Erratic childhood, civic work lead Brown to city council

By Kris Hansen

Daily Nebraskan photo

Arlyss Brown is being sworn in as Lincoln's new city councilwoman.

The one-story house is long, sprawling and white, with a driveway arching past the front door.

A pair of grinning hobgoblins, left-overs from Halloween, peek from the window of the upper-middle class house. Inside is Arlyss Brown–43-year-old mother, lawyer, civic worker and new city councilwoman.

She is a homey kind of person–short, square-faced, blue-eyed. Her short brown hair lies in loose ringlets about her head. She has a ready smile and a quick, low laugh.

Past experiences help

Easing back on the couch, Brown smiled as she reflected how the events of her life led to her appointment as councilwoman. She said many things from her past, from her erratic childhood to her civic work, will help her in her new job.

Brown grew up jumping from town to town and school to school. Born in Ashland, she lived in three different cities before settling in central Omaha.

She jumped from class to class, too. As well as changing schools often, Brown skipped a grade from kindergarten to first grade.

Brown said the jump was a mixed blessing. Although she had no trouble keeping up with the class, being a year behind in size occasionally bothered her.

No Christmas part

She recalled her part in the first grade Christmas play–or rather the part she didn't play–of hanging the Christmas stocking.

"They took the part away because I couldn't reach the stocking. It absolutely crushed me," Brown said. "I don't think teachers realize sometimes how important little things are to kids."

She contracted rheumatic fever when she was 10 years old and suffered recurring bouts for the next three years. The fever and pain kept her bedridden much of the time.

"I came to appreciate then the things I'd been taking for granted before that–the simple things. It was also when I developed a deep faith in God," Brown said.

Mother tutored

Brown said her mother, a teacher, tutored her while she was ill. Since she was confined to bed and could only listen to radio and study, she was ahead of her class once she returned to school.

Brown's teacher advised against letting her move ahead with her class, saying that even though she was ahead, she could not cope after being gone.

"I remember her telling Mom, 'She has a lot of potential to do great things but if you don't keep her back, it'll come to nothing.' Well, here's nothing," said Brown with a laugh.

Brown said she was active in many things at Omaha Technical High School, which earned her the class most valuable student award.

High school, college debater

She was an avid debater and won several awards, including the Missouri Valley Debate Championship. She continued debating throughout college, but later gave it up.

"I had enjoyed it, but once you had won the championship they wouldn't let you do it again," Brown recalled. "Besides, I was getting tired of it."

Although Brown entered Omaha University (now UNO) as an art major, she earned bachelor degrees with honors in both government and speech, along with making different plans for her life.

"My biggest ambition when I was growing up was to be a dress designer," Brown said. "How I ever wound up being an attorney I'll never know."

Designing thrill disappears

Her high school plans included going to one of the coasts to study dress design, but her parents would not let her go since she was only 16, Brown explained. After taking art classes at OU, she found the thrill of designing had disappeared.

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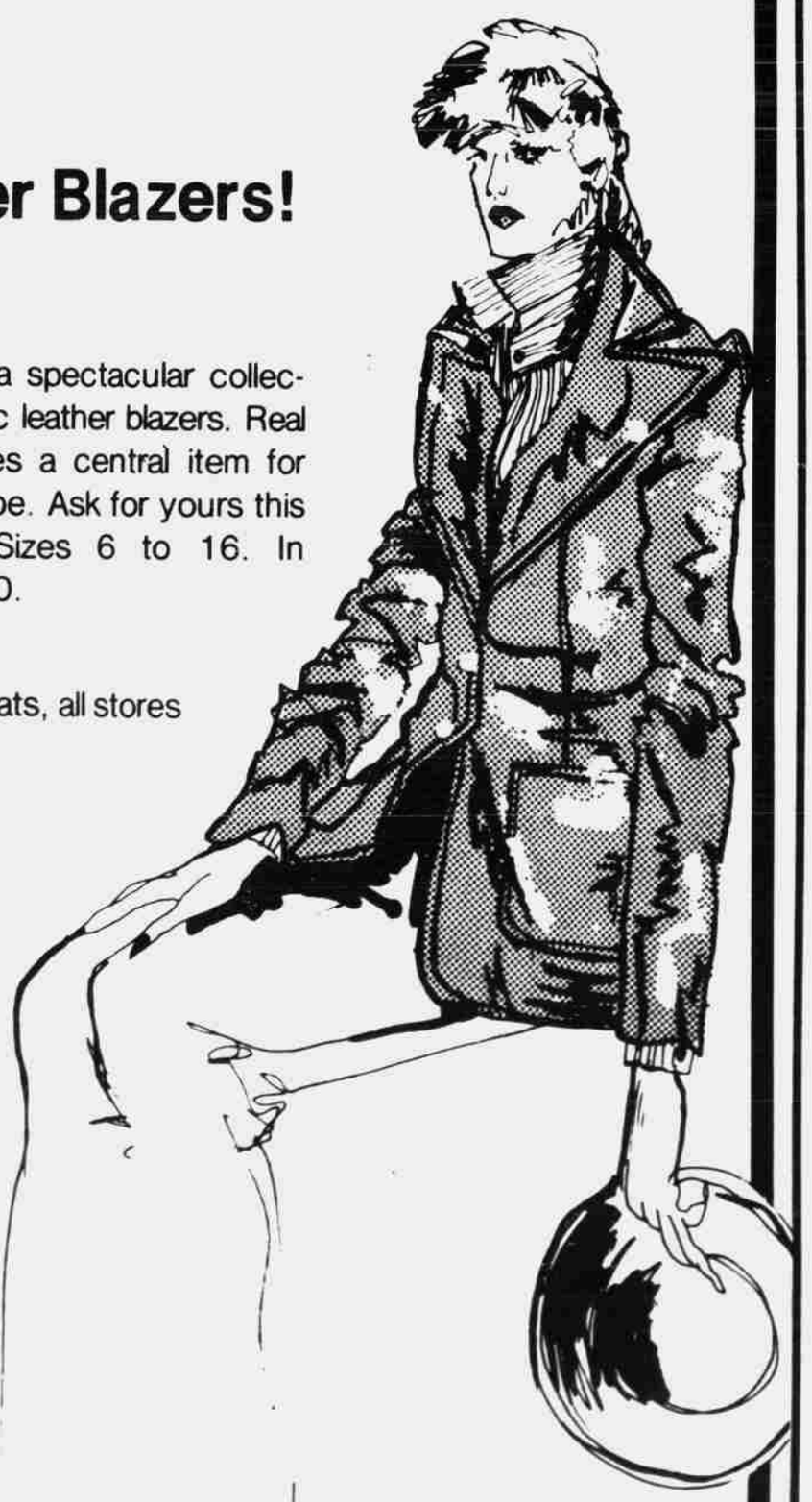

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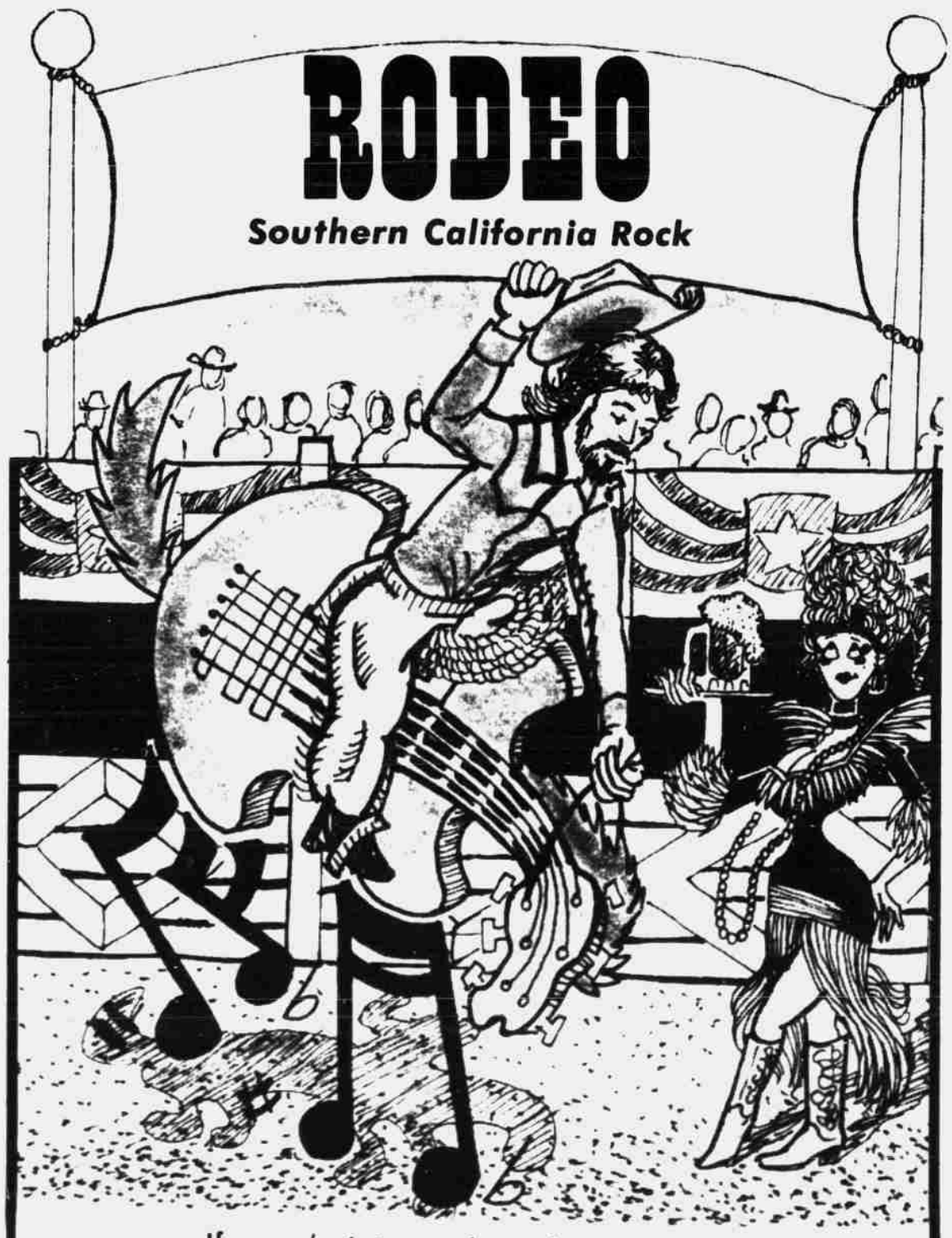

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