

Oklahoma Education Association

Spring 2023

Education Focus



Jet Lagged

How a Western Heights community of educators
Pg. 2 saved their town through organizing

A Crowning Achievement

Local teacher inspires in the classroom and on the pageant stage

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OREA Spotlight

by Monica Royer

Change Takes Time and Patience

Trelma Sullivan retired after working for 27 years at Liberty Elementary School in Ponca City. Now that she cares for her husband full-time, she has had the opportunity to reflect on her career.

She remembered moments when advocacy changed her life. During her teaching career, there was a bill that required “every teacher in Oklahoma to submit a document which specified their goals, aims, objectives, etc., in outline form, for every segment of every subject they were teaching.” It would add hours of work to all educators, so she stood up with many others to fight against the bill. They each wrote letters sharing their concerns, and Sullivan was even given the opportunity to read hers on the Senate floor. Through their efforts, they defeated the bill.

After retiring, she was able to see progress in education again. “Every bit of support that OEA and individual educators can give to the cause of OREA is greatly appreciated. We got our first COLA (Cost-of-Living-Adjustment) in 12 years a few years back. That was a happy day for all retirees, particularly those who had retired many years before and were paid less,” Sullivan explained.

Sullivan was also a part of the Kay County Retired Educators Association, which sadly has been disbanded due to lack of leadership. She hopes that others can stand up like she has in the past to help bring this organization back for those in need.

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The Education Focus

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OEA Oklahoma Education Association
putting education first.

A Letter from the President



I'm in a four-door sedan with two popular football players and my hands gripped tight to the steering wheel. This was the scene that played out twice a week during my driver's education class with Coach Little. Even though you felt like you had a neon sign overhead while driving down the road with "Student Driver" plastered on the back of your car for all to see, those were some of my favorite days of my sophomore semester. I took pride at being a much better driver than "the boys" while watching how nervous they would get having to drive with the head football coach. I loved the lessons I learned from Coach Little. He would always tell us, "You have to accelerate when entering the highway. Turn your head and check your blind spot when changing lanes. But most importantly, you have to look at the road and you must always look for anything that might be coming." I can hear him today, "Katherine, quit being a looky-loo and trying to see what's going on around you - it's only going to distract you from what's important ahead of you." I've carried Coach Little's words with me all these years and while they are still very important to my driving, they have also been integral to how I focus and tackle day-to-day issues.

As much as I would have liked for all the political rhetoric, campaigning, and culture war issues to have stopped, we have quickly seen that they are going to continue. We heard it from the first State School Board meeting, the governor's State of the State, and bills that have been filed for the 59th Legislative Session. So many people would like to create a space to keep us as perpetual "Looky-Loo's" by distracting us with press grabbing bills, proposing plans to provide only some teachers with pay incentives, and claiming the vote at the polls was a mandate for parent choice, i.e. vouchers. This could not be further from the truth. So let me break these down one at a time.

Press grabbing bills - Over 500 education bills were filed for this legislative session. While many of them are good and provide the needed reform for our schools, students, or profession, there are those bills that are written as divisive and attention-getting bills. Some might get heard only in committee and some might even get heard on the House or Senate floor, but their purpose is to distract, create fear, or fuel their base of supporters. It's nothing more and nothing less, but I get it. Each time I read a proposed bill that is filled with hate and misinformation, it is like a dagger through my heart. Every one of us is a service provider for our students and we work daily to provide an environment that is going to build them up and help them be successful. Your number one job is your students and OEA's number one job is to have your back. We are going to keep you informed throughout our weekly legislative email updates and by providing opportunities to lobby at the Capitol and have dinners with legislators back home.

Pay - We are in a workforce crisis! Our schools and districts are lacking the personnel to fill classrooms, drive buses, serve meals, or clean facilities. We've got a people problem and to solve this issue, it is going to take a recurring financial investment in our core service that we provide. We know that in order to attract and retain teachers and support professionals we need for all employees to receive a pay increase. You can't have a stable workforce without investing financially. There are several bills proposed to do just that and we will be keeping you informed of their progress.

Elections - Oklahoma's November election was definitely interesting and filled with victories and disappointments. What we saw was that individuals elected at the local level were elected because of their platforms, but statewide elections were decided by party. The governor expressed in his State of the State that his reelection was a mandate on vouchers. This is not true. Our recent polling confirms the message that we heard last March: Oklahoman's want their public dollars going to public schools. They also want more money invested in our public schools and for school personnel to receive pay increases.

So, as you can see, there is a lot going on as we enter the 2nd semester of the school year. OEA members, I want you to know that we are here for you to keep you informed, active, and engaged. Remember to keep your eyes open for what is ahead and don't be distracted by the bumps in the road.

Katherine Bishop

Jet Lagged

by Joe Duvall

How a Western Heights community of educators saved their town through organizing.

Sharon Teague has taught in Western Heights for the last 50 years and she had never seen anything like it.

“It seemed like I was in a different place,” said the Western Heights middle school teacher and Western Heights Education Association (WHEA) President.

It was April of 2021. The State Board of Education intervened by placing the school district on probation for a litany of causes. Western Heights Public Schools and then-superintendent Mannix Barnes were being accused of mishandling funds,

failure to provide in-person instructional services to students, a lack of willingness to respond to concerns of the parents and the community, failure to provide food for students, and a significant loss in enrollment and teachers.

The district’s enrollment had declined by 30%, graduation rates were among the lowest in the state, and a quarter of the district’s staff left.

“It felt like a lot more than that,” said Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) advocacy specialist Carnie Cullen, who worked with Teague and WHEA every day of the multi-year ordeal.

From the beginning, there were red flags warning that the Mannix Barnes era could result in catastrophe. He had never been a teacher, was not an administrator, and did not possess a superintendent’s license at the time.

“When I have an issue, I call Carnie,” declared Teague.

“We were concerned,” recalled Cullen, “But I remember telling Sharon, ‘Let’s give him a chance. Let’s try to work with him.’”

Even as Barnes re-opened already negotiated contracts and things were getting tense, WHEA was still attempting to maintain lines of communication and work together.

Then March 2020 happened. The COVID-19 pandemic began and the world stopped.

At that point, the Superintendent of Western Heights Public Schools became less and less approachable.

“He would rarely return e-mails or phone calls. We just could not get in to see him at all,” said Teague.

During the pandemic, certified teachers were able to continue receiving their regular salary. Education support professionals had no such guarantee, which meant in many districts like Western



Heights, support staff needed to work hours at the school to continue earning a living.

While other districts around the state were able to create schedules that rotated staff equally, Western Heights had no such process.

“We tried to have a fair and equitable rotation so people could get paid,” said Cullen. “When we went to talk to him about, ‘This is what we’re doing in Moore, Mid-Del, Norman, etc., so people don’t lose money,’ he refused to talk to us.”

The red flags from the hiring of Mannix Barnes were beginning to glow orange with fire.

“That’s when he shut down food service,” recalled a still visibly upset Teague. “This is a district that is completely free-and-reduced lunch.”

In a letter to Western Heights, the State Department of Education (SDE) expressed fears that the district suspended food service so it wouldn’t have to pay school support employees, not because of social distancing concerns.

Barnes issued a “double dare” to State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister and

Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt to feed the children themselves before reinstating food service almost a week later after continued pressure from the SDE.

During this period, staff positions from each core subject and two electives were eliminated, which created even larger class sizes and skeleton crews. The superintendent also failed to pay extra duties to club sponsors and some of the coaches.

“At first, we tried to handle it by talking to him,” said Cullen, “He usually ended up screaming at us, so Sharon and I would get up and walk out of the room. He was also rumored to have a reputation of walking in and telling people they were fired without going through any of the legal steps. People were petrified they were going to lose their job because of him.”

“A lot of people started looking elsewhere for jobs for the next year,” remembered Teague, “We lost quite a few

people.”

While in bargaining conversations, Barnes presented WHEA with a completely gutted copy of the contract that stripped away the rights of educators and refused to talk or negotiate any of it.

“We had eight or nine bargaining sessions before we just said, ‘That’s it, we’re done,’” said Cullen.

For Teague, Western Heights had become the “different place” than it was under his predecessor.

“We’ve never been this way. I can’t explain it because I’d worked for many superintendents, worked well with many superintendents,” the 50-year educator said, “We’ve not always agreed, but we’ve always been able to sit down and work through our disagreements.”

“That’s when things ramped up,” said Teague, “That’s when we started getting the community involved.”

“OEA PLAYED A BIG PART IN ORGANIZING THE COMMUNITY. WE’VE NEVER BEEN FACED WITH THIS BEFORE, SO WHERE DO WE GO? HOW DO WE DO THIS? IT WAS MUCH MORE ORGANIZED THAN IF IT HAD JUST BEEN US.”

After asking educators to reach out to everyone they knew, WHEA hosted “10 or 15 people” at their first meeting.

“We went over everything that was going on, listened to their concerns, and said, ‘Ok, can you guys go get more people?’ By the end, the meetings were so packed we had to move to a different location,” said Cullen. Teague credits Cullen and her professionalism for the coalition of concerned educators and community members gaining traction.

“OEA played a big part in organizing the community. We’ve never been faced with this before, so where do we go? How do we do this? It was much more organized than if it had just been us.”

“Back then, Sharon and I were best friends on the phone,” joked Cullen.

“We talked every day. I had her on speed dial,” laughed Teague, “I would just lay it all out. ‘Is it legal? Can they do that? How do we respond?’”

Barnes, who earned \$220,000 per year (\$115,000 more than his predecessor and 5th highest in Oklahoma despite Western Heights being 34th in total enrollment), was also

facing scrutiny for alleged mishandling of district funds after it was discovered things like insurance payments were not being made.

WHEA presented the community with the possibility of a petition to audit the school district and asked them to contact the SDE with a request to take a good look at Western Heights Public Schools, its superintendent Mannix Barnes, and the board members who enabled him.

“I’m telling you, people that never showed up to a WHEA meeting got on the phone and called the state department,” said Cullen, “They came and picketed, they came to the board meetings.”

“Our situation is dire for our students, our families and for our teachers,” said one of the letters to the SDE, “Mr. Barnes has complete disdain for all of us and has made derogatory remarks to individuals about what he thinks about our families such as they are ‘dumb and poor.’”

Following the efforts of the community and WHEA, the Oklahoma State Board of Education suspended Barnes in June 2021 and a month later took over operations of the district.

An Oklahoma County district judge, who ruled in favor of the state takeover, called Western Heights “a mess, financially, operationally and in every other way I can think of.”

Barnes was placed under investigation by the State Auditor and Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation.

After being suspended for over a year, Mannix Barnes officially resigned as superintendent of Western Heights Public Schools and



turned in his Oklahoma Educators Certificate. Three controversial school board members also resigned. When each action was announced at a December 12, 2022 meeting, the crowd cheered.

“It was an enjoyable experience we haven’t been used to recently,” exhaled Teague, “I think we’re looking up.” Brayden Savage, the interim

superintendent who was recently extended to the full-time position, meets with WHEA every week and has been completely transparent. This was something that seemed so far away at that first meeting of 10 to 15 concerned educators. That seed of hope was watered with daily diligence and organizing by WHEA and sprouted into the reality of a better future for their community.

"We've had two or three former teachers at the middle

TS o New Heights

school come back. They went other places after this debacle started and they've come back," said Teague, "So we are rebuilding, because this is like a big family out here. Once you're out here, you love Western Heights."

Those who went through the multi-year ordeal want others to learn from their experience, so they do not have to endure what Western Heights endured.

"If it's in the contract and you have a question about it, address it," advised Cullen, "You cannot become complacent with your contract."

"We realized a lot of lessons and I think we're probably better for it," said Teague, "You got to be vigilant. You cannot let things slide. You must pay attention to everything that goes on. Even the small things in your contract. It's there for your protection."

OEA is also there for your protection, something many more people are aware of in Western Heights today.

"People say, 'You need to be a member of WHEA and OEA because they had our back at the walkout and they had our back when Mannix Barnes was superintendent,'" said Cullen, "The association has shown their members what they do when times get tough."

This story is an example of the real-life progress and joy that can be experienced when educators organize and unite behind a single cause. It is no coincidence that WHEA has gained over 30 members in one year.

"This is absolutely why I do this job," reflected Cullen, "Sharon and I will have that Western Heights story for the rest of our lives and it's something we'll never forget. But all those teachers have learned to stand up for themselves and that's something I'll never forget."

Thanks to the hard work of so many, including herself, Western Heights Sharon Teague is beginning to recognize the town she spent half a century educating.

"It makes me feel good to see that we are making progress and people are coming back to work here. Once a Jet, you're always a Jet."





Civics? Education? Let's do both!

Civication is an exciting opportunity for OEA members to connect with state lawmakers and make a difference in Oklahoma public education.

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A Crowning Achievement

LOCAL TEACHER INSPIRES IN THE CLASSROOM AND ON THE PAGEANT STAGE

With the name Sunny Day, it is easy to assume that this is not the average teacher. In her five years in the classroom, Day has been a fifth grade English and social studies teacher, sixth grade English teacher, ELA site coordinator, Attendance Chair, and Cheer Coach at Western Heights Public Schools. On top of all of that, Day is also a pageant queen, model, advocate, volunteer, and social media content creator.

Day began participating in pageants when she first attended The University of Oklahoma. She was a shy child, so her mom encouraged her to make friends.

"I saw a flyer for the Miss OU Pageant and thought it would be a great place to meet people," Day said. "I finished in last place, but I did make friends and even received a scholarship to help with school."

Day went on to participate in many more pageants over the next ten years such as Miss Earth, Miss America, and Miss USA. These experiences ended up changing her life beyond relationships and titles.

"I have a passionate heart and always wanted to fight for things but did not have the courage to do so until I started doing pageants," Day added.

While pageantry and teaching seem wildly different, for Day, they went hand-in-hand.

"To participate in pageants, you must have a platform; mine has always been education. I use my time on stage to share experiences of the classroom. Many people have never heard teachers say these things on a large platform. This helps the community gain insight and understand why we are worth fighting for," Day stated.

Developing this platform helped Day to remember her purpose for teaching.

"I see myself in the kids that I work with, specifically those that come from traumatic households. I grew up with a single mom and my dad had addiction issues. Miraculously, I was the first person to finish high school and college. If it was not for my education, I could have ended up like them," Day shared.

Because of the confidence she gained through her experiences, she felt comfortable sharing her story with her students.

Day explained, "I offer a unique perspective. I'm open with my kids and tell them my real experiences. I know there are people who are telling them that they'll never be anything. I think my story inspires kids to not give up with themselves. The few teachers who stood and protected me changed my life, and I want to be that person for them."

ment

PAGEANT STAGE

by Monica Royer

Day was even approached by Vice News to be a part of a documentary that highlights what life is like for contestants outside of pageantry and the hardships they face. They followed Day behind the scenes while competing in Miss Earth and even went to her classroom to film her teaching. She was open about her struggles with work-life balance and being diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

“Work-life balance is difficult, but I’ve improved some over the years. I take time to do yoga and see a therapist. If I’m not mentally there, there’s no way I can serve those kids. I used to feel guilty if I was sick at the beginning of my career, and now I’m unapologetic when taking mental health days. School systems can do better to offer resources to teach us how to achieve this sooner.”

Day plans to retire from pageantry soon but takes the lessons she has gained with her.

“Oklahoma is getting better and growing, but we still have a long way to go. This journey has inspired me to run for office and make bigger changes and to advocate for teachers,” Day said.

Day has proven that pageant contestants are more than just pretty women on stage and that teaching is more than just delivering

curriculum. She is living proof that even in the darkest of times, there will always be Sunny Days ahead.



The Mustang Polar Exp

OEA MEMBERS BRING LITERATURE TO LIFE AT CREEK
ELEMENTARY by Joe Duvall

Too often people drive by a public school and all they see is brick and mortar – missing the magic that goes on inside.

From the outside, Mustang Creek Elementary School looks like any other school. It is a brick building that rests behind a lush green lawn and is centered by a main entrance that is adorned by two large trees on each side. It is lovely and charming. Yet, many motorists and community members probably drive by it every day without giving it much thought.

Inside the school, though, educators are working every day in new and innovative ways to bring a child's imagination to life.

Terri Story has taught for 27 years in Oklahoma in the classroom, but knew she found a home as the library and media specialist at Creek Elementary.

"I enjoy experiencing all of the grade levels," said Story, "My biggest thing is I want every kid to love reading."

While teaching at Greenvale Elementary in Western Heights, Story was inspired by their library and media specialist.

"Cindy Littlefield created this



Polar Express that you stepped into, sat down, and at that time the kids watched a film strip of Polar Express," said Story, "So when I became a library and media specialist myself, I knew I wanted to bring that back."

Creek's media assistant Salinda McCubbins shared similar passions and inspirations as Story. "I just love books," admitted McCubbins, "To watch a kid's eyes light up when they find what's right for them."

Story began telling McCubbins about her experience at Green Bell and wanting to make it come alive at Creek. Salinda then told her husband, Brandon McCubbins, who had the skills to make a plan become reality and the rest was history.

"Brandon is the architect behind the Polar Express," admitted Story.

"He created a 12-by-30 foot frame with a tarp as an entry so that we can open and close

it with icicle lights," bragged Salinda about her husband.

Story and McCubbins then line the inside with rows of chairs for the students to make it feel as if they are sitting inside a train.

"We black out the lights, train sounds are playing," said Story.



The "train" encompasses the entire library, as students are served hot chocolate and allowed to wear pajamas, which is a treat no matter your age.

"Their eyes just lit up," said Story, "I see every class, every grade level from pre-K to 4th

Express

grade. The pre-K kids were just in awe, the 4th graders loved it, and probably my favorite is to see the teachers' reaction."

"We also built the train around the smart board, that way when we have guest readers the pages are displayed, and all the children can still read."

One particular guest had a blast coming in to read for the children, but did leave Story

Many notable Oklahomans answered the invitation from Story and McCubbins to read for children on the Polar Express. Along with the Mustang Fire Department, guest speakers have included the Oklahoma City Police Department, who brought with them a police dog, elected officials like Joy Hofmeister and Leslie Osborn, newscasters and meteorologists ("Channel 5 gave us a shoutout."), community members, administration, staff, and board members.

"We're just trying to get people to come out, especially to a library these days," said Story, "We want to promote literature, not restrict it."

OEA President Katherine Bishop was one of the guest readers to visit the Polar Express at Mustang Creek Elementary School.

"The kids are immersed immediately," remembered Bishop, "You really felt like you were in the book. Watching the kids was amazing. They were so engaged."

"We enjoy hearing from parents that say their child couldn't stop talking about it," said McCubbins.

Like the Mustang Creek Elementary School building, Terri Story, Salinda McCubbins, library and media specialists,

and educators across the state are doing incredible work that not enough Oklahomans are able to see. By inviting in community members, media, and elected leaders, Story and McCubbins have revealed a beautiful blind spot that too many often ignore.

"Terri and Salinda are truly educators at heart," said Bishop, "What we want so badly is for kids to read for pleasure and our library media specialists around the state are incredible."

For Story and McCubbins, their hard work on the Polar Express and the efforts spent shining a light on it to the public are means to one end.

"They get to escape for a little bit to another world," said McCubbins, "Some kids will never get to experience going on the Polar Express."

"I want my room to be a safe spot," revealed Story.



and McCubbins with some notes.

"The Mustang Fire Chief came and loved it, but gave us some safety tips to make it safer," recalled Story, "Now it has a PVC frame. We continue to build upon the previous years and the kids love it."

Beyond Teaching

EDUCATORS LEARN HOW TO HELP STUDENTS AND THEMSELVES GROW FROM TRAUMA by Monica Royer

This school year, the Teaching and Learning Center at OEA was able to offer a new workshop under the OEA Trauma Cadre Initiative. The goal of the cadre is to provide free, strategies-rich, trauma-informed presentations to Oklahoma educators.

The cadre is comprised of administrators, counselors, teachers, and other educational staff. With the help of two well-regarded Oklahoma researchers, the cadre members were able to develop 2-3 hour presentations for elementary and secondary educators. Additionally, they offered “Beyond Trauma Informed for Educators: Daily Practices to Process Trauma Exposure,” which was created to help educators with the management of repetitive trauma exposure.

“Many educators that I visited with on a regular basis shared their concerns about the trauma-affected students they see and felt under-equipped to help them. One of the most important aspects of the Beyond Trauma Informed trainings and the work of this cadre is the practical, immediately accessible strategies that teachers can take with them and begin implementing in

their classrooms and with their students,” Mary Dikes, OEA Teaching and Learning Specialist, explained.

The OEA Trauma Cadre offered two free presentations in January 2023 at the University of Central Oklahoma and Northeastern Oklahoma State University.



Laura Bowie, a 7th-grade science teacher at Western Oaks Middle School, went with the hope of helping her students in ways that her former teachers could not do for her.

“I am a survivor of childhood trauma of various types; many of my teachers did not know how to reach me, nor did they recognize the signs of someone dealing with the aftereffects of childhood trauma. I don’t want to see any of my students fall through the gaps and feel no one gets them or understands them,” Bowie shared.

When asked why she believed that all educators should attend these types of workshops,

Bowie explained “These are challenging topics to discuss, some that many want to pretend don’t exist in their schools or cities. Learning should always continue even after a degree is obtained. As educators, we should continually expand our knowledge to benefit our students.”

Kimberly Littrell, M.Ed., OEA NE/SE Teaching and Learning Specialist, shared this same belief.

“The science of trauma is helping us understand that a regulated child is a child who can learn, and that a dysregulated child cannot be punished into regulation. We cannot extricate emotions from the learning process as the links to behavior and cognition are vast! Understanding trauma’s impacts and utilizing implementable strategies allows educators to do what they do best—educate and care for the whole child,” Littrell said.

After these successful presentations, the Trauma Cadre is excited to continue their work and provide more presentations at schools across the state. They hope to continue to help educators and students heal from their trauma and grow in an ever-changing world.

NEON

NEW EDUCATORS OF OKLAHOMA NETWORK

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SCAN BELOW FOR MORE INFORMATION AND CURRENT EVENTS



BEYOND TRAUMA INFORMED PRESENTATIONS

While many Oklahoma educators have attended professional development on the theory of trauma exposure and how it impacts children, OEA's cadre presentations focus on in-the-moment and curricular

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