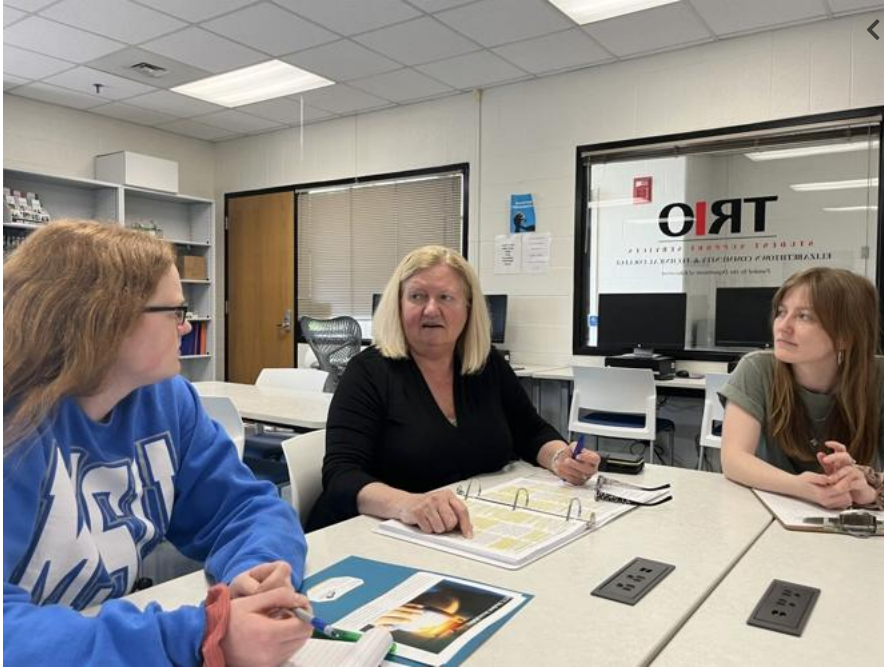


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Cooper always offers a hand up

By AMY SMITH THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE
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1 of 3



ECTC Director of Grants and Contracts Susan Cooper discusses a potential grant program with Academic Counselors Breanna Phillips, left, and Trio Student Support Services Department Assistant Darian Wilbert.

Submitted

Getting to know Susan Cooper

Favorite color: Blue

Favorite food: Italian

Favorite movie: "Blind Side"

Favorite team: UK men's team, Denver Nuggets and teams that have former UK players

Favorite genre of music: Motown

Favorite season: Spring

Favorite restaurant: Tony's in Lexington

pets: A miniature Ausidoodle, Lucy

Favorite memory: "Being with my grandparents."

Favorite vacation spot: Savannah, Georgia and the East Coast

Susan Cooper's desire to see the disadvantaged rise above their circumstances led her to the bush of Africa and, more recently, to the position of director of grants and contracts for Elizabethtown Community and Technical College.

After earning her bachelor's and master's degrees at Western Kentucky University, Cooper taught and coached woman's basketball at Berea College. After a couple of years, she joined the Peace Corps and headed to Africa.

"It's the toughest job you'll ever love," Cooper said. "It was the hardest thing I ever did, but probably the best thing I ever did."

Cooper lived in the bush of Sierra Leone, a mile from a Catholic church and the only asphalt highway in the country.

"You just learned to survive," Cooper said. "It was like a serious camping trip for two years. The things that you thought you would miss, you didn't miss at all. You just had to learn that culture and then how to manipulate the culture into thinking that the ideas that you had were their ideas."

Person who has most influenced her life: My grandfather, my mother and Johnny Oldham, the former athletic director at Western Kentucky University

Advice: "I think if you can dream it and visualize, then you're over half way to achieving it. It's important what you dream and think about, whether positive or negative, it's probably going to happen. So, think good thoughts and good self-talk."

Nominate a Wednesday's Woman

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One of the ideas Cooper and her colleagues convinced the residents to embrace was using water from the wells they dug instead of the river.

"My primary job was securing grant funds to build wells," Cooper said. "We dug six different water wells in the villages because they were going to the river and getting water, which a quarter of a mile up, someone was probably using the bathroom in the river. We would secure those grants; some were from Great Britain, Australia and the U.S. I was begging for money even then."

Although she coached women's basketball for several years after leaving the African bush, today Cooper finds herself still "begging for money." This time it's as the grant writer for ECTC.

"Last year, we were awarded \$3,628,351 in grant dollars," Cooper said. "Most of my stint, other than coaching and teaching, has been working behind the scenes trying to make things better for the disadvantaged, low-income students.

"I feel like education is the greatest equalizer to giving them a level playing field to be able to break cycles," she added. "A lot of these grants are geared towards disadvantaged first generation students to help them being retained in school and leading them toward graduation. If you can get them that far, sometimes they will go on to their four-year (degree)."

Cooper said the money from the grant she currently is pursuing would provide tutors for first generation students (those students whose parents have not earned a four-year degree and are low-income) in five area high schools, provide Saturday sessions to introduce them to STEM type fields of study and jobs, and offer a summer field trip.

One of the endeavors of which Cooper is most proud is the Family Scholar House tax credit.

"They're building a unit with 48 apartments for (families) here on campus, and it's the only one in the United States that we are aware of with Family Scholar House," Cooper said. "They can live right here on campus, and I think the city has agreed to put a sidewalk to the child care center in the old G.C. Burkhead School was, the Hardin County Childcare Center.

"As long as (enrolled student) maintains their grade point average, they can stay there even a year after they graduate to get their feet on the ground and get their own home," she added. "It's going to be great for our community. I was just a small part in securing that tax credit."

While growing up, Cooper saw firsthand the difference an education can make in people's lives.

"I was raised in Grayson County around those individuals with so much talent and intelligence that is oftentimes just not tapped or used just because they don't know," Cooper said. "It was like living in Africa. They didn't have any electricity or running water, but they didn't miss it because they didn't even know it existed. So, it's just kind of the same deal, and education is the only way, in my opinion, to eliminate poverty."

Cooper enjoys the competitive aspect of grant writing, which was also one of the things she thrived on while coaching.

"I enjoyed the competition and the hunt because I was doing the recruitment and working with the kids," Cooper said. "I liked everything about coaching. It was very hard and long hours."

As assistant women's basketball coach at WKU, Cooper took her Hilltoppers to the regional finals twice.

"The Western team was made up of local kids within a 60-mile radius of Bowling Green, so we had a great following," Cooper said. "We filled up Diddle Arena several times. We had really fun times with that group. They were regional champs in '84-'85 and '85-'86."

Although Cooper had great success as assistant coach, she made the decision to pursue having a family.

"I'd been an assistant for six years, and three of those six we went to the final four, and one of those three we went to the final of the NCAA, so I'd gone as far as I felt I could go as an assistant, and I felt like I was at the point that I needed to make a decision to do something," Cooper said. "I felt like I wanted to have a family, and I knew what it took to be a coach and do it on the level that I wanted to do it on, and I thought it was almost impossible to maneuver that, so I made the decision that I'd rather have a family."

Staying true to her desire to help those in need, Cooper helped open a chapter of Habitat for Humanity in Ohio County.

"If I had more time, I'd get involved with (Habitat) now," Cooper said. "It's very fulfilling and a great organization. It's a hand up, not a handout. I tend to lean toward those kinds of organizations."

Cooper currently lives in Harrodsburg to be near her daughter, Caitlin, who is a Saddlebred horse trainer and farm manager.

"I help entertain her guests at the farm and attend the horse shows," Cooper said.

Cooper looks forward to the days ahead for the Elizabethtown community.

"I think that Elizabethtown is really lucky right now," Cooper said. "At this time, we have such great leadership at this college, and this town is getting ready to go through a huge transformation in a short period of time. We're just lucky that there's good leadership here, and I'm fortunate to be a part of it and feel like you've made a difference in making that happen or in the process of making some things happen for people all around this service area to have a better life."

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