

Cathy Gafford started out sitting in an introductory journalism class at Auburn University. Large typewriters filled the classroom, loud and looming over the students as they were thrown into the task of writing their first article.

Gafford survived that introductory journalism class and graduated with a double major in journalism and mass communication in 1975. Leaving her hometown of Auburn, Gafford moved to Birmingham after graduation to pursue a career as a copy editor.

However, just like the typewriters in that introductory journalism class, Gafford's life has evolved. She is now back in Auburn, working as the director of Jean Dean Reading is Fundamental, a non-profit organization in Opelika, Ala. that collects and donates books to underprivileged children throughout the state.

Gafford's life in Birmingham was put on hold 25 years ago when she received the unexpected news that her mother's health had taken a turn for the worse.

"My mother got really sick, really fast," Gafford said.

Gafford immediately headed back to Auburn, and what was thought to be a temporary visit turned into a permanent arrangement. Gafford's last 18 months with her mother gave Gafford the opportunity to spend time with her family and the opportunity to start a new chapter in her life.

During her time in Auburn, Gafford and her father, Joe Dean, the then district Kiwanis governor, began to help with the Kiwanis club's program Young Children Priority One. This led Dean and Gafford to begin their own program that focused on the distribution of books to young children who were not given the opportunity to have books.

“We knew that there were kids who didn’t have books in their homes,” Gafford said. “We just couldn’t let that happen.”

Dean and Gafford’s program became really large, really fast, and as the need for the program increased, so did Dean and Gafford’s efforts.

“We were going to do the RIF program for a year and then turn it over to somebody else, 23 years ago, 450,000 children ago and over a million books ago,” Gafford said. “We were hooked.”

Gafford and her father never passed the program on to anyone else. The non-profit organization was named Jean Dean RIF, after Gafford’s mother, and it now serves 25,000 young children living in the state of Ala. every year.

“It was very nice to turn around and see the other side of life,” Gafford said. “To be able to help people, to see the other people that wanted to help people and to facilitate that for them is a great thing.”

Gafford handles the non-profit in much the same way that she handled her last few months with her mother. Gafford put her entire self into her time with her mother, and now she puts her entire self and efforts into running Jean Dean RIF.

No longer a copy editor in Birmingham, Gafford now spends her time working 14 hours a day at Jean Dean RIF with her fellow volunteers, a few employees and her dog, Jack, a friendly companion whose stroke back in February has hindered the use of his back legs.

“Jack’s my security manager,” Gafford said. “He’s got me on the end of his paw.”

Gafford's loving treatment of her handicapped dog extends to the volunteers who come to help out at Jean Dean RIF.

"A true enjoyment for me is working with the volunteers," Gafford said. "My favorite thing is to see how many people in the community, truly and earnestly care about other people."

Gafford returns the "true and earnest care" to her volunteers when they come to help out at the warehouse.

"Miss Gafford treats her volunteers like family," RIF volunteer Chelsea Crawford said. "The first time I went, Miss Gafford brought me her jacket, because it was the middle of winter and cold in the warehouse."

Gafford has come a long way since that introductory journalism class. Once a journalist with a flair for copy editing, Gafford is now a non-profit director whose efforts have had an impact on thousands of children throughout the state.

"Now, the most rewarding thing is to have some of these kids from various counties coming to volunteer, because they recognize our label from the books that they read in preschool," Gafford said. "The books helped them, and now they want to give back to somebody else."

Like the children who grow up and give back to the non-profit that gave to them, Gafford strives to give hope to the community, to her volunteers and even to her lovable dog Jack.

"Hope is important for me," Gafford said. "I had to hope for them, and they were given hope."

