

Inside Northside

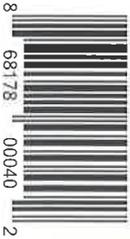
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by Susan Bonnett Bourgeois



Ola Magee: In the Footsteps of Dick Knight

ETCHED ON A PLAQUE in the old Regina Coeli Convent in Covington, this saying has been one of the guiding forces in the life of Ola Magee. That building, and that statement, changed Ola's life, and, more importantly, changed the lives of countless children on the northshore for the last 51 years. The Convent, which housed the first Head Start program here, was where new teachers went to train.

At the age of 20, Ola found herself with two babies just 13 months apart standing at the doors of the Head Start facility in Franklinton looking to volunteer. An elderly, and very persuasive, gentleman at her church, Mr. Butler, had told her that it was time for her to get to work in the community while she was raising her babies. He saw something in Ola, and he wanted to nurture it.

Ola went back every single day after that, even with an hour roundtrip to bring the babies to her

mom. That was after she dropped her husband, Richard, off at work, because they had only one car. And then, in the afternoon, she would do the whole process again—just to volunteer. Ola had found her calling in life; it did not take long for the staff to see her passion and offer her a paying job to officially join the Head Start team.

She and Richard had four babies in five years, and the demands on her time grew and grew. Bolstered with a fierce drive to succeed, help from their families and their strong bond, she and Richard juggled it all, and her family thrived while Ola shot up the ranks of the Regina Coeli Head Start program. "The people I worked with kept me going. They just kept believing in me, and it drove me to do more. I thought, 'If they see that much in me, it must be there, so I kept moving forward,'" says Ola.

*"Do something in this life
that will outlive you."*

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Ola's true passion for caring for others flourished at the organization. She took night classes at Southeastern to get her teaching certificate and later earned a B.S. in Education, while earning a reputation as a loving and devoted teacher, employee and leader. Her mentor, Beverly White, who was a director at Head Start as well as an educational leader in the community, saw all of the potential in Ola when she was still just working in the classroom.

Ola says, "She would come into my class, point out something that I was doing a certain way and say 'THAT! That is what you need to show other teachers so that they can connect with the children like you do. This cannot end with you, Ola,' she said. She saw me as her legacy plan, and it made me rise to fill



her expectations of me." There is a saying that good leaders always send the elevator back down. Well, Beverly sent the elevator down to Ola, groomed her to be a leader, and years later, Ola assumed Beverly's job and her status in the community.

And Ola has continued to give it her all for nearly 51 years.

That passion, commitment and selfless service is exactly why Ola was selected by the Northshore Community Foundation this year to be the recipient of the Third Annual Dick Knight Award.

The Dick Knight Award recognizes individuals for their commitment and service to the charitable nonprofit sector in the four-parish Northshore region. The spirit of the award is to recognize nonprofit staff who have significant tenure in service-based

work and have a body of accomplishments that reflect that success. Previous winners of the \$5,000 financial award include Dianne Baham of STARC and Myrna Jordan of Our Daily Bread Food Bank. The Foundation partners with Resource Bank, the Gia Maione Prima Foundation and the Fund for Bogalusa for the contributions to make this award possible.

Dick Knight worked harder in his philanthropic missions than most people do at the height of their careers. He moved the needle on philanthropy and community service in our region unlike any other. His strong personal and professional relationships and stellar reputation in all of South Louisiana was instrumental in the efficacy and strength of philanthropy throughout our communities. To ensure Dick's legacy, the Foundation offers this annual recognition and service award in celebration of the impact his leadership has inspired in others.

We honor Dick's legacy by recognizing the life-long service that Ola has given to Head Start and the children and families of her community. Her dedication and philanthropic heart are the embodiment of the spirit in which Dick lived his life.

"Ola has a gift for teaching in a way that is best for each individual child. She has helped to open 19 new Head Start centers and has taught countless teachers across the state to be a compassionate and caring educator. In my opinion, Ola Magee is the epitome of service to the community, just like Dick Knight, and her accomplishments reflect this," said Dr. Susan Spring, Executive Director RCCDC, which provides comprehensive early childhood services to over 1,800 children and employs over 500 people in a five-parish area of Southeast Louisiana.

Ola and Richard now have five grandchildren scattered across the country. As for how she plans to spend the \$5,000 award, she says, as she laughs, that she made a promise that she would not donate the gift back to Regina Coeli, but that that would be hard to do. Her oldest grandson says, however, that he would be happy to help her figure out how to spend it.

"I want to use every single bit of myself up in this life. When I am gone, I want others to know that I gave everything I had to give and that I squandered nothing and took no blessings with me," says Ola. "I did something in this life that outlived me."