the foundry at Kingsport Press, while her mom also worked for the Press but as a proofreader. Phyllis' mother proofread the World Book Encyclopedia, volumes A through K.

Growing up, Phyllis said she was the “Denise the Menace” of the neighborhood, the party planner and event organizer, planning games and activities for everyone in her community. But, ever since she was very small, Phyllis wanted to be a nurse. She attended Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Va. to get her nursing degree, and then took her first job at Duke because her boyfriend and future husband went to UNC Chapel Hill.

After moving to Richmond, Phyllis worked at St. Mary's Hospital, then for the Henrico County Health Department, then for Procter & Gamble. For most of her career, however, she was a physical therapy rehabilitation nurse for people with traumatic brain and other injuries. She worked for thirty years with Sheltering Arms in the Richmond area.

Phyllis and her husband had three sons but lost one to cancer when he was just 47. She has two granddaughters and other family that she delights in spending time with.

Influences on her life include her in-laws. Her mother-in-law was one of 20 children, with many nieces and nephews. There was always a family reunion going on. Phyllis says it was amazing for an only child to be part of such a big family.

She continues to be influenced and inspired today by her family and her faith, citing church, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School as important parts of her life. Her compass for living is Proverbs 3:5-6 which says, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” For someone who is legally blind—she can only see the large “E” on the eye chart at the doctor's office—Phyllis feels that this Proverbs verse is particularly significant. She doesn't need to see the path before her because God is directing her feet, her hands, and her heart every day. God has directed her steps all over the world, traveling the U.S., Europe, Canada, and Cuba and God continues to guide her path today at Lakewood.

Phyllis greets everyone she meets at Lakewood with a smile, and even the canine members of the community can expect a treat from her if they happen to meet. She hands out cards to the new residents at Lakewood that said: “Lakewood adds years to your life and life to your years. We are dear hearts and gentle people and the next thing to heaven.” She said helping people in her community keeps me going and wakes me up in the morning. Lakewood is honored and pleased to have Phyllis Wilson be the unofficial welcome wagon for the community, and her ongoing influence is to spread light and love to everyone.