

## Mary Jane McKinley

When Mary Jane was told in the 1940's that she couldn't become a band director because she was a woman, she didn't let that stop her. Instead, she enlisted the help of two Ohio University professors who "championed" her cause, as she once put it, and who voluntarily provided her with the instruction she needed for the degree she so desired.

That early passion and determination led to her becoming one of the first female band directors in Ohio. The milestone would be the start of a long and distinguished career in music education, one that continued even after her retirement in 1982. Most of her 36 years of teaching was with the Nelsonville-York City School District.

McKinley, known by friends as "Mac", died on November 30. She was 86.

Many around Nelsonville will remember her for the Christmas music she'd play on piano from the Rocky Outlet store or for her direction of the Nelsonville First United Methodist Church choir. Most, however, will remember her for doing what she loved – educating children through music.

"She was one of the most unique band directors in the entire state," said Marcus Neiman, of the Ohio Music Education Association. "She was a no-nonsense type of person who was in complete control of everything she did. The kids loved her, and the parents respected her. I've never met anyone with more compassion or caring."

McKinley, originally of Lucasville, found her love of music in 1930 when she saw the Portsmouth High School Band at the Scioto County Fairgrounds for the first time.

I thought it was the most wonderful, exciting thing I had ever seen or heard," McKinley said in an article in Triad, the official publication for OMEA. "I was consumed with the desire to be a part of it.

She was the youngest of seven children and born into a family of educators. She was the daughter of Jesse and Mabel Bonzo McKinley of Lucasville, Ohio. Jesse was the son of Calvin and Sarah Field McKinley. Mabel was the daughter of William and Katherine Artis Bonzo.

At a young age, her father insisted all his girls take private lessons in piano. She loved the piano so much, "I had to play it every time I walked by a piano." She wrote.

While admirable, it was a passion that frequently made her tardy to school. During her sophomore year, she was tardy 76 times out of 136 days.

Her nephew, William McKinley, tells us that she wrote the lyrics to the Valley Fight Song. She graduated from Valley in 1944.

In high school she played bells then switched to alto saxophone, the instrument she played through college. While in college, she added the clarinet to her repertoire. She graduated from Ohio University in 1950, in the top 10 percent of her class.

Throughout her career, McKinley taught vocal, instrumental theory, stage band and marching band to all ages, elementary school through high school. She also served as the head of the music department of her district.

In addition to her success as a band director, she was an avid golfer. She coached Nelsonville-York City men's golf team for 15 years, advancing to six sectionals and district tournaments.

While McKinley was known for her compassion and patience, she was afraid to push her students to reach their potential. "She was the type of person who had the warmth of a grandmother, yet could have the intensity of a drill sergeant," Neiman said. "The students had a responsibility to play music and the responsibility to play it well."

That drive earned the Nelsonville school band 29 district superior ratings, 17 state superior ratings and countless top ratings in the solo and ensemble events during her tenure.

In 2008, Neiman presented McKinley with the Distinguished Service Award, an honor bestowed on just one music educator a year.

"It's like a lifetime achievement award for music educators.

Cheryl Nunnally, a former student who later became a music teacher, remembers McKinley's kindness and resourcefulness. "She could make an instrument out of wood and glue and no money." Nunnally wrote in her letter supporting McKinley's nomination for the award.

Steve Cox, another former student, said many of his fondest memories from high school were from his time spent in her class. "In a word, she was a leader," he wrote, "She embodies all of the finest attributes of those who choose to educate. Knowledge, compassion, respect and unwavering friendship were hers to offer."

It wasn't uncommon for McKinley to work until 9 or 10 p.m. in preparation for competitions, recalled her life partner Kate McCoy.

"Above all else she was a fine educator," Neiman added. "Her first love was teaching children music. It wasn't teaching music to children. She may not be with us anymore, but what she did in her life will remain with us throughout our lives and we'll carry them on to the next generation."