



By Allison Morgan

Jerrie Conley relishes her role as housemother to members of the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity at the University of Tennessee at Martin, where the brothers call her “Mom” and treat her like one of the family. She is now halfway through her second year in the role of housemother, which is a rare find among fraternities these days.

## Housemother Jerrie Conley loves taking care of her 63 ‘boys’ in UT Martin’s Alpha Gamma Rho chapter

**S**he doesn’t cook. She doesn’t clean. She doesn’t pay bills. She doesn’t do laundry, except for the occasional emergency removal of a blood or mud stain.

So just exactly what good is a mother who doesn’t do any of these things?

Plenty. Just ask the brothers of Alpha Gamma Rho (AGR) social/professional fraternity at the University of Tennessee at Martin, where their housemother, Jerrie Conley, is one of the most influential women in these young men’s lives.



In the AGR study room, Jerrie checks how homework is progressing for Brandon Stewart, left, and Garrett Weidner.

“It’s really important to us to have a housemother because a lot of us are a long ways from home,” says AGR President Taylor Dill, a senior plant and soil science major. “I’m from Lebanon, and this has been my home away from home for the last four years. Mom Conley has made that transition easier.”

Cook and maid? No. Comforter and caretaker? Yes. As “Mom,” Jerrie says those latter roles are much more important to the fraternity’s 63 brothers, 48 of whom live under the same roof with her in the AGR house on University Street at the edge of the UT Martin campus. She’s not there to dole out discipline, enforce a curfew, or make their meals (a full-time cook does that), but she’s available when “her boys” need advice or guidance or an occasional late-night batch of no-bake chocolate oatmeal cookies.

“I like being someone who watches over these boys and makes sure they are accountable,” says Jerrie. “I support everything they do, as long as it’s in good taste. If there’s a problem,

I’ll help them fix it. I encourage them to make different choices if they’ve made a mistake. It takes a lot of patience and learning not to be judgmental.”



The vivacious 69-year-old seems to have no problem keeping up with the high-energy, chaotic lives of college men. Sometimes it’s loud, and sometimes it’s late. But most of the time, she says, it’s just simply fun. If she’s not resting in her two-room apartment in the house, she can often be found watching movies with the group, playing a fierce game of Rook, or heading out for ice cream with some of the guys in the fraternity’s old rattletrap truck. She attends all their events — dances, water polo matches, football games, and homecoming activities — and has been known to get a little rowdy in her competitive spirit.

She’s their biggest cheerleader and secret-keeper. She’s the first to defend them when they’ve been wronged and the

first to point out when they’ve done something wrong. She sews on buttons, mends broken hearts. She keeps up with their grades, teaches manners and etiquette, and encourages them to do volunteer work. They get pep talks when they’re down and gentle scoldings when they’ve been rude. She loves seeing them have good time but can be a calming force when things get out of control.

In turn, the AGR members treat Jerrie with the same respect and reverence they would their own parent or grandparent. They watch their language, take off their caps when they come inside, keep their elbows off the table, and do their chores without complaining. They open doors for Mom, bless her in their prayers, and pull out the chair for her at dinner.

“When you think of a fraternity, respect is not something that comes to mind,” says Taylor. “Respect is almost lost in our generation, but we try to change that. Living here teaches us valuable life lessons about respecting women and elders.”

Once a standard part of fraternity life, housemothers are a dying breed these days. Specifically, UT Martin's AGR chapter is the only fraternity on campus — and the only AGR chapter in the state — with a housemother.

"Of the 72 active chapters we have, only 15 have housemothers," says Rachelle DeLaurier, executive assistant for the national Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity. "We have always believed that chapters with housemothers do better academically and behaviorally. That being said, some chapters cannot afford a housemother. Others resist for different reasons, but the monetary issue is probably the largest deterrent."

The members of UT Martin's AGR chapter say they can't imagine their house — or their lives — without their "Mom." There has always been a housemother associated with the chapter, which will turn 50 in 2013, and advisor Marvin Flatt says it's a key reason why AGR has a reputation of being one of the university's best fraternities.

"Having a housemother helps uphold AGR's motto: 'To make better men,'" says Marvin, who has advised the chapter for six years and was a member himself from 1972-76. "These ladies truly care about the young men they work with here. Even though these college kids are away from home, they have someone they can turn to if they need her, or if they get a little out of line, they have someone twisting their ear."

Having a mother figure involved in nearly all aspects of their daily lives would cramp the style of some college kids. But not these AGRs. The fact that the fraternity has a housemother is one of the reasons why some joined AGR in the first place.

"When I went through rush, I moved in here as a guest but visited the other fraternity houses," says Brandon Stewart of Lexington, a sophomore animal science production major. "Talking to those guys, I got the sense that they were fraternity brothers, but that was it. Here, we are family. We stay with each other; we do things together. We even eat dinner together. Like I tell Mom all the time, I don't have any grandparents, so I look up to her in that way. You treat her right, and she will treat you right."



When Jerrie took on the job of housemother last year, she brought enthusiasm, excitement, and an AGR legacy unprecedented at the university and, in fact, the national fraternity's history. Her mother, Johnella Childress, served as the fraternity's housemother for the entire decade of the 1990s. They were even recognized this summer at the AGR National Convention in Burlington, Vt., as the first two-generation housemothers in the fraternity's history.

"There's a great story in the legacy of these housemothers," says UT Martin alum Brent Turner of Lebanon, who was an AGR member on the committee that hired "Mom Childress" in 1990. "They're more than a figurehead — they're an active part of the fraternity. They help maintain the rules and remind the young men how they are supposed to conduct themselves. They're available to console, counsel, and be a friend when they need to be. They're really special ladies."

Johnella wasn't looking for a houseful of college men to care for when she sold her home in Trimble and moved to Martin in 1989. A widow, she simply wanted to be closer to Jerrie, her only child. But when Johnella heard about the job of AGR housemother, the then 73-year-old thought it might be just what she needed.

"When the boys asked me why I wanted the job, I said I had just moved here, and I didn't know anyone, but I was looking for someplace to call home," she recalls. "Besides that, I work well with boys."



**ABOVE:** The role of housemother was already familiar to Jerrie, whose nearly 95-year-old mother, Johnella, seated left, held that position in the 1990s. The legacy of mother-daughter AGR "moms" is unprecedented in the university and, in fact, the national fraternity's history. **LEFT:** Jerrie attends nearly all the AGR members' functions such as this dance where she shows the chapter president, Taylor Dill, some of the moves that help keep the 69-year-old young. — Photo provided by AGR

In fact, I work better with boys than girls. They asked a few more questions and then told me they had to meet with some other people before making a decision. Well, I hadn't even gotten home before they called and gave me the job."

Johnella was the last "mom" in the old AGR house, an early 20th-Century mansion that was torn down to make way for construction of a larger, more modern house in 1997. She was also the first housemother in the new one, although she decided it was time to "call it quits" soon thereafter.

Some 12 years later, Johnella continues to take pride in knowing how her "boys" have turned out — bragging about their careers and families like they're her own sons. About 35 of the AGR alumni from her housemother days threw her a birthday party this summer, even though her actual birthday isn't until Dec. 11. She'll be 95.

"I said, 'Boys, it's not my

birthday!'" laughs Johnella. "They said, 'Well, that time of year, you're busy, and we're busy, and we wanted to have it this summer.' I was thrilled to death."

There's only been one housemother between Johnella and Jerrie, who is now halfway through her second year as the "first lady" of UT Martin's AGR chapter. The women in this position tend to stay for quite a while, averaging about 10 years tenure each. A retired schoolteacher and divorced mother of three grown children, Jerrie says she can see herself staying at least that long or longer.

"They asked me about taking this job when Mother retired, but I was still working with the reading program in the school system," says Jerrie. "Then last year, they asked me about it again. It didn't take me but one day to think about it. I remembered how much fun she had here, and I decided to give it a try. And I love it. I've raised my family, and now I'm trying to raise these boys right."



**In the house dining room,** Lane Duncan helps seat "Mom Conley" at the head table next to "Mom Childress." It's just one example of the good manners the AGR members display at the house meals, which are held every day at noon and 5 p.m.