

Death Notices

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Ruth Denney, founding director of HSPVA, dies at 92

By PEGGY O'HARE
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The founder of Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts has died, but her feisty spirit is being remembered fondly as colleagues recall her groundbreaking efforts and her compassionate commitment to the theater.

Ruth Denney, 92, succumbed Monday in Austin to a brief illness, family members said.

Denney established the HSPVA in 1971 and served as the institution's first director. She went on to become a professor of drama education at the University of Texas at Austin.

Earlier in her career, while teaching drama at Lamar High School in Houston, she launched many stars on their paths to fame, including Tommy Tune, Jaclyn Smith and Paula Prentiss.

Denney's achievements — and her impact on the theater community — are tremendous, colleagues said Wednesday.

"What she did was convince people to begin something the city had never had before," said Dr. Herbert Karpicke, current principal of the HSPVA, which now has a student population of almost 700.

"To me, it's almost like Jesse Jones convincing people we need the Ship Channel. It's almost akin to that. ... To stick with that and know if you do this right, you'll have something fantastic," he said.

Denney was a native of Ohio and began her career with the Houston Independent School District in 1950, according to records filed in the district's archives.

She eventually became a drama teacher at Lamar High, where she remained until 1968, then began working toward establishing a school for the performing and visual arts here, a quest that took several years.

She saw the mission as an opportunity to achieve racial integration, said her longtime colleague, Annette Watson, who later succeeded her as principal of the school.

"Had it not been for Ruth Denney, that school would never have been formed, because it was her idea," Watson said from her Lago Vista home Wednesday.

The school's success helped create the concept of magnet schools, which eventually spread across the country, Watson said.

Denney strongly believed the arts stretched across all demographics and sought to bring together all sorts of students — the academically outstanding and those at risk of leaving their studies behind — through their common interest in theater, she said.

"It was really risk-taking to start a school in 1971," Karpicke said. "It was very difficult, I'm sure, for her. ... There was lots of skepticism about whether the school would be successful or whether the kids would just come and play around."

The school, only the third fine arts magnet school in the nation when it opened its doors, began with a population of fewer than 200 students. It wasn't even accredited during its first year of operations, HISD officials said.

Today, its student body is more than three times that amount, with about 1,000 students auditioning every year for fewer than 200 spots in the disciplines of theater, dance, music, voice, instrumental

and visual arts, Karpicke said.

The school has had only four principals in its 35-year history. Denney served as the school's first director, but was commonly referred to as the first principal, and remained in that position until 1976, when she retired from HISD.

Denney had a gift for seeing potential in her students long before they realized all they could be, said a former Lamar High student who studied under the legendary instructor.

"The reason I can do what I do is because Ms. Denney taught me how to act 'as if,' " said Sharon Watkins, a 1965 Lamar High graduate who now owns a restaurant in Austin. "She really saw things in us that we didn't know we had until we discovered them later."

Following Denney's retirement from the University of Texas in 1988, a theater scholarship was established in her name. More recently, she pushed to establish a fine arts academy at a high school in Austin and accepted honors from organizations such as Theater Under The Stars.

Denney is survived by her longtime companion, Jean Nipper, and four nieces. A memorial service will be held in Austin in the coming weeks. The Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home in Austin will handle those arrangements.

In Houston, the legendary school she established will honor Denney with a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Moore's Opera Houston on the University of Houston campus on May 19.

"Without her impact, we would be in a significantly different place than we are today," said Lamar High Principal James McSwain.

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