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EDUCATION

A Griffin at the helm: Buchtel grad Mary Outley now leads Akron Public Schools

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It was Mother's Day in the early 2000s at Crouse Elementary school in Akron, and the kids were busy making cards for the mom-figures in their lives when one turned to the other and asked whether their principal would be getting a Mother's Day card.

"Do you think Ms. Outley has any kids?" he asked.

"She has all of us," another replied.

A teacher overhearing the conversation sent the second boy down to then-Principal Mary Outley's office to repeat what he'd said.

Twenty years later, Outley, 56, is now the interim superintendent of Akron Public Schools, and while she has had several nieces and nephews in the schools, she still sees the district's 20,000 students as her "children."

Outley takes the helm of one of the biggest districts in Ohio at a turbulent time for Akron schools, following the departure of her predecessor after only 19 months on the job and a near teacher strike in January.

Formerly the district's executive director of elementary education, Outley said she stepped up to fill the interim role because of her 32 years in Akron schools.

"I feel that I'm the right person at this time because first I have a passion for Akron Public Schools," Outley said in her first full interview since starting in the interim role Feb. 14. "I want to see our students thrive and excel. My background being here for 32 years, I feel like

"I'm already part of the work. I do not feel like I'm starting from scratch. I can just dive right in to what it is that's important for us to be focused on."

Outley's father instilled a commitment to doing a job well

Outley lives in Copley now but is an Akron native, graduating from Buchtel in 1985.

She grew up the youngest of four kids in the neighborhood near Crouse. Her father was a rubber worker for General Tire, and her mother was a nurse at what was then Barberton Citizens Hospital.

Outley's father dubbed her "headstrong" from the start, she said. She had her own paper route delivering the Beacon Journal, then an afternoon paper, starting in the fifth grade. She and a friend were recruited into the role together. Her friend lasted about two days. Outley kept at it until about the 10th grade.

She was briefly hospitalized with pneumonia in high school, and her dad — a man who once walked the five miles to work one day when his car broke down — took over the route for her for the week.

"He took more pride in it than I did at that time," Outley said. "Because he believed if you take on a job you do it well. Even if it was a paper route... He believed that, and that was what was instilled in me."

Outley was Akron's 'first open-enrolled student'

Outley's three siblings had all graduated from Buchtel, but as the last class of seventh graders at West Junior High, she was rezoned to Hyre Middle school and then Ellet High School.

She wanted to go to Buchtel.

"I call myself Akron's first open-enrolled student," Outley said. "Because I asked for permission to go to Buchtel and they said, 'Well, go ask the principal.'"

The principal granted her request, and she became a Griffin.

Education was "paramount" in her house growing up, she said. Her parents "thought education was very important" and "wanted to see all their children graduate, which we did."

Outley went to the University of Akron, but it took an extra push from her dad, who had noticed during her senior year he hadn't seen any college admissions letters roll in yet.

"He said, 'Where did you apply to?' " Outley recalled. "I said, 'I did not,' and he said, 'Why didn't you apply to college?' And I said, 'I've decided to take a year off from school, explore, get to find myself.'"

Her father asked her how she planned to do that.

"I'm going to go to Europe and backpack across Europe for a year, and then I should be ready to go back to school in the fall," Outley replied. She was also hoping, perhaps, the money saved for her first year of college could help pay for that endeavor.

Her father's response: "Absolutely not."

He told her she'd been watching too much TV.

"So that day, my dad put me in the car, and took me to the University of Akron," she said. "And the first person he saw on campus, he said, 'What do you call those people that help enroll you?' And the guy said, 'An advisor?' He says, 'Yeah, where do I find one of those?' So he pointed out where to go, over in Spicer Hall, and my dad took me, and the rest is history. I registered that day for classes and I went that fall."

She was a little surprised at her father's willingness to follow through on his convictions, but respected him too much to push back. She never made it to Europe, but she graduated with her undergraduate and later her master's degree from Akron and began her teaching career at Erie Island Elementary.

"Once my parents both died, everything I do now, I do with them at the heart, at the root, trying to make them proud, trying to be a legacy for them," she said.

Chance encounter leads Outley to career in education

Despite wanting to spend a year abroad before college, Outley said she knew since high school she wanted to be a teacher. Her first love was math, she said, and she enrolled in

bookkeeping and accounting classes at Buchtel. But it was a chance encounter outside of Crouse on a walk home from school one day that sealed her fate as an educator.

Outley said she was passing by the school when she overheard two boys out front, probably third or fourth graders, saying they hated school.

"I really didn't say anything to them, I didn't interject; I just listened," she said. "They were just so disgruntled about what was going on, but mostly they just felt it was boring, dull, they couldn't have any fun and there were other things they could be doing."

Outley said she was amazed by what they had to say.

"I loved elementary school, and I could not imagine why these boys could hate school at such a young age," she said. "So right then, it was in my spirit to become a teacher, because I didn't want any elementary kids to hate school."

Outley moved from Erie Island Elementary to Perkins Middle School, then became an assistant principal at her former middle school, Hyre, before becoming principal of Crouse in 2002. In 2004, she became executive director of elementary education.

She will now be the second Black woman to lead Akron Public Schools. She wants to be visible in schools, she said, so students, especially young Black students, can look up to her in the role.

"So they can dream and say, 'I can do that too,'" she said.

School board to hold a retreat with Outley and administrative team this weekend

The school board will conduct a search for a new superintendent and is looking to have someone in the role by August, although it has not chosen a firm to lead the search.

Outley declined to say whether she's interested in the job permanently, only that she's committed to the work. She's already surveyed staff about concerns they may have, receiving feedback about wages, students using cellphones during the school day and overall central office transparency.

The board is holding a two-day retreat with Outley and other administrators, along with teachers' union leaders, this weekend to review some of the biggest ongoing issues in the district, including the long-term planning process around facilities, and district finances.

"I do not want to see anything stall for a moment, and so we're just moving forward," she said.

After decades of serving only the district's youngest students, Outley said she's looking forward to having a wider impact.

"I love Akron Public Schools," Outley said. "And to me, this is something that I would think any educator would want, to have the opportunity to touch the lives of all of their students, to have an impact. And that's why I left the classroom. Every time I learned I could have a greater impact at a different level of work, I went for it."

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