

Raise your hand if you have heard the saying, “three days older than dirt.”

For some, memories of challenging lessons and plenty of homework might pop into your head. For others, time in Rickey Jones’ classroom at New Hope High School may provide a look at what it would be like to pursue a career as a teacher.

If you’re not from New Hope, though, and don’t know Jones, his self-deprecating sense of humor indicates he has been working at the high school for a *long* time. Now in his 43<sup>rd</sup> year teaching at New Hope High – 56<sup>th</sup> overall – Jones has a learned perspective about what has made the school such a big part of the community on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its opening.

“I think in part it is the students and the fact they have a great feeling for the school,” Jones said. “I also think a big part of it is the parents and how much they have invested in the school.

“The teachers are also a big part of it. We are very fortunate here. Our science department has been together for a long time. You have to have leadership, which, of course, includes our principal (Matt Smith), but the teachers are the guts. They’re the things that make it work.”

Jones has taught Zoology, Human Anatomy and Physiology as well as Honors Biology and Biology. In addition to his teaching duties, Jones spent 39 years as a football, basketball and baseball coach – hence his nickname “Coach Jones”. Along the way, Jones has taught in nearly all of the buildings that are part of the New Hope schools campus.

“I wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember,” Jones said. “I don’t know why. Like most high school athletes, my dream was to be a college player and a professional player, but about the ninth grade I realized I wasn’t good enough to do that. It dawned on me a little

earlier than it dawns on most kids. At the time, I weighed 146 pounds and I was 6 feet tall.”

Jones graduated from New Hope High in 1964 and then spent three years at Mississippi College, where he played football and baseball. He then transferred to Mississippi State University because he got engaged to his wife, Ramona, so he could save money and live at home. He graduated from MSU in 1968.

Jones said his initial plans included teaching History or Science, but an advisor in college, also named “Coach Jones”, suggested he go into Science because every coach goes into History and that it would be easier for him to find a job.

“It was wise advice,” Jones said.

Jones worked as a teacher for one year at New Hope High before he moved to Central Academy in Macon (four years) and then Heritage Academy in Columbus (nine years). Cecil Vaughan, the principal at New Hope High, subsequently called him and asked him to return to coaching, which paved the way for his return to the school.

Jones’ wife, Ramona, a graduate of Lee High in Columbus, worked as a kindergarten teacher at New Hope High for 25 years. Together, they became part of a fabric that binds the community and the faculty. In 2022-23, 30 of the 82 members of the New Hope High staff graduated from the school.

Jones said he felt that sense of community when he first arrived and believes it has only grown stronger, but he isn’t sure if that makes the teachers feel like there is additional responsibility to do a good job.

“I do feel a commitment to these kids,” Jones said. “I teach classes you have to choose to be in. If you chose to be in this class, I am going to bust my chops to teach you something. I tell my kids the first day every

year, at the end of the semester and at the end of the year, I want you to say to yourself, 'I learned something in that class.' I have this push inside me to give them everything I have got every day. I don't know if that is any more or less affected by my background."

Jones said his peers at the school share that attitude and want the students to be successful. He feels that thinking connects the high school to the middle school and the elementary school and fortifies what it means to be a Trojan. That thinking may have originated in 1922 when the citizens of New Hope wanted "to develop a better educational opportunity for the boys and girls of this community," according to an article published Aug. 26, 1923 in The Commercial Dispatch. As a result, five small schools – McCrary, Little Hope, Mt. Vernon, Dunbar and Windham – were consolidated into a "handsome brick building" that featured nine classrooms, an auditorium, a library, an office, boys and girls comfort units and two music rooms and had a formal opening Sept. 4, 1923.

The dirt from that groundbreaking may be long gone, but Jones is still around thanks to a connection to the New Hope community, his peers and a school that keeps him energized.

"People who go through New Hope are New Hope," Jones said. "New Hope is part of you. It is a fiber of your being. I guess that is why you come back. I wasn't planning to come back, but circumstances and Mr. Vaughan called me and it was a no-brainer. That is the thing. The school becomes a part of you."