June 2020 felt like a new beginning for many of us in Stone Oak, with restaurants and businesses reopening and a return to a version of normality. For Joanne and James Smith, the month heralded a new beginning as it marked her retirement from a career in higher education that spanned four decades. Joanne spent the last 28 ½ years in student services administration at Texas State University, serving in several positions that culminated as Vice President of Student Affairs.

Joanne described her responsibilities as encompassing everything outside of the classroom — 11 departments such as campus recreation, police, career services, student health, counseling, and diversity. She created the office of retention management and planning, as her primary focus was to retain students and make sure they successfully graduated, she said. She increased the retention rate at Texas State from barely 60 to a highly regarded 78 percent during her tenure.

Joanne developed the Paws Alert Program to help faculty and staff identify at-risk students and created a Bobcat Preview week that combined just-in-time orientation with college resources and spirit building activities. Her motto at Texas State was “Big but Small,” which describes the school’s goal to create a sense of community among the 6,000 freshmen students, while also showcasing the university’s growing population and influence.

“We wanted to make sure students knew we cared about them and wanted them to succeed,” she said. Joanne and James devoted much emotional capital to the Texas State students – considering them their children.

“We were the last stop before the ’big adulthood,” Joanne said. “It was awesome to see their transformation.”

In 2005, James retired from his second career as a national bank examiner for the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency and became a pillar of support for Joanne while her professional star rose.

James and Joanne met 36 years ago as students at Kansas State University. Joanne was pursuing her doctoral degree in Student Affairs Administration and James was completing a dual undergraduate degree in Finance and Accounting, after retiring from the U.S. Army, where he served eight years as a military pay supervisor and twelve years as an auditor.

The two met when Joanne sought James’ help with a finance project. The Smiths participated in counterpart service organizations — Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., with which they continue to serve as alumni. The March of Dimes has been the primary beneficiary of their philanthropic efforts.

The Smiths look forward to rejoining the San Antonio Chorale Society, with which they sang from 1993-2007. They also sing in Trinity United Methodist Church’s choir. They look forward to adding their alto and baritone voices to the chorus at Independence Village’s sing alongs, which they hope will soon be resumed. They moved to their home there two years ago and are delighted with the freedom from maintenance the community affords.

Since Joanne’s retirement, the first activity in which the couple participated was a hotdog lunch in early June. Staff members on golf carts personally delivered the picnic to each resident’s home. Many set up lawn chairs on their driveways to share a social time with friends and neighbors over lunch.

For more information about the lifestyle offered at Independence Village, call (210) 764-5260, or go to www.independencevillage.com.