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November 10, 2025

CTI INSTRUCTOR'S PASSION FOR HALLOWEEN PARADE LIVES ON

Uniontown, PA – Fayette Career and Technical Institute instructor Cheryl Olson may have passed away, but her memory lives on – as does her passion for the Uniontown Halloween parade and its float competition, thanks to the efforts of her colleagues and students.

“She took it very seriously, took pride in it and did a great job,” CTI Assistant Director Nathan White said of Olson’s efforts designing and building the school’s parade entry each year.

Olson taught cosmetology at Fayette CTI for 19 years before succumbing to lung cancer in May. White said she was always heavily involved with each stage of constructing the parade floats.

“In years past, Cheryl would collect items for the costumes and even sewed the costumes a few years,” he said. “Cheryl was always dedicated to making sure the students came together and had a good time.”

Olson’s teaching assistant, Nancy Nickle, said Olson was “very competitive. She wanted to win in everything.” Nickle said that was especially true of the Halloween float contest, which held a special place in Olson’s heart.

White said several CTI faculty members, including auto body instructor Steve Forsythe, welding instructor Tom DeGusipe, education instructor Leann Orris, graphic arts instructor Dave Bowers, and building construction instructor George Belch, worked on the floats with Olson. Director of Adult Education Maria Lovat, building and grounds supervisor Ron Stasko also helped with the annual project, he said, as well as “many, many great students.”

Nickle noted Olson would begin planning the following year’s float immediately after Halloween. Nickle said it was home school visitor Torrie Smith who stepped in to fill Olson’s absence this year.

Smith said she and Olson clicked instantly when Smith began working at Fayette CTI seven years ago.

“She was outgoing, strong-hearted and very, very experienced at the CTI. Whether it was about hair, nails or just how to do something, she was the lady who knew. She took so much pride in her cosmetology class and her students,” Smith remembered. “If you ever heard the expression “go big or go home,” that was Cheryl! Her floats – outstanding; her open house theme at the CTI – above and beyond. Everything she did, she did with her full heart.”

Nickle said this year's Footloose theme was Olson's idea, and Smith said Olson's advance planning made it possible to see her plan to fruition.

"Cheryl loved the parade. She normally had the themes picked a year in advance. Her planning is what let us do the Footloose float this year," Smith said. "Last year, when she was diagnosed, she told us her idea, and me and a few other teachers said we would help her bring it to life. Unfortunately, none of us are (as good at sewing as) she was, so we had to rely on thrift shops and old closet items for the students to wear."

Smith said she hadn't been involved with the Halloween float until Olson asked her to take over her role. Despite her relative inexperience, Smith led Fayette CTI to a first place in the float category.

"I never actually did anything with the float before, which is weird because I do love Halloween," Smith said. "She asked me last year in late March if I would take over Student Council for her, and that meant the float. I was hesitant but knew I had to do it for her, and I am so sure she was looking down on us when we won again this year in her memory."

The win was a fitting tribute to a woman whose colleagues remember not only her love for the parade, but also her devotion to the school, her students, and her friends.

"Cheryl always went above and beyond with not only the float, but with anything relating to the success of the CTI. She played a vital role in the CTI becoming Middle States Accredited, which is a big undertaking," White said. "Even when she was sick, she created a walk-a-thon that helped raise money for cancer research."

Nickle said Olson was a good person to have in your corner.

"When she liked you, she cared. And she always knew how to make you laugh," Nickle said.

Smith already is planning for next year's Halloween parade – and hoping her efforts can continue to honor Olson's memory.

"I definitely feel the pressure to live up to her reputation, but I think with the support of the CTI family, we can do it," she said. "It was so much fun, and to see the community so involved was awesome! As for next year, I do have next year's Halloween float theme picked, along with about 14 more years of ideas after that. I won't give away next year's theme yet, but let's just say, there's no place like the CTI."

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This communication is part of the Fayette County PR Initiative, which is funded through the Fayette County Local Share Account (LSA) and Hotel Tax Grants in cooperation with the Fayette County Board of Commissioners, Fayette Chamber of Commerce, The Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette, The Redstone Foundation and other partners. This funding has been designated for the continued promotion and marketing of Fayette County, PA.

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