



Featured: DRESS FOR SUCCESS: Retired Clarke County School District educator Johnnie Lay Burks sits in the Athens-Clarke County Library on March 9. Burks was the first Black teacher at Chase Street Elementary School in 1966, and the school is now set to be named after her. "That was a hard fight for us to get the barriers broken," Burks said. "(At the time), I (was) extremely young in my career, but I'm tough." Photo by Temprince Battle

Breaking barriers

Johnnie Lay Burks, the first Black teacher at Chase Street Elementary School, has broken barriers and made change through her career as an educator.

BY ISABELLA WESTRICH
Variety Editor

Johnnie Lay Burks wears a black suit with a red shirt, red scarf and red felt hat that perfectly match her nails.

She calls it "dressing for success," and it's what she's done every day of her teaching career.

She dressed for success on all the days she taught at the all-Black East Athens Elementary School, mimeographing and taping the missing chapters into textbooks to try to make up for lacking materials, resources and opportunities for the students she loved.

She dressed for success when former Clarke County School District Superintendent Samuel Wood selected her because of her exemplary teaching to integrate a school, news she had to keep quiet to avoid attracting negative attention from the community.

She dressed for success on the day she attempted to start her assigned teaching position at Alps Road Elementary, the day the principal stopped her in the school's lobby, saying that Alps Road's all-white faculty was "complete."

And she dressed for success the very next day, the day in 1966 when she started as the first Black teacher at Chase Street Elementary School, soon to be named after her.

Every day that she dressed for success, showed up and pushed for change, society told her that she wasn't good enough because of the color of her skin. She didn't give up, though, because she knew that any progress she made

would be for her family, her friends and her students—and she always gave her all for her students.

"This picture became more than me, Mrs. Johnnie Lay Burks, because I've got a race of people I'm representing. I've got a family. I've got colleges. I've got high schools. I've got all these people. But more to the point, I can hear my slave ancestors (saying) 'You got to keep pushing. We got this far, you got to take it to the next level,'" Burks said. "So (I couldn't) quit because this was not about me."

Throughout the rest of her career in various CCSD positions, Burks built connections with students and families and became a beloved educator in the district. She watched as CCSD became more and more equitable, taking pride in her role in the progression.

"When you go to the Board of Education now, what you see (is) a diversified group of men and women. I love it, and when I look up there then I think, 'I had something to do with that,'" Burks said.

Now, students walk into the same cheerful office and wood-paneled hallway of the currently-named Chase Street that Burks walked into years ago as the only Black teacher in the building.

But after a Feb. 9 BOE vote, that hallway will be the entrance to Johnnie Lay Burks Elementary School, a place where everybody, no matter the color of their skin, is welcome. **O**

-- JOHNNIE LAY BURKS
Retired CCSD educator

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