

Martha Best had a great connection with children

By **CHERRIECE WRIGHT**

The Dispatch

It's not enough to say Martha Best loved children; it was definitely more than that. There was almost a deep connection between her and them.

Maybe it was the tomboy spirit she grew up with that she never lost. Maybe it was the more than 40 years she spent working with children at the First Baptist Church Children's Center on West Third Avenue that drew them close.

Whatever the connection, the children she taught there, from the beginning to the end, were among the many who took her sudden death the hardest.

Best started her work with children at the day care center before there really was one. In the 1960s,

when the church's children's center was only a ministry to underprivileged children, Best started work as a teacher's assistant.

In 1968, the church's day care center was officially established with a license to hold only 42 children at a time at a fee of \$12 a week. Best was part of the first faculty hired, said Jean Ashley, director of the children's center.

More than three decades later, with an increase in fees to \$77 a week and the addition of 78 chil-

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Best

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dren, Best was still teaching, working with children ages 2 to 8 years old.

"Teaching was her first love and I think the children knew that," Ashley said. "She was my friend, my mentor, a leader and a fine example to the rest of the staff."

"I just couldn't believe it," said Jennifer Boles, a teacher at the center.

Boles had been a student of Best's and Boles' son, Zack, was in her class.

"Zack was very upset," she said. "He learned a lot from her. He's going to miss her being there to greet him in the morning and making him feel comfortable. We're all going to miss her."

The sympathy doesn't stop with Best's current students; Ashley has had several calls from adults who expressed their sympathy.

Best, 82, was born March 15, 1917 in Old Town, Maine, to Oscar A. Wakefield and Gladys Wakefield. The family moved to North Carolina when she was about 3.

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The fourth of eight children, her adventurous nature first showed itself when she was just a child. Her son, James "Jim" Best, described her as a tomboy.

"She loved the country," he said. "She could climb trees just as good as any of the boys."

Armed with a single-barrel shotgun she got when she was 13, Best said his mother also showed a penchant for hunting.

As she got older, some of her activities changed, but the spirit remained the same.

When it came down to dating, Best had one answer: No. "Boys didn't attract her," Jim Best said. Even though she eventually married Robert Best Jr., she gave him an uphill battle.

She met Best almost by accident, hearing about him before she met

him. "She had an older cousin who kept telling her about this really good-looking guy," her son said.

Best worked as a road maintenance grader and the truck he was on broke down in front of her house. She and her cousin went out to meet him and he took a liking to her. After being convinced to do it, she went out with him on Valentine's Day in the early 1930s. Years later, they were married on Christmas and had three sons.

Best was at the home of another son, Robert "Bob" Best, in Mt. Gilead, when she died suddenly, leaving behind her sons; six grandchildren; four great-grandchildren; and a sister, Francena Raymond of South Orange, N.J.

"It was a shock," Jim Best said. "I thought she was perfect. She was a gentle mother, a good wife to my father. She was just a good woman."

That consensus is shared by her students and friends.

The poem that was read at her funeral and a memorial plaque will hang in the children's center where she taught for so many years.