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Henderson hails 9 top educators

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PATRICK SULLIVAN/TIMES-NEWS
Dr. Don Jones, right, speaks about Dr. Stephen Page who received a 2010 Special Recognition Award during the Henderson County Education Foundation Eighth Annual Hall of Fame induction ceremony.

A few always knew they would one day be teachers, some were "hooked" into it and others discovered a passion for the profession after their first teaching experience.

The nine members of the Education Foundation Hall of Fame Class of 2010 took different paths to becoming an educator, but wound up in the same place Thursday evening as they were recognized for being the best of the best in Henderson County school history.

"It means a lot to a school system to have the quality of people we have and to have the opportunity to recognize the individuals for what they do for our children," Henderson County Schools Superintendent Stephen Page said during a press conference before the Carolina First/HCEF Hall of Fame awards ceremony and banquet at Hendersonville Country Club.

This eighth class brings the total number of Hall of Fame members to 71. The foundation selects the inductees, who are then honored at the annual banquet sponsored by Carolina First Bank. The dinner is also a major fundraiser for the foundation, which gave college scholarships totaling $62,000 to more than 31 local in 2009-10, according to HCEF Executive Director Dr. Don Jones and HCEF Board President Allen Combs.

The inductees are administrators Gerald G. Greene, Dr. Thomas A. Ledbetter, Steve Norwood and Thomas W. Williams; teachers Ethlyn Sims Byrd, Rosalind Shealy Pardue, Inez Jackson Phillips and Barbara Mathis Stepp; and Lula M. Burrell for support services.

"We are so honored to be here again," Education Foundation board member Regan Ward said in opening the press conference. "I was surprised to find that, at this table, we have 250 years of service to this area."

How did they make it so many years in such a demanding profession? "The best thing is to have a sense of humor," Ledbetter said at the press conference, as the others nodded in agreement. "One of the students asked me why I was always smiling, and I said it beats crying."

Three special recognition awards were given this year for the first time in Hall of Fame history. A tile, certificate and picture of their school or schools were given to county and region Teacher of the Year Dot Case; county, region and state Principal of the Year Jan King; and Page, who is retiring at the end of the school year after six years of leading the district.

More than 200 people attended the three-hour dinner and ceremony, from

community members to family members of the inductees. In his official welcome, Hendersonville City Councilman Steve Caraker said the high level of public education in the area was one of the reasons the area offered such a high quality of life.

Burrell was the first to be called up, and she told the crowd, "In my 50 years and 10 bosses, I learned a lot of things -- patience is one of them."

"I don't know if I've ever known anyone that had 50 years," Jones said. "Lula, we're very proud of you."

Burrell worked for 20 years in Tryon starting in 1941, then worked 30 more for Henderson County Schools beginning in the early 60s.

During the press conference and throughout the evening, the inductees talked about their path to teaching.

Williams said that when he graduated from Hendersonville High, his coach told him, "Tom, I think you need to go into education." Williams was planning to become a civil engineer, but his coach told him he could help get Williams into Western Carolina University on an athletic scholarship. He graduated with a teaching degree.

"I thoroughly enjoyed being in education, the 30-something years I've been involved in it," he said. "The most rewarding part of being an educator is to see the students mature into young men and women and succeed in life."

Phillips, who taught physical education and science for 42 years at Balfour Elementary, said her love for children began at a young age, and she was encouraged by her teachers to join the profession. One of the greatest rewards, she said, is "when I meet children today that I taught, they can tell me what they liked about my class." Phillips said being inducted was an exciting milestone, and she has taught more than 1,200 students.

Ledbetter was East Henderson High School principal from 1971-89, and assistant superintendent over Auxiliary Services from 1989-98. He was another person who didn't plan on becoming a teacher, although he has had many relatives work in education.

"I sorta got hooked into it," he said at the press conference, and stayed for more than two decades.

Pardue taught science at Hendersonville High in 1961-67 and 1990-99, and taught science at Hendersonville Junior High in 1968-73.

Pardue also hadn't planned on becoming a teacher. She was initially accepted to work for the FBI in Washington, D.C. Then she and her father talked about the job and decided it wasn't a place for young single women to working. Instead, she sent out teaching applications.

"I just happened to send one to Hendersonville. I had been up here for the summers," she said. "I've just loved it. I've loved my children."

Pardue said teaching had been her minor in school and she just sent a teaching application to Henderson County because she had visited when young. She ended up with a contract, and a year later met her husband, Jim Pardue, a member of the Hall of Fame class of 2006.

"This means a lot to me and I know Jim would be proud," she said after accepting her tile.

Greene, who was principal of Mills River Elementary for 15 years, from 1971 to 86, after running East Flat Rock for seven years, also had several family members in the

profession -- his father, grandfather, aunt and brother among them.

"And so I didn't have a choice," he joked.

Greene said it was a pleasure to be in the class of 2010. "Being selected to the Education Foundation Hall of Fame means so much to me," he told the crowd. "Knowing I will have my plaque and picture right alongside those I admire and respect is a great honor."

Byrd taught 22 of her 35 years in the county until retiring in 2002. She taught math and science in Balfour Education Center's seventh and eighth grades, starting in 1967, then language arts and social studies in Flat Rock Junior High's early years, 1972-76. She taught at Hillandale Elementary from 1976-86 and Atkinson Elementary in 1986. She taught gifted students at Hendersonville and Bruce Drysdale elementary schools and Hendersonville Middle, then HMS math and language arts.

"It's been a great ride," she said. "I enjoyed it all and I appreciate the honor."

Norwood, who was community schools coordinator from 1982 to 93 and Hillandale Elementary principal from 1993-2002, had a different motivation at first.

A teacher asked him to join Future Teachers of America, and he made a friend join with him. "She (the teacher) said well, we have refreshments, and that got my attention," he said.

Teaching was still far from his mind when he went to East Carolina College, and even when he did his student teaching at a small k-8 school in the country. One day he learned he was getting an A in his class, the first given by his teacher in about 10 years.

"So then I thought, well, maybe teaching is something I could do," he said. He hitchhiked to Georgia, signed a teaching contract and the journey began.

"I think the heroes are all the employees and all the staff that work for the children," Norwood said, and thanked his very first teachers, his mom and dad.

Stepp, who taught kindergarten at Balfour Elementary from 1979 to 2002 and for two years at new Clear Creek before retiring, knew early on that she belonged in the classroom. In 1912, her grandmother became a teacher at age 16 and traveled from community to community to teach. She was always coaching Stepp, who later taught kindergarten students in a church.

Stepp said she liked the job, and went to Balfour School to be a kindergarten assistant. She was encouraged to get her degree and became a kindergarten teacher one bachelor's and one master's degree later. She always taught kindergarten, and loved every minute.

"You can depend on kindergartners to tell you the truth," she said as the audience laughed.

Stepp loves animals and often brought baby pigs into her room. She was given a pot bellied pig as a retirement gift when she left. She wrapped up the night with humorous stories from her days in the classroom. She talked about a "stingy" principal who wouldn't get her an incubator, and so she used a popcorn popper. Except it got too warm, and one day there was an explosion.

"It's been such an honor to be a teacher in Henderson County," she said.

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