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Teacher Hall of Fame inducts four local educators

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Oct 5, 2023



Top row, from left: Jesse Brown and Helen Russell. Bottom row, from left: Kimberlea Embry and Donna Smith.

Submitted

The Governor Louie B. Nunn Kentucky Teacher Hall of Fame at Western Kentucky University accepted four local teachers into its ranks.

Jesse Brown of Glasgow Independent Schools, Kimberlea Embry of Butler County High School, the late Helen Russell of Barren County Schools and the late Donna Smith of Allen County-Scottsville High School made up the hall's 15th cohort announced last week.

Jesse Brown



Brown retired from teaching at Glasgow High School in 1993 after 30 years yet remains a constant presence in the school.

He took a break from substituting a class last week to be recognized in front of faculty, staff and students at the school.

Principal Joey Norman said Brown has been an inspiration to both teachers and students for decades.

“There’s no generational disconnect because (students) respect the fact that he’s been doing it for so long,” Norman said. “He’s a good role model for younger teachers, to let them know that ‘hey, even though our days are tough sometimes, Mr. Brown always comes in with a smile and leaves with a smile.’ ”

Jim Evans, a Glasgow resident since he was 14, sat in Brown’s world history class in 1964. They became off-and-on friends in the years after.

He said Brown was the only teacher he wanted to pay attention to.

“I stumbled into the Teacher Hall of Fame back last June or so and I thought, ‘I know the perfect person,’ ” Evans recalled.

Evans, along with the Glasgow High School administration, drafted up a nomination for Brown and collected over 70 letters of support from students and peers.

They were beyond happy to hear he was accepted.

“He’s a real teacher. That’s so simple, but that’s what I can tell you,” Evans said. “He’s not just an instructor, he’s a real teacher. He works to let you learn instead of just memorize a bunch of facts.”

Kimberlea Embry

Embry is in her 31st and final year teaching family and consumer sciences at Butler County High School.

She is a proud adviser of the school's Family, Career and Community Leaders of America chapter and a self-described "eternal optimist." Embry also oversees a "Playschool" for preschool aged students in the district.

Following the education footsteps of her mother and grandmother, Embry knew she wanted to be a teacher as early as high school.

"We have a responsibility to prepare kids for the future workforce, and that's part of what we do – teaching students everything from soft skills to technical areas, or in my case, early childhood," Embry said.

Her children, Matthew and Delaney, subsequently followed in her footsteps. Matthew also teaches at Butler County High School while Delaney teaches at Murray Independent Schools.

Embry takes pride knowing that students are able to walk away from her class with skills they'll use their entire lives. A member of the Aberdeen Catholic Church, her faith has motivated her through decades of teaching.

"I have always felt God put me in this position to hopefully bless others," Embry said. "To help kids make sure they know somebody cares about them, loves them and wants them to have healthy, happy lives."

Her final year teaching has a “bittersweet” feeling, though she’s excited to spend more time with her family.

Embry said there are many teachers much more qualified for the Hall of Fame, but it’s a welcome surprise regardless.

“I’m very overwhelmed, to be honest – very humbled, very honored,” she said. “I had no idea. I was very surprised.”

Helen Russell

Russell began teaching history at Barren County High School in 1973 during the school’s inaugural year.

She retired from teaching in 2000, only to return to education in 2003 as a curriculum specialist for Barren County Middle School.

Russell retired again in 2015 and passed away in 2020 at the age of 80.

Cortni Crews, BCSD assistant superintendent and longtime friend of Russell, said she was “born to be a teacher.”

“I always called her Yoda,” Crews said. “I’m a Star Wars fan, and I felt like she was really the master teacher.”

Russell started in the district as a library secretary at Park City Elementary in 1965, later serving as a school counselor there.

Crews said her experience in elementary, middle and high school environments made her the perfect mentor for less experienced teachers and students alike.

“She taught me to be a servant leader,” Crews recalled. “She just always lifted up those around her. You got cards, you got texts, you got voicemails, she’d send you pictures – it didn’t matter what was going on in her life.”

She added that despite appearing as a “prim and proper lady,” Russell also knew how to get a laugh and liven up a room. Her faith also encouraged Russell to see people in their best light.

“She made sure you saw your value not just in her eyes, but she wanted you to see the value you had in God’s eyes,” Crew said.

Crews recalled the sentiments of the late writer Jesse Stuart, who inspired her with the sentiment that “a teacher lives on through the lives of their students.”

She said as Russell mentored an “immense amount” of up-and-coming teachers as an instructional specialist, her impact on the district will continue to live on for generations.

“Good teaching is forever and the teachers are immortal,” Crew said. “(Russell’s) lessons are forever. She always took pictures of sunrises and sunsets and would share them with us all, so I think I see her in every sunrise and her love just carries on.”

Donna Smith

Smith taught math at Allen County-Scottsville High School for 30 years and remains a celebrated figure among many in the district.

Smith retired in 2013 and fought cancer for several years before passing away in 2021 at 59.

Amy Williams, a fellow teacher, met Smith as her student during her second year teaching geometry and “later became like best friends.”

“She was like a sister to me,” Williams said. “She and her family kind of took me in after I got out of college, and then I ended up teaching with her at the high school.”

Williams said Smith had an exceptional knack for getting to know students, not just as pupils but as people.

“You could ask her about any class and she could tell you where everybody sat,” Williams said. “I had her for her second year teaching, and she could tell me where I sat in her class 30 years later.”

As she built up her own teaching experience, Williams regularly looked to Smith for inspiration, as did many other young educators around her.

“There are several people teaching today that had her as a teacher, and I know she played a major role in them becoming educators,” she said.

Smith was a “very strong Christian woman” though wouldn’t push her beliefs on anyone unwilling, Williams said. She was also a well-known basketball player as a student, earning a spot in the district’s Hall of Fame for her time as a Lady Patriot.

Her faith and athleticism combined in her role as a representative for the Southern Kentucky Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which she continued after retirement.

“FCA of Southern Kentucky would not be what it is today without Donna Smith,” Williams said.

Following her death, the organization renamed its camp scholarship fund in Smith’s honor. The fund provides assistance to Christian athletes seeking to attend camps around the state.

“Donna made a huge impact in the lives of students and coaches by sharing her faith in Jesus through sport,” the organization said in a Facebook post. “She had a deep desire for all to come to know Christ as Lord and Savior.”

Williams said no one is perfect, but Smith “was pretty close.”

“She was just always willing to go out of her way for you if she could and just do whatever she needed to help you out,” she said.

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