

Mary Johnston



When Mary Johnston began teaching at a one-room schoolhouse on Bearinger Road in 1950 she stayed up until 11:30 p.m. preparing lessons for her students.

These long hours were rewarded later in her teaching career with offers of promotion. Many of these were turned down, however, because Johnston wanted to stay in touch with the children she so loved.

When she retired as principal of MacGregor senior public school in 1987 it was noted that she led the school with a fresh approach – roaming the halls, visiting classrooms and chatting with students, most of whom she knew by name.

“I enjoy the students . . . I want them to know me as a person, to show me the good things and the bad,” said Johnston. “They’re the purpose of the place, and I’ve got to be where the students are if I’m going to do my job properly.”

While Johnston received many honours during her distinguished career, the most notable was the naming of a new elementary school on Brynhurst Blvd in west Waterloo the year she retired.

“She’s one of the most remarkable, highly respected teachers in the system,” said Waterloo trustee John Hendry. “She’s just an incredible person. The kids love her . . . she’s a tremendous model for all teachers, not just female.”

Johnston was born in Edmonton but moved to Waterloo with her brother John and parents Joseph Samuel Johnston and Marion Halley, also a teacher. She attended Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School, Waterloo College and the Stratford Teachers’ College. She received a B.A. from the University of Western Ontario and her Bachelor of Education and Master of Arts from the University of Toronto.

After teaching in the one-room schoolhouse she moved on to MacGregor school. She was a vice-principal at Empire and Centennial schools and principal of Brighton, Winston Churchill, Keatsway, and MacGregor senior public school.

Her talent stemmed largely from one simple rule, noted upon her retirement: “She accepts all students for what they are, and does all she can to help them to develop to their fullest potential.” She was a fair disciplinarian who often offered students a cookie before explaining to them why their actions were wrong and what was expected of them in the future.

Honours included the Wiegand Award for Teacher Excellence, Kitchener-Waterloo Professional Woman of the Year, and Her Majesty’s Silver Anniversary and Golden Jubilee Medals. These awards were given in recognition of her teaching excellence, but

also because of her involvement outside the classroom with the Ministry of Education Circular 14 Committee, the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, where she was known as "Miss Federation," and the Waterloo County Women Teachers' Association. Johnston worked long and hard for the "fair deal" that would allow women "to take their place in all segments of society as equals to men."

Johnston remains very involved as a ruling elder of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Kitchener, and is active in the Women's Missionary Society. She has a longtime interest in history, and is the past president of the Waterloo Historical Society, and an early member of the Waterloo LACAC (Municipal Heritage Committee). She has chronicled many events through the lens of her camera.

In 1975 she published *The Trail of the Slate, a History of Early Education in Waterloo County, 1802-1912*.

Mary Johnston, who was selected as the outstanding educator in Ontario in 1978, never lost the joy of helping children. "There's nothing like seeing a child grasp a difficult concept and then want to go on and learn more . . . there's nothing like getting them to question, to develop that questioning mind."

Photo courtesy of Charles Belair