

**For Immediate Release**

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# Media Release

## **Volunteer Celebrated for his 44 Years in Education**

**Charleston, SC** – Rarely do surprise birthday celebrations come as a surprise to the honoree. More often than not, someone accidentally lets the cat out of the bag.

On one Sunday in February, John Henry Smalls Jr. had no clue that his family was having a celebration for him in the fellowship hall at Friendship AME Church in Mount Pleasant's Old Village. His three children John III, Carlton and Keymeil, invited friends and family to gather after worship to celebrate his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Age isn't slowing the 44 year-educator down; he can be found every weekday at Charleston Progressive Academy (CPA) where he serves as a substitute teacher and school volunteer. He taught at Porcher Elementary School, McClellanville Elementary School, Wilmot J. Fraser Elementary, and Lincoln High School as a physical education teacher; and He has regularly served as a substitute teacher around Charleston County.

So why does he do it so many years after he initially retired?

"I see those kids in me," said Smalls. "Like them, I didn't have a lot when I was growing up. But I succeeded and they can too. I want to pass that on to them. I come here every day to be with these kids. They bring me as much joy as I bring them."

Smalls grew up in the Old Village of Mount Pleasant, and was one of 12 children born to John H. and Mary L. Smalls.

He was raised by his mother who worked in the cafeteria at Moultrie High School and other domestic work just to make ends meet.

"It was tough where economics was concerned," said Smalls. "We hardly had enough money for food, but the Lord provided and we were never starving or hungry."

As a child, he found himself on the basketball court every day after school but at the same time, his eyes were on the prize - education!

Office of Strategy and  
Communications

**Gerrita Postlewait, Ed.D.**  
Superintendent of Schools

**Erica Taylor**  
Chief of Staff

Coaches and the principal at Laing High School saw his potential and helped him secure a scholarship to attend Kittrell Junior College in North Carolina. He later transferred to Claflin College in Orangeburg where he earned a degree in Physical and Health Education.

"I was always athletic and liked most sports," said Smalls. "I knew that sports would be my ticket to college. Athletics helped me get out of town to better my situation. When I left for college, I didn't have hardly enough money for the bus fare, but I managed."

His decision to go into education was an easy one.

"The community I came out of had lots of teachers," said Smalls. "If you did something wrong they would see your parents on Sunday at church. Our teachers and even the principal pushed us to do and be our best, and they helped us individually to succeed."

Smalls, for more than three decades, wrote the weekly column "Across The Cooper With John Smalls" for The Charleston Chronicle and has worked at local Walmart stores for nearly two decades.

He drives to the Peninsula every day from his home in Ladson because he wants to give back.

"My coaches saw the potential in me, and I see the potential in these students at Charleston Progressive," said Smalls. "I want to show them that with persistence they can be successful and rise above the poverty."

Principal Wanda Sheats is grateful for his service.

"Mr. Smalls has been a dependable and positive volunteer at Charleston Progressive Academy since we returned to downtown in 2013," said Sheats. "He arrives at CPA daily at 8:30 a.m. to volunteer, but as a certified substitute, he fills the role of the sub when a job goes unfilled and does it with a smile. Mr. Smalls knows our students and even the students' parents since he has been a sub in some of their classrooms."

Through the years he has taught the children of his former students and even works with some of them at Walmart. It brings him joy to see and hear their success stories, he said.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," said Smalls. "Some days I am not needed at the school, so I just assist. I want to help guide the kids towards their future. I want to inspire someone to do better than what I wanted to do."

Teacher Valerie Muhammad has worked with Smalls for years.

"Filled with sincerity, dedication, and commitment, Mr. Smalls is truly a blessing to our CPA family," said Muhammad. "We greatly appreciate his willingness to go the extra mile to support us all."

Smalls considers himself blessed.

"I come from a community of faith," said Smalls. "Everyone has their own definition of community. I consider my community my family, and we are one where education and giving back are the cornerstones of supporting and lifting up a community."

Sheats agreed, describing the school and those within her walls as a family.

"Mr. Smalls is one of our biggest assets and a part of the CPA family," said Sheats. "I salute his energy at 80 years old as he continues to share his love of educating children. I appreciate him each and every day he walks through the doors of CPA!"

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#### **About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools that span 1,000 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 86 schools and specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.