service n. 1. the occupation or process of assisting another person or persons. 2. a system or arrangement that performs work or supplies needs. 3. use, assistance, a helpful or beneficial act. 4. CHRIS PURCELL.

It might not appear that way in a dictionary—yet. But Chris Purcell, executive secretary of OU’s Board of Regents, does seem to epitomize the spirit of service to the University—and to higher and public school education in Oklahoma.

A veteran of over 25 years at OU in various administrative service roles, Purcell has functioned as the Regents’ executive secretary for the past five years. The role is a critical one, providing a liaison between the Regents and a variety of interests, and giving board members the information and nuts-and-bolts assistance they need to function smoothly.

As Purcell explains, “I’m an executive officer who does what the Regents need or want done. I connect with President Boren on different issues that the Regents have questions about; sometimes he wants me to get information to them.”

Perhaps as importantly, Purcell functions as a vital link between the seven-member board and the academic community, the political realm and to the general public as well. She has been labeled by her employers as a “sophisticated, people-oriented person” who handles requests, comments and problems with aplomb.

And there are routine, but crucial, matters, such as setup and notification chores for board meetings, which are held regularly 10 times a year and on special occasions as important business warrants.

The multifaceted job “wasn’t something that I’d thought about applying for,” Purcell says. When the Regents’ position came open, she had served for more than eight years in Student Affairs as assistant vice president and later interim vice president. “I was really comfortable doing that. And I had adjunct appointments teaching in higher ed and human relations.” Yet after being encouraged by others to apply, Purcell was named to the post in January 1992.

Her “bosses” seem to appreciate Purcell’s performance. Board member Dr. Don Halverstadt describes Purcell as someone who “has a great breadth of responsibilities that she discharges exceedingly well. She’s a bright star for the Regents, as well as for the president.”

Halverstadt adds, “Many of the Regents are not graduates of OU. They come in with less in-house information about the University’s needs, workings, strengths and foibles. Chris has great knowledge of OU in general from being part of the University in other capacities. That allows her to be of help to the Regents in a variety of ways.”

Purcell’s experience with OU goes beyond her service in Student Affairs. She first encountered OU in 1969 on the other side of the academic fence, as a wide-eyed freshman from Wewoka, Oklahoma.

“OU was a big place for a small-town girl, but I loved the people, the excitement, the diversity,” she says. As an undergraduate, she became involved with student activities and served as a dorm resident counselor during her senior year. She also was a graduate assistant for the Center for Student Development.

She has three OU degrees—a 1973 B.A. in early childhood development, a 1975 M.A. in special education and a 1982 Ph.D. in lifelong learning/adult
education. Yet her academic credentials never steered her to a career away from her alma mater.

After teaching briefly in the Oklahoma City public schools, Purcell returned to OU as assistant director of Student Development. She initially planned to give the job “a three- or four-year commitment,” but enjoyed her work with students so much that “I just never could quit.” Before long, the campus community became a permanent home to Purcell and her husband, Gary.

“There’s a lot to take advantage of in a university community,” she said, “and this is a particularly good one, because people in Oklahoma care about education and OU.”

Caring—and offering help in all sorts of situations—became a part of Purcell’s daily work during her 17 years in student services.

“I worked my way up through Student Affairs literally from the bottom—carrying watermelons and picking up watermelon rinds at Howdy Week to, you know . . . still carrying watermelons,” she said wryly. “But I got to do a lot of things, and it was fun working with students during those years.”

Working with students could be adventurous, she recalls. “My husband and I once sponsored a student ski trip where we took 280 students to Purgatory, Colorado. And on the trip 28 students had broken arms or legs. We had to find rides for each of those to get to the emergency room in Durango.”

Purcell also was recognized by UOSA as Outstanding Staff Member in 1979 and Outstanding Administrator in 1991, and she received the Walter Neustadt Award as OU’s Outstanding Administrator in 1984. The Wewoka Public School Foundation honored her with its Award for Excellence in 1987 and again in 1996.

But Purcell gives as much praise as she earns and is particularly generous toward the Regents. She has witnessed their workings and contributed to their efforts throughout a hectic five-year period that saw a remarkable turnover in the board’s membership, the hiring of a new OU president and two football coaches, and the placement of Lawton’s Cameron University under the OU board’s purview.

“My seven bosses have all been some of the most wonderful people I’ve ever been able to work with, because of their high character and morals,” Purcell says. “People don’t have any idea how much time these individuals put forth for what is volunteer service—they don’t get paid for this.”

She adds, “They defend policies and procedures that they don’t have any part in promulgating. I’ve seen them do a lot of good public relations work, night and day, that goes unrecognized. That’s one of the greatest things I’ve enjoyed here—just seeing their devotion to the institution.”

Outside of OU, Purcell’s philosophy of service—and interest in education—carries over as well. She has served as board president of the United Way of Norman and the Norman Public School Foundation, officer and current board member of Leadership Oklahoma and founding director of the Norman Community Foundation.

How does a mother of three manage to juggle all this activity and still find time for the kids? Purcell says the key lies in having a marriage that works as a successful partnership with her husband, whom she met at OU in a freshman political science class.

“My husband and I agreed a long time ago that we both wanted to be involved with parenting. When he got out of law school, he sought a job that could give him flexibility so he could go to his kids’ school and give talks to their class or help coach a baseball team. He’s a really good father.”

Gary Purcell is quite accomplished in his own right, serving as a U.S. magistrate judge at the federal courthouse in Oklahoma City. And mother Purcell is more than happy to talk about, and show pictures of the children—15-year-old Brad, an avid golfer; Michael, 11, an OU basketball ball-boy and all-around sports buff; and Katie, 10, an energetic third-grader dubbed by her mother as the “spirit bearer of the family.”

In her home life, too, Purcell feels the call to serve. “I’m one of those mothers who like to do the cookies for school parties—finding wax teeth that go on monster cookies for Halloween.”

It all adds up to a busy life, she says, of “living every moment to the fullest. You get out of things what you put into them, and I want to jump in all the way.”

—MICHAEL WATERS