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Teacher Has 'Retired' 3 Times but Keeps Coming Back--and Loving It

By LEE HARRIS

Mamie Jean Shippy had to stop teaching when she got married, when she reached mandatory retirement age for California teachers, and again last May when her school district ran short of money.

But she still plans to return to the classroom soon--at age 82.

"I intend to substitute and help out where I can," the spunky teacher insisted last week at a ceremony to recognize nearly 40 years of teaching in the El Rancho Unified School District. "I've enjoyed every day I've been here," she told the audience of more than 75 officials, parents and students. She received an engraved paperweight from Stuart E. Gothold, the county superintendent of schools, and a plaque from parents.

Even though Shippy is small and frail-looking, she is known for her energy. "I've seen that 80-year-old lady crawling around on her knees helping the kids paint a large map of the United States on the (concrete) playground," said Hilda Cano, a parent.

Shippy would often go with the students on their field trips, and attended most teacher conferences in Southern California, officials said. "She is a lifelong student. She was always trying to keep up with the new methods of teaching," county schools consultant Richard Sholseth said.

She "retired" from the Pico Rivera school district in the early 1970s when she reached the state's mandatory retirement age, but returned for 15 more years to teach part time in a program for gifted and talented elementary-school students. State law allows retired teachers to hold part-time positions, but Shippy's job was eliminated last May when the district ran short of money for the program.

In the 1930s, Shippy had to give up teaching at a junior high school in Gillette, Wyo., after she married. "Wyoming had some strange law that said a married woman was not allowed to teach," she recalled.

She joined the El Rancho district in 1952 after she and her husband, Carl, moved to the area with their two sons, Frank and Scott. Her husband died in 1982.

While waiting to return to the classroom, Shippy said she will keep busy working on the family genealogy. The dining room table in her Whittier home is piled high with family albums and genealogical charts. "I won't get bored," Shippy said.

Her former boss said there is a good chance that Shippy will be called on to substitute. "She is still raring to go," observed Grace Nakamura, who heads the district's gifted program.