

Athens City Schools Alumni Spotlight- Dr. Jane Qualls

As Athens City Schools celebrates the 75th anniversary of Camp Oo-tah-nee-noh-chee, the district is reflecting on the many generations of students whose experiences at camp—and throughout Athens City Schools—helped shape their lives. One of those students is Dr. Jane Qualls, whose connection to Athens City Schools began more than 70 years ago.

Dr. Qualls attended Athens City Schools from 1954 through 1959, completing third through eighth grade at City Park Elementary. As an Athens City student, she played flutist in band, played six-on-six basketball as a forward, and enjoyed tennis and swimming. She also attended Camp Oo-tah-nee-noh-chee as a fifth and eighth grader and later returned as a junior counselor.

Her fondest memory of her ACS years is especially meaningful as the district celebrates the camp's 75th anniversary. Dr. Qualls was part of the first group of students to experience overnight camp and was also in the class that helped select the name Oo-tah-nee-noh-chee.

“I was in the first group to do overnights and in the class that helped decide on a name for Oo-tah-nee-noh-chee,” she recalled.

After graduating from McMinn County High School in just three years, Dr. Qualls attended Tennessee Wesleyan for one year before continuing her education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Over the following six years, she earned her B.S., M.S., and Ed.D. degrees. She earned her teaching certificate in 1966 and her doctorate in 1969, becoming the youngest person at the time to earn a doctorate from UT.

Dr. Qualls went on to dedicate six decades to education. She spent 35 years with Alcoa City Schools, beginning her career as a kindergarten teacher and eventually serving as Supervisor of Instruction for K–12 education for 22 years. In 1989, she was named Tennessee’s Supervisor of the Year and later served as president of the state supervisors’ organization.

In 1999, Dr. Qualls became Alcoa City Schools’ first female Superintendent/Director of Schools, a position she held for five years. During her career, she was recognized for outstanding leadership and helped develop and oversee numerous innovative educational programs, including Basic Skills First, SECME-Minority Engineering Education, paid fifth-year internships for student teachers, arts programs featuring professional artists and dance instructors, sign language as a second language, “grow your own” minority teacher programs, foreign exchange opportunities, and scuba diving experiences for biology students.

She also oversaw major construction projects, including the Alcoa High School gymnasium and Alcoa Middle School classroom and Commons buildings.

Following her 35 years with Alcoa City Schools, Dr. Qualls spent another 22 years at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, serving as an adjunct professor in teacher education and facilitator in the administrative leadership program.

After 60 years of service in education, Dr. Qualls retired in 2026.

Her commitment to education extended beyond the school system. Throughout her career, she recognized the importance of community partnerships and served on or worked with organizations including United Way, Habitat for Humanity, Experience Your Smokies, the Children's Center of Knoxville, MLK celebration committees, SMILES, Leadership Blount, East Tennessee Leadership, the Blount Chamber of Commerce, and advisory committees for Maryville College.

She and her family also welcomed international visitors into their home through CISV (Children's International Summer Village), student foreign exchange programs, and Sister-City educational programs.

Outside of her professional career, Dr. Qualls and her family enjoyed years of scuba diving, boating, and kayaking adventures. In her sixties, she took up pickleball—a sport she continues to enjoy well into her 80s.

Today, Dr. Qualls resides in Blount County and has called the area home for 42 years.

When asked what advice she would offer today's Athens City students, Dr. Qualls encouraged them to embrace every opportunity to learn, explore, and experience something new.

"Take advantage of all experiences and stay open to enjoying the awesomeness of learning new things and having new adventures."

Her own life stands as an example of where that openness can lead—from an Athens City classroom and the early days of Camp Oo-tah-nee-noh-chee to a six-decade career devoted to education and community.