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Former Oceana principal looks back as high school celebrates 50th year

By [JEAN BARTLETT](#) | Pacifica Tribune

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In 1962, when Oceana High School was under construction and Pacifica students attended Oceana at Westmoor High School in Daly City, teacher Lois Jones started with them. With work still being done on Oceana in 1963, students and their teachers were sent to Terra Nova. In 1964, when the Oceana students and teachers moved to the newly completed Oceana campus – the campus with the breathtaking view that still looks over Sharp Park – teacher Lois Jones went with them. She was still there for Oceana students when the school restructured, from a comprehensive school to a small school with an alternative college preparatory program, in 1991.

After 34 years, Principal Lois Jones retired from Oceana in 1996.

Jones will be honored with a special ceremony on Friday, Nov. 2, when Oceana alumni, current and former faculty, parents and local organizations arrive at the Lake Merced Golf Club to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the school's founding and the 21st anniversary of the school's restructuring.

Born in San Francisco, Jones had an interest in physical therapy and headed off to San Francisco State where she received her MA in Exercise Physiology. She did her

student teaching at Lincoln High School in San Francisco and her first teaching job was at South San Francisco High School. Shortly thereafter, she headed to Oceana.

“I had the old, general secondary teaching credential,” Jones laughed. “If there was a course that was open, and you were willing to teach it and felt you had competence, you did teach it.” Over the course of her teaching career, Jones taught physical education, English, freshman social studies, driver’s education and she started a Special Ed class. When she came on board with Oceana in 1962, she also headed back to night school where she obtained her counseling credential.

“I didn’t start counseling until I went physically to the completed Oceana campus in 1964,” Jones said, noting that when the doors “officially” opened, Ernie Ribera was principal and Bob Watt was Vice-Principal. Jones husband Jess Jones, whom she lost six years ago, had been assistant football coach to Floyd Gonella at Terra Nova in 60 and 61. When Oceana opened in 1962, Jess came on board as the head football coach. He also coached swimming. Along with working as a counselor, Lois’s first days on the newly completed campus were also spent teaching physical education.

“The first year of Oceana football in 1962 was devastating because we didn’t have any seniors,” Jones recalled. “Jess had kids playing first string that were maybe 130 pounds. That was hard on the kids, the coaches and the community as our juniors and sophomores got wiped out on the field. But we got through it and even that, couldn’t contain the overall excitement of the kids who lived in the northern part of Pacifica, because Oceana was their school.” Jones remembers Oceana’s first official “shark.” Named “Gideon,” and built by student Diane Mirabelli’s dad, Gideon was shaped with wire, covered with papier-mâché, had two big red eyes made of tail lights and metal teeth and he was placed on wheels. When Oceana’s first Shark mascots Diane Mirabelli, class of ’65, and Shannon Sealey, class of ’64, wheeled Gideon out with a rope at the school’s first home football game, the crowd went silent before bursting into thunderous applause.

“That first shark was a vicious shark and I loved it!” Jones laughed.

Jones and her husband lived further south down the Peninsula and the drive to Oceana was different than it is now. There was no Highway 280 and Sharp Park Road was a two-lane thoroughfare. Jones never cared about the drive. For her, teaching at Oceana was the thing, and she liked it from day one.

“We were always lucky at Oceana,” Jones said. “While big events happened throughout the country – the Kennedy assassinations, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, college protests – teachers remained calm and students stayed steady. We never had much gang activity and while there were some racial tensions in the 60s, those dissipated with outreach support. For me, when kids graduated and headed off to college, or when a student accomplished something – these are the memories, the highlights.” Also an incredible highlight was being involved in the school’s restructuring in 1991.

“In 1990 and ’91, with the support of the Jefferson Union High School District, the board made the decision to close Oceana in the spring, as a traditional, comprehensive high school and reopen it on-time as a whole-school change effort,” Jones said. “What we decided to do was to adopt the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools.” Founded by the late Ted Sizer, a leader in educational reform in the U.S., Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools was built on nine principles – learning to use one’s mind well, less is more (depth over coverage), goals apply to all students, personalization, student-as-worker/teacher-as-coach, demonstration of mastery, a tone of decency and trust, commitment to the entire school and resources dedicated to teaching and learning.

Principal from November of 1990 until her retirement in August of 1996, Jones was one of 13 teachers who met to plan the school. The building of the new programs for Oceana’s restructuring went on in the late afternoons. The deadline to figure it all out and have it approved loomed, as parents needed to know whether to reenroll their student or not for the coming school year. During the day, Jones ran the comprehensive school. It was wildly busy.

“We decided that it was going to be an academic school for all students, with a minimal number of electives,” Jones said. “To make this happen there were certain stipulations. There would be no money for sports or music, and the school would be downsized. It was the best and worst of times. It was hard, really hard on parents and kids and teachers who wanted these electives. For coaches and band teachers and auto shop teachers, and all the kids who loved these programs, the rug was pulled out. But our goal was at the end of four years, each and every student would have the option, if they wanted it, to attend college and be qualified to attend college. This flew in the face of kids being put on a track and never getting off of it.” Included in the decisions made by the 13, was that community service would be a requirement of graduation. There would be a senior exhibition and a senior portfolio to demonstrate each student’s knowledge by the end of senior year. A block schedule was adopted as were advisories, to help prevent any student from falling through the cracks. Four years of humanities classes were required which included the option for students to enroll in enriched and Advanced Placement classes. An academic counsel was created consisting of students, teachers, the school principal and a parent. All the teachers wanted to create a space where students felt not only safe, but comfortable because they belonged – to build community with students and teachers.

“It was a wonderful group of teachers who met and we learned how to work together,” Jones said. “We came to consensus. But none of this would have happened without the support of the School Board, the Superintendent and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers). There were just too many things we were asking.” Jones stressed that it was also a time where monies could be found to make such decisions. She and teachers Judy Borelli, John Larmer and Mary Bennett spent hours and hours writing two big grants and got both of them.

“It was really hard work,” Jones said. “Because we soared and fell, soared and fell and leveled off. When you are in a community or in a school, when you are changing some very basic things, there is a tension that is always trying to pull you back to the way it used to be and it becomes very tiring. You can’t ignore the tension, but you

can't go to war either. Tension came from the teachers in the district and parents in the district who thought we were crazy. But in the community, there were a great number of teachers, parents and kids who supported us. If you have a program that is strong, with a good philosophical foundation – it survives.” Jones said that monies they received in grants were the major recognition for the whole-school change effort. The school also received a bell from the State of California.

“So many teachers were so instrumental in making this all happen,” Jones said. “So many more than I have named. One of my proudest memories is opening the new Oceana on that first day and having everything go okay.” Jones who is the grandmother of two, with one on the way – daughter Suzanne, like her parents, is also a teacher – said she originally had no particular plans following her retirement.

But then she went to work with the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, in addition to working with a program out of New York that trained new principals, in addition to working with a UCLA managed program. However, she eventually retired from all that and pared it down a bit. Now she does volunteer work for the Sisters of Notre Dame at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont. She also volunteers with the Half Moon Bay Library adult literacy program and she additionally volunteers at Oceana. Currently she is mentoring a senior for his senior exhibition project.

“Oceana makes me so proud to walk through the school and look at the kids and the classrooms and know that the changes are still there,” Jones said. “People will say, ‘oh, teaching is not a very high paying job.’ But for me, it was all worthwhile.”

Friday, Nov. 2, 6:30 p.m., at Lake Merced Golf Club, 2300 Junipero Serra Boulevard Daly City, Oceana High School invites alumni, current and former faculty, and parents to celebrate the school's 50th anniversary and the 21st anniversary of its restructuring. Evening includes dinner, silent auction and special ceremony honoring Lois Jones. Tickets are \$62 and are available at the school's main office, 401 Paloma Avenue, Pacifica, <http://ohs.juhsd.net/index.html>. Also see Oceana Classic at Brown Paper Tickets (<http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/268490>)