

## PIONEER PROFILE

### Toni S. Walters

By Gerry Coon

Professor Emerita Toni S. Walters was honored at the Oakland University Leadership Conference this month for her outstanding contributions to the field of teacher education. When asked about other awards, Toni admitted to receiving National Black Child Development Institutes Guardian Award (2008), the Distinguished Faculty Award from the Michigan Association of Governing Boards of Colleges in 1998 and the Presidential



*Toni addressing a group of scholarship donors and recipients.*

Diversity Award in 2005. “But,” she added, “The award that I cherish most is the Oakland University Award for Teaching Excellence, because working with students was my love. That’s what I really enjoyed most during my career.”

It was Toni’s dedication to teaching that prompted Paula Webster, one of her doctoral students, to ask her to come to Paula’s home town during the spring break and work with teachers. Toni agreed, and that visit to Kingston, Jamaica, began a nine-year journey (1998-2007) for Toni, traveling during school breaks and sabbaticals to instruct teachers and

set up literature centers at teachers’ colleges throughout the island.

Visiting colleges and rural schools, Toni soon discovered the dearth of educational materials available to the island’s teachers and students. She began collecting books from faculty and friends, buying many herself, and carrying 50-60 books each trip in an extra suitcase. At one point she showed up at the ticket counter with one suitcase and twenty boxes of books, only to be told that she would have to pack the boxes back in her car because there was a Christmas travel Box Embargo in place. Fortunately, Paula had foreseen the problem and had contacted a vice president of American Airlines. Toni was permitted to embark with a ticket marked, “one suitcase plus twenty boxes.” Another time she purchased a huge barrel for “barrel shipping” and filled it with books. Within the first year they were able to send a traveling library of 30 books to every Basic school on the south coast of the island.

On one visit to the Alcoa School in a rural area, Tony and Paula expected only a few teachers to attend the in-service. That 90° day found a perspiring Toni sharing her teaching pedagogy with over 60 teachers who sat on hard wooden benches all day, stopping only for a lunch of rice and peas.

There were other developments in this Jamaica Project beyond staff development for teachers, demonstrations in rural schools and the establishment of traveling libraries.

Toni was present at the ground-breaking for a large brick building erected to house the Literary Research and Development Center, dedicated to promoting an OU style reading curriculum on the island. Dr. Donald Wilson, head of the education department at the University of West Indies in Jamaica, collaborated with OU to provide master's degree studies to four students a year over four years. Of the eleven who graduated, all returned to Jamaica to establish reading programs similar to Oakland's in their respective teachers' colleges throughout the island. Rather than a twelfth graduate student, Jossett Smikle (now deceased), came to OU as a visiting professor from the University of West Indies and returned to develop a reading master program based on Oakland's curriculum at her university. Reading textbooks donated by OU faculty and other sources went toward building a professional library at a rural college deep in the mountains.

Toni was forced to abandon the Jamaica Project in 2007 when her husband, Ken, developed a serious illness and needed her help at home. Ken Walters and Toni Cole were married in 1967, shortly after her college graduation from Central Michigan University. Though not officially an OU Pioneer, Toni is truly a native Grizzly. In 1976 she earned a master's degree in Early Childhood at OU and finished her PhD in Reading and Language Arts in 1984. In 1989 the Reading faculty invited her to join the staff and she finally agreed, taking quite a cut from a teacher's salary to do so.

Ken and Toni raised two daughters: Wendy, an Associate Dean at Parsons in New York and a published poet and librettist; and Jamie, Director of Creative Services and Programing at WDIV/Local 4 in Detroit. An unusual feature of the Walters' family home in Troy, Michigan, is a dance floor installed in a small portion of their family room. "Ken had a large collection of music—jazz, country, reggae, rock and roll, rhythm and blues and everything in between. Ken loved all music. We enjoyed the dance floor, but we were just as likely to be found dancing in the kitchen while waiting for dinner to finish cooking."



*Toni with two of the students who received a scholarship.*

After Ken succumbed to cancer in 2010, OU graduates put forth the idea and initial funds for a scholarship. Generous donations from Toni and others enabled the Toni S. and Ken Walters Endowment Scholarship Fund for dedicated reading education teachers committed to working in ethnically diverse communities. Since 2013 two student scholarships have been awarded annually.

Since her retirement in 2011, Toni continued to co-author with reading department PhD graduates Jonella Mongo and Vivian Johnson a recurring column "Between the Covers," focusing on African American authors and illustrators of children's literature. For 13 years they voluntarily provided that column for the National Black Child Development

Institute's publication, *Child Health Talk*, two to four times a year along with well received annual national conference presentations. Overall, Toni's retirement years are busy ones with the symphony, photography, theater, seasonal gardening, getting together with friends, a bit of writing, and of course frequent travel.

In addition to her many trips to Jamaica, Toni has traveled widely, from the East to West Coast of the United States and to one country at a time throughout Europe. On one of several trips to Egypt she met a children's author who donated 40 of her books for Toni to use at an in-service with teachers. Next month she has a trip scheduled to the Panama Canal and she will greet the New Year in Iceland. Of course she spends a lot of time with her daughters and their families: Wendy and Dan and their eight-year old Isaac in New York City; and Jamie and Vince and their four-year-old Theo and two-year-old Roxie in Detroit. The three grands often visit Grandma at the house in Troy, learning to garden and cook, and of course spending a lot of time with books.

In reviewing her time at OU, Toni had this to say: "I did my tour of duty on committees, but it was the teaching I loved." And that love has been returned to her by countless students, both here and abroad.