

Beloved actor James Earl Jones had impact

Poughkeepsie Day School connection

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The Poughkeepsie Day School, located on Boardman Road, has long treasured its connection to James Earl Jones, the beloved actor who died Sept. 9 at his Pawling home. He was 93.

Along with Jones' other contributions to the Dutchess County community — Jones worked with aspiring writers during the Young Playwrights Festival at the Bardavon 1869 Opera House in Poughkeepsie, and had called the Village of Pawling home since 1970 — he was an active supporter of the Poughkeepsie Day School from the time his son was a student there.

The school's auditorium — refurbished in January 2000 — was named in his honor.

Now the head of school, Spiro Gouras, hopes to honor Jones' legacy by ensuring its theater remains a space enjoyed by the larger community.

Jones' legacy at the Poughkeepsie Day School

The school, which closed amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, then reopened in the fall 2021, has brought partners onto the campus, such as Star2B theater group, Hudson Valley Bluegrass Association and Stringendo in the summers, striving to curate its James Earl Jones Theater "for more than the small population that's here," Gouras said.

Gouras gives credit to Jones' legacy for their independent school having a more community-based mindset, and plans are in the works to honor his enduring impact, which began when Jones' son, Flynn, attended the Poughkeepsie Day School from 1994-2001.

Gouras did not work at the school during that time, but stories of Jones and his wife Cecilia's support of the school have endured through the years.

"He recognized himself as someone who had," Gouras said, and wanted to give back to the community, particularly in a way that wasn't about him.

"I have heard that he was uncomfortable about even naming the theater after himself," Gouras noted.

The school chose to name the theater in Jones' honor, though no plaque was placed there in his name at the time, following Jones' request.

Jones' priority was to ensure the school had a state-of-the-art facility to be enjoyed by everyone, and it struck Gouras the first time he visited the school.

"This is an incredible theater for a small independent school to have," he said.

Jones 'believed in' Poughkeepsie Day School

Lisa McVey, who is the athletic director and gym teacher at the Poughkeepsie Day School, worked at the school when Jones' son, Flynn, was a student there.

"Even though we all understood what September 29, 2024 8:14 am (GMT -4:00)



Poughkeepsie Day School head of school, Spiro Gouras, left, and teacher Stephen Haff inside the James Earl Jones Theater at the school on Wednesday. PATRICK OEHLER/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

a big, important star he was, it was equally important to all of us that we remember he's Flynn's dad as well," she said.

McVey said she felt a sort of kinship to the actor, and said he held a potent connection to the students, parents, teachers and staff alike.

"He and his wife, Cece, they were very nice, and they came to all the functions," McVey said. "He was so generous with his time."

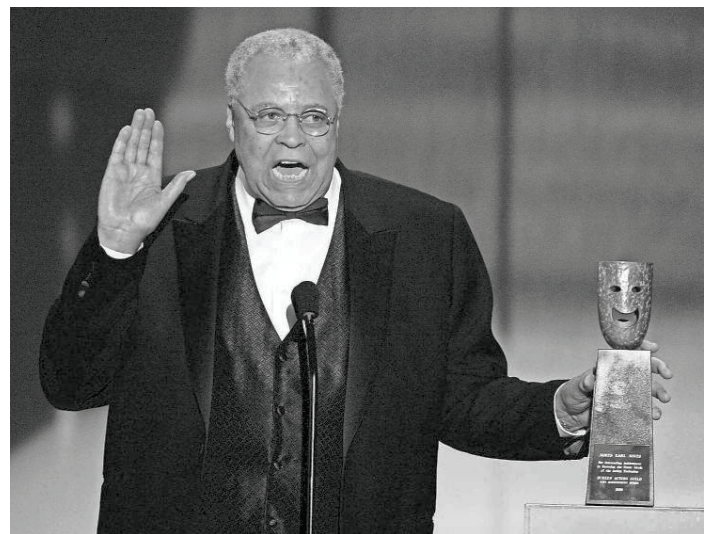
She mentioned he'd often be involved by engaging in fundraising activities for the school, including signing Darth Vader helmets to auction off. "I always tried to get one," she said. Jones also pulled together ensembles of actors for performances on the school's campus and did multiple readings at school benefits.

"He was just a really lovely part of our community... he was a member of us," she said. "He believed in the school."

Sadler Bakst, a former student and now parent of children who attend the Poughkeepsie Day School, was just a few years younger than Jones' son Flynn when she was a student at the school from 1999 to 2004.

"His son Flynn was a delight to be around, making me laugh like no one else I've ever met," she said in an email statement.

Although Bakst only met Jones a handful of times, she said, "I remember Mr. Jones as a warm, gracious and kind man." When Jones helped build the theater, "he made a massive, lasting im-



James Earl Jones accepting the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2009 Screen Actors Guild Awards in Los Angeles. LUCY NICHOLSON/REUTERS

pact on the PDS community," offering the opportunity for students to rehearse, perform and enjoy numerous productions since.

During one of the productions she participated in, "Twelfth Night," after the theater was newly constructed, Jones had attended the show and stayed behind afterward to congratulate the cast and crew.

"His words of encouragement left us feeling both honored and valued," she said. "His graciousness, warmth and generosity meant the world to me, and I hold that memory dear to this day."

It's been many years since Bakst has spoken with Flynn, but she said she hopes he finds comfort in knowing "his dad left such a meaningful legacy behind in our community."