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Amanda Jones

Poyen science teacher receives Presidential Award

by Carol Rolf/Contributing Writer | December 6, 2015 at 12:00 a.m.



Amanda Jones, who teaches science at Poyen High School, recently received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, which is the highest award in those fields. She teaches chemistry, physics, biology, Advanced Placement biology, environmental science, anatomy and physiology to 10th- through 12th-graders.

Amanda Jones graduated from Poyen High School in 1994 as an honor graduate, earning the distinction of class valedictorian. She returned to her alma mater as a teacher in 2002. Many awards have come her way this year.

Most recently, Jones, 40, who teaches science to 10th- through 12th-graders, was selected as one of 108 mathematics and science teachers to receive the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, which is the highest award in those elds. The awardees represent all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, U.S. Territories and the Department of Defense Education Activity schools.

“I was taught by my parents to always work hard and never give up,” she said as she explained why she thinks she received the award. “If you keep working, you will always nd a way to get through any tough time and solve any problem.

“I believe it is that ideal of the need for continuous hard work and effort that makes me a recipient of this award. I can never leave well enough alone – I have to nd a way to improve on everything I do. My husband told me years ago that I could make even the easiest job on the planet hard because by the end of the day, I’d have 10 ways to improve upon that easiest job.

Jones and the other recipients received their awards at a ceremony in July in Washington, D.C. Recipients each received a \$10,000 award from the National Science Federation to be used at their discretion.

The Presidential Award is given annually to outstanding kindergarten through 12th-grade science and mathematics teachers from across the country. The winners are selected by a panel of scientists, mathematicians and educators following an initial selection process done at the state level. Each year, the award alternates between teachers teaching kindergarten through sixth grade and those teaching seventh through 12th grades. The awardees named in July teach seventh through 12th grades.

Other awards Jones received this year include being named the Air Force Association of Arkansas State Teacher of the Year and the Air Force Association of Arkansas Lewis E. Lyle Chapter Teacher of the Year. Coinciding with the Air Force Association awards, Jones received a membership in the Civil Air Patrol. She was also inducted into Henderson State University's Academy of Distinguished Alumni.

Jones was raised in Tulip [in Dallas County], the daughter of Tommy Smith, who now lives in Malvern, and Wanda Lawrence of Tulip. Jones' parents divorced when she was 3, but she said both always played an active role in her life.

"They both still work and work hard every day," she said of her parents. "They taught me that value of hard work as a young child and always encouraged me to learn and enjoy learning new things. They are both caring, loving, helpful people – would give up everything they had to help someone else. They have both always worked for everything they have and taught me to do the same. They are amazing parents, and I hope to always make them proud."

Jones went to Carthage Elementary School in Dallas County for her kindergarten through fifth-grade years and for her seventh-grade education. She moved to Leola during the fifth grade and finished the year there, which was the same year the Leola School District was consolidated with the Sheridan School District.

She completed the sixth grade at Sheridan Elementary School and returned to Carthage, where her mother took a job as the school nurse. The following year, Jones attended Poyen schools, where she would complete her high school education.

"I didn't grow up saying I wanted to teach, but I did always love school. I used to line up my baby dolls and play school," she said. "I always had such fun with my friends, and learning new things in school made every day of elementary school amazing. I did always want to do something to make a difference – be the first person to do something important, amazing, helpful," Jones said

"I wondered why there were only women cheerleaders and no women coaches," she said with a smile. "I wanted to be the first female head coach in the NFL. "Then I wanted to be a dentist, but when I found out how much it cost [for dental school], I couldn't do that." Jones said she knew she did not want to be a nurse, but she always loved science.

"Dad always had a garden, and he had cows. I remember going to the sale barn with him. When he brought a cow home, I learned all about feeding it," she said. "My parents were always good to answer all my questions and explain things to me," Jones said.

"By college, I thought I knew that I wanted to teach. I had done some volunteering in high school. ... I was the leader. ... I taught groups, but I finally decided to major in science. I knew if I decided later, I could go into teaching. I took education hours and got certified. That's how I ended up teaching," she said.

"I am very glad I chose to teach because I love it," Jones said. "I don't achieve major milestones for humanity teaching in my classroom, but I do greatly enjoy the minor differences I can make in my students' lives every single day.

"The most amazing honor in my career, you would think, would be being invited to the White House and meeting the president of the United States as a presidential awardee. And it was amazing, but the highest honor in teaching actually comes from seeing students work hard in class and graduate and turn those dreams from high school into their real lives."

Jones attended the University of Central Arkansas in Conway for the first two years of her college career, then transferred to Henderson State University in Arkadelphia as a junior when she was offered a full scholarship for three more years, which she needed to complete her biology degree and education hours, including student teaching.

She graduated summa cum laude from HSU in December 1999 with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology and a minor in chemistry. She received a Master of Education degree in secondary education and curriculum in December 2002 from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, where she received the Dean's Award. She is certified in middle school and high school sciences and is a National Board Certified Teacher. Since 2005, she has been a member of the adjunct faculty at the College of the Ouachitas in Malvern.

Jones began her teaching career with the Job Corps in Royal and at Magnet Cove High School, respectively.

She has collaborated with Vanderbilt University's Aspirnaut Program to build an on-site after-school science program for students in third grade through high school. She also mentors the robotics team and spearheads the Poyen Academic Banquet, which honors students for academic excellence

In addition, she developed an ACT prep course for students and works closely with participants to prepare them for college. Jones was named the Grant County Teacher of the Year in 2005, the Arkansas Outstanding Biology Teacher of the Year in 2012 and the Arkansas Senior Beta Club State Sponsor in 2013-2015.

She is married to Casey Jones, and the couple live in the Big Creek community near Malvern with their three daughters: Ella Scarlett, 11, Avrie Anna, 8, and Aliza Claire, 1. Casey Jones is the service manager for Stihl Southwest.

Other members of Amanda Jones' family include her stepmother, Lourene Thaxton Smith of Malvern; stepfather, Mike Lawrence of Carthage; parents-in-law, Dale and Carolyn Jones of the Big Creek community; a sister, Michelle Williams of Leola; and stepsiblings, Amy Kutka of Malvern, Mendy Corter of Springdale, David Adams of Ohio, Dylan Thaxton of Hot Springs and Jessica Wiley of Bryant.

"I want my daughters to see that being a mommy, which is my most important job, doesn't make you incapable of having a career," Jones said. "No matter what your job is, you should always do your best and give it your all. If you do that, you will always find success because true success comes to those who earn it for themselves."