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Teacher Hall of Fame celebrates four local inductees

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Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman and Robin Kinney of the Kentucky Department of Education presented the 2023 inductees (from left) Eddie and Rick Russell representing the Russell family, and Holder representing her late sister, Donna Smith of Scottsville, Jesse Brock. The induction ceremony took place in WKU's Gary Ransdell Hall auditorium on Friday, December 1, 2023. Photo by Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Educators from across the region converged on Western Kentucky University's campus to celebrate the induction of four local teachers to the Governor Louie B. Nunn Kentucky Teacher Hall of Fame.

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.

The four were welcomed by WKU President Timothy Caboni, Dean of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences Corinne Murphy, interim State Commissioner of Education Robin Kinney, Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman and superintendents from each district.

"Nothing inspires rising educators more than those who did it best, those who demonstrate profound devotion to developing young minds, transforming lives and shaping our future," Caboni said. "And that's why we're here today — to recognize excellence."

Inductees were each recognized for their decades of work and presented with awards to mark the occasion. Russell's award was accepted by her sons, Eddie and Rick Russell, while Smith's was presented her to sister, Sue Holder.

Brown graduated in 1962 from Western Kentucky State College, now WKU, and has been "a staple of Glasgow Independent School District" for decades, Kinney said.

“In fact, when the district was told the good news about Mr. Brown, they immediately started planning a celebration for him,” Kinney said.

Brown spent 30 years teaching history at Glasgow High School and has continued to serve as a substitute for 12 years. Brown said he now often sees the grandchildren of former students come through his classes.

“I’m so blessed in my age to be able to still do what I love to do. I had a number of my former students here and that’s always rewarding,” Brown said. “To hear nice things said about you, you’d be crazy if you didn’t like it.”

Brown said things have changed drastically since he began teaching, especially with the proliferation of digital learning. He said his experience coming up with “no technology, just me” taught him the power of one-on-one relationships with students.

“I relate well to kids. I think part of it’s kind of a grandfather figure to them now with my age and all that,” Brown said. “Still, they respond well to me and I don’t have any problems with the discipline — it’s just a fun thing to do.”

Embry, a WKU graduate of 1990, is “involved in so many roles at Butler County High School that it’s difficult to narrow down her title to just a few words,” Kinney said.

Primarily a family and consumer sciences teacher, Embry is also a cross country coach, advisor of the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America student organization, helps coordinate annual projects and events for students and serves on state curriculum committees, among other roles across the school.

Kinney said Butler County High's FCCLA, under Embry's mentorship, is "considered one of the best in country" and last year placed among the top 10 chapters nationally.

Embry said this will be her final year of teaching before retirement but the award is a good way to go out.

"I never expected anything like this, and I'm truly humbled that so many people felt like I was worthy of any kind of award," Embry said. 'It's just another one of God's blessings, I'm truly thankful.' "

Embry, an member of Aberdeen Baptist Church in Morgantown, said her faith in God and her passion for education helped get her through the most difficult times.

"God always gets me through — prayer, having Christian friends, my church family, but also just knowing that you're making a difference for kids, even during COVID," Embry said. "COVID was a hard time for everybody, but I knew the kids needed us then more than ever."

Russell, who passed away in 2020, graduated from WKU in 1970 and spent 44 years within Barren County Schools, beginning at Barren County High in it's 1973 inaugural

year.

Russell retired — for the first time — in 2000. She began as curriculum coordinator for the district in 2003 until her second retirement in 2015.

Cortni Crews, BCSD assistant superintendent and longtime friend of Russell, told the Daily News last month 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.”

Crews said despite appearing as a “prim and proper lady,” Russell knew how to get a laugh and liven up a room. Russell’s faith encouraged her to see people in their best light, Crews said.

“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.

Kinney, quoting a former student of Russell’s, described her as “the heartbeat of Barren County High School.”

“There are dozens of messages from former students that talked about how much they loved their favorite teacher and miss her smile,” Kinney said. “That smile and her legacy will now and forever be remembered as we induct Helen Russell into the Kentucky Teacher Hall of Fame.”

Smith, who graduated from WKU in 1983, taught math at Allen County-Scottsville High School for 30 years before passing away in 2021.

Kinney said Smith earned a place in the Hall of Fame for being “a positive, amazing force inside and outside the classroom” and for “teaching students both math and the important lessons of life.”

“As her former students can attest, the late Donna Smith was the epitome of a truly great teacher and, to many, the coolest math teacher in the world,” Kinney said.

Amy Williams, a fellow teacher, told the Daily News last month she was a student when she met Smith early in her career. The pair “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.”

Williams said she regularly looked to Smith for inspiration as she began teaching herself, as did many other burgeoning 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, 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.

Coleman, following the event, said all four inductees showed a long-time commitment to education and understood teaching is more than “an eight-to-three job.”

“It’s a job where you invest in young people every single day, and that’s hard,” Coleman said. “It’s mentally, physically and emotionally exhausting, but it is truly the work of building the future and that’s truly what you heard that these honorees have done every day of their career.”

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