

**For Immediate Release**

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**Contact:**

Erica Taylor 843-937-6303

# Media Release

## **Pulse of CCSD – Sharon Armstrong lives to be of service to others**

**Office of Strategy and  
Communications**

**Gerrita Postlewait, Ed.D.**  
Superintendent of Schools

**Erica S. Taylor**  
Chief of Staff

**Charleston, SC** – The humble are often called to serve in unanticipated ways. In the case of Sharon Armstrong, she served her country with honor as an eight-year Army Reservist and marched down a civilian career path that allowed her to serve others in the areas of transportation and education. Today she is a 15-year veteran of Charleston County School District, currently working as a Routing Technician in the Office of Transportation.

Born in Newport News, VA, Armstrong went into the workforce as a pharmacy technician at the Medical College of Virginia. She spent 11 years there; she did not serve patients directly, but her work was crucial to the medical attention every one of the patients received. She was a spoke in the wheel of service.

“The hospital was rewarding,” said Armstrong. “Part of my personality is adventurous so I knew the time had come for the next part of my life journey. ”

There was an opening at the Greater Richmond Transit Company where Armstrong was hired as a bus operator. She loved it so much she drove for almost ten years. Armstrong was just shy of earning her ten-year safety pin before she transferred to the transit office.

“Again, I was serving people and doing something I loved,” said Armstrong. “The pay was great. I got to drive this big old bus and I had a knack for it.”

She wanted to be more involved in representing her colleagues so she was elected to serve (as the first female) as Secretary-Treasurer of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1220.

"I was young at the time and married with a son," said Armstrong. "It was important for me to have hours that allowed me to be with my family. That is why I took the job in the transportation department. I was quickly promoted to the safety department handling worker's compensation claims. It was a great company to work for."

As many locals know, the pull of the Lowcountry always brings those who move away, back home. This was the case with Armstrong's family. Her husband was born and raised on the Charleston peninsula and he was easily able to move his HVAC contracting business to the area in 2004. He built the family a custom home, established his business here, and Armstrong came to work with Charleston County School District (CCSD) in the School and Community Service Department. Their now adult son, James, graduated from Wando High School.

Armstrong's experiences with the district are memorable and the mentoring she received from her supervisors resulted in professional wisdom that she has carried with her in all of her positions with CCSD.

One of those was R.B. Stall High School where she quickly realized the cultural differences between her hometown and the Lowcountry.

"It was a perfect fit for me, don't get me wrong," said Armstrong. "At first, though, I am looking at others, who look just like me, but I could not understand the dialect. It eventually became second nature, as did mothering a school full of high school teenagers."

Armstrong had never been in education before and said she learned so much from the students. She was considered the 'momma of the house' and worked in tandem with Principal Daniel Connor to minimize discipline issues that the school had been known for. Also, Principal Connor implemented some recognitions for good behavior and academic awards that hadn't been conducted in years. This began to change the environment at the school.

"Stall got a bad rap," said Armstrong. "It was hard not to have compassion for these kids when you get to know them and learn what their home lives are like or realize their other struggles. There were many student successes. I was there to offer a tissue, a snack or lunch money, a hug or a kick in the butt (figuratively speaking), and my office was that place to receive either."

Armstrong said that Principal Connor truly made 'students the heart of his work' which is when things began to turn around. It cannot go without saying that Mr. Connor loved "his kids" and spent considerable time in the halls - especially in the special needs classrooms. He was very protective of Stall students. Mr. Connor loved cooking out on the grill for students and staff.

The doors to their brand new building opened and that's when things began to grow, Armstrong said.

"We also welcomed a new principal, Kim Wilson," said Armstrong. "It was a beautiful transition. Principal Connor shook it up with the enforcement of discipline and Principal Wilson brought in the 'whole child' concept which coupled academics, discipline, and social and emotional learning."

Wilson will never forget their first introduction. It was the summer of 2010 and he showed up for the first day of work. Armstrong introduced herself and showed him to his temporary office.

"That is when I discovered Sharon had a great sense of humor," said Wilson. "She said my office was in the In-School-Suspension room. And that was the beginning of what would be a wonderful working relationship for the next seven years."

Armstrong said that Wilson's approach was that 'everyone mattered' and when he introduced the Capturing Kids Hearts Program to the school, it changed the school's culture.

Wilson refuses to take all of the credit.

"Sharon was always the first one on campus and one of the last employees to leave every day," said Wilson. "She was a champion for students. Students always came first for Sharon. No matter what she was doing when a student arrived at

her doorstep she would stop and take care of their needs. She would gather their stories like seeds and sow them among the many passionate and wonderful R.B. Stall employees to make sure they would be well taken care of have an opportunity to blossom.”

“Both principals were amazing, just different,” said Armstrong. “Principal Connor was very protective and often said ‘paperwork is important but people are more important than paperwork.’ Principal Wilson had a spirit of excellence and brought with him heartfelt programs that motivated the kids.”

To Armstrong, her day did not end when the kids left school. She was a regular at football, basketball, wrestling, fine arts programs, evening programs, parent nights, and weekend. She cherishes the opportunity she had to accompany Stall JROTC instructors to attend an officer pinning ceremony for a Stall graduate who attended Clemson University. The student now proudly serves in the United States Air Force. Armstrong could routinely be seen with her camera taking candid shots of students receiving awards so they would have something to show to their parents. Kids always came first.

### **Not here to be an island**

Armstrong left Stall in 2017 to work in the district’s Fine Arts Department. She missed the students but said that working in the district office gave her a new perspective as to how hard CCSD staff works.

Katey Hines-McCormack, former Fine Arts coordinator hired Armstrong in 2017. She describes the way they worked together as being two peas in a pod.

“Sharon had an incredibly steep learning curve to understand intricacies of the myriad of accounts associated with fine arts and she handled it with a sense of humor and grace,” said Hines-McCormack. “I can say that I was incredibly happy to have Sharon at my side throughout our tenure in Fine Arts. The bonus of my time with her is that we became bona fide friends. I love her and her attitude towards life, family, and faith.”

In her role at the district office, Armstrong supported all fine arts programs in the district.

"Sharon Armstrong is the most enthusiastic, energetic lady I know," said Denisse A. Santos, CCSD Visual and Performing Arts Coordinator. "She walks into a room and the whole place lights up. She brings a high level of vitality to every aspect of her work. Ms. Armstrong is not only efficient in her work, she also does everything she can to perform her work accurately and to the best of her ability."

According to Santos, Armstrong takes the time to get to know her co-workers and goes above and beyond in making sure everyone feels welcome and cared for.

"She is notorious for knowing birthdays and sending a card and for providing notes of encouragement to those around her," said Santos. "Where she can help, she goes out of her way to do so. Mrs. Armstrong has served on social committees and is often seen assisting with events for district staff, teachers, and students."

Wilson agreed. While at Stall, she did the same thing.

"Sharon was the school matriarch," said Wilson. "She made sure that school was fun, birthdays were celebrated, special occasions were recognized and good work never went unnoticed. No matter what kind of morning you were having Sharon could put you in a good mood with that big smile and friendly greeting that gave you a better mindset for the day. She treated every parent with kindness making them feel their child or need was the most important."

Armstrong said all of her positions within the district have been an amazing experience where people from across the district were rallying to help each other.

"Teamwork makes the dream work," said Armstrong. "The same goes for me. If someone needs help, I'll do what I can. I'm not here to be an island. I believe God put us here to serve one another. That adventurous part of Armstrong's personality has never dwindled in her 60 years of life. While working in the Fine Arts Department, she also completed a degree in Hospitality "because it seemed like a fun thing to do." For her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, she went tandem skydiving.

In November of 2019, she had the opportunity to again expand her career and transitioned to Transportation.

"In the latter part of my work life, I wanted to take on another challenge," said Armstrong. "I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. It has been a huge blessing for me and it doesn't hurt that my house is three minutes from the office."

For the first time, CCSD owns the routing software of its school buses. Armstrong said having control of the routes allows the team to better serve parents and students' transportation needs.

"Sharon is a welcome addition to our Transportation Team, as she brings a genuine positive attitude to the office," said James Lynch, Director of Transportation. "Since pursuing her new career path as a Transportation Routing Technician, Sharon has embraced this new challenge with an open and eager mind. Her vast experience as a CCSD employee combined with her willingness and motivation to learn a new skill set has enabled Sharon to successfully transition into her new role within Transportation."

### **Full circle**

Working in transportation again is almost like coming full circle for Armstrong.

"CCSD provides great opportunities for those who are seeking out growth, whether it is their work location or their position," said Armstrong. "As long as you qualify and the timing is right, the opportunities are there."

Aside from opportunities, working for the district has afforded Armstrong with some great memories and experiences. One of her favorites was the coordination and ultimate dedication and opening of Mickey's House.

This was an idea brought to Principal Wilson by teacher Alison Gable. It was a model in which a home, staffed by 'house parents', was made available to displaced high school students.

"Mr. Wilson jumped right on it and got support, funding from stakeholders and multiple partnerships," said Armstrong. "The next thing you know, students are being chosen to live there and we're having a dedication ceremony. It's so good to

know those kids have somewhere to go home to and parents there to nurture and encourage them and share meals. Those kids now have the opportunity to make successful lives for themselves.”

Wilson recalls that Armstrong was interviewed by ABC News Channel 4 for a story about Mickey’s House. She showed the reporter around the school and ended up in the school pantry where donations were kept to distribute to these students and families. Sharon became very emotional and said to the reporter, “We can take donations at any time. Every child needs to be able to have a roof over their head and someplace to feel safe, so they can be like everyone else.... Oh, I’m a Weeping Willow.”

Wilson said that Armstrong is a “Weeping Willow.”

“A Weeping Willow is a person who exhibits the highest empathy for others and demonstrates love and compassion in everything she does,” said Wilson. “Sharon does not seek recognition, her goal in life is to make others feel like they are special and that everyone has something to offer. Sharon has a unique way of bringing that out in others. Sharon is the Pulse of CCSD a Weeping Willow that will capture your heart.”

Armstrong said that the school is special and that alumni, former teachers, and community partners continue to support the school and their efforts year after year, including Mickey’s House.

Armstrong misses the direct contact with the students but is determined to put all of her efforts into becoming proficient in the routing software so that she can do her best to design routes with student safety and efficiency in mind.

“I want to do a job that we can all be proud of,” said Armstrong. “The kids are always on my mind. I see dozens of names and numbers each day as I do my work but I am reminded that each one of those names is prized a possession to their parents and I will do all I can to protect those babies.”

This promise falls in line with a poem Armstrong’s mother often recited:

*"If a job is once begun,  
never leave it until it's done.  
Be the task, great or small,  
do it well or not at all."*

"Until I retire, I am going to continue to study my job and do it well," said Armstrong. "If I can't, I won't do it any longer."

"Mrs. Armstrong is so deserving of this honor, and is certainly a strong pulse in CCSD," said Santos.

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#### **About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.