

Ruth Denney, Texas theater educator, dies at 93

Influential educator founded performing arts high school, was mentor to stars such as Tommy Tune.

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Legendary Texas drama educator Ruth Denney — whom nine-time Tony Award-winner Tommy Tune credited with setting him on the path to show business — died Monday at Hospice Austin's Christopher House from complications following a hip fracture suffered in early March. She was 93.

Born April 4, 1914, in Ohio, Denney was educated at Ohio Wesleyan University. After teaching for several years in Ohio she moved to Houston.

Denney began her career in the 1950s in Houston, where she taught at Lamar High School. While she was there, her students won six state championships in the University Interscholastic League's one-act play contest. Tune was one of her students. "High school theater was extremely important for me in helping to shape my later career," Tune told the Houston Chronicle in 2003.

After more than a dozen years in the classroom, Denney took an administrative job with the Houston Independent School District and began to scheme about creating a high school for the arts.

In 1971, she founded and became the first principal of Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, only the third such fine arts magnet school in the nation when it opened. Skeptics doubted the school would give students a solid education, and the school wasn't even accredited its first year.

"The art teachers cooperated, but the music and dance instructors — forget it, they didn't want to lose their best students to one school," Denney once said to the American-Statesman.

In addition to Tune, her students over the years have included notable performers including Robert Crutchfield, Robert Foxworth, Carlin Glynn-Masterson, Paula Prentiss and Jaclyn Smith.

In recognition of her contribution to its success, the Houston performing arts high school named its theatre the Denney Theatre.

In 1976, Denney became a professor of drama education at the University of Texas. She taught at UT until 1988. At retirement she was named professor emeritus and many of her former students and colleagues helped establish a scholarship in her honor. The Ruth Denney Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Theatre helps benefit theater arts students.

After her retirement, Denney was key in lobbying Austin Independent School District officials to establish the McCallum Fine Arts Academy at McCallum High School.

Denney's contribution to the arts has been honored many times by organizations including the American Association of Theatre Education, Theatre Under the Stars and the Texas Education Theatre Association. In 1987, she was selected to receive the Houston Mayor's Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Arts for her role in creating a strong arts community in Houston. In 2002 she was inducted into the Austin Arts Hall of Fame.

She is survived by her longtime companion, Jean Nipper, and three nieces.

A marriage to Thomas V. Denney ended in divorce.

Plans for a memorial service are pending.

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