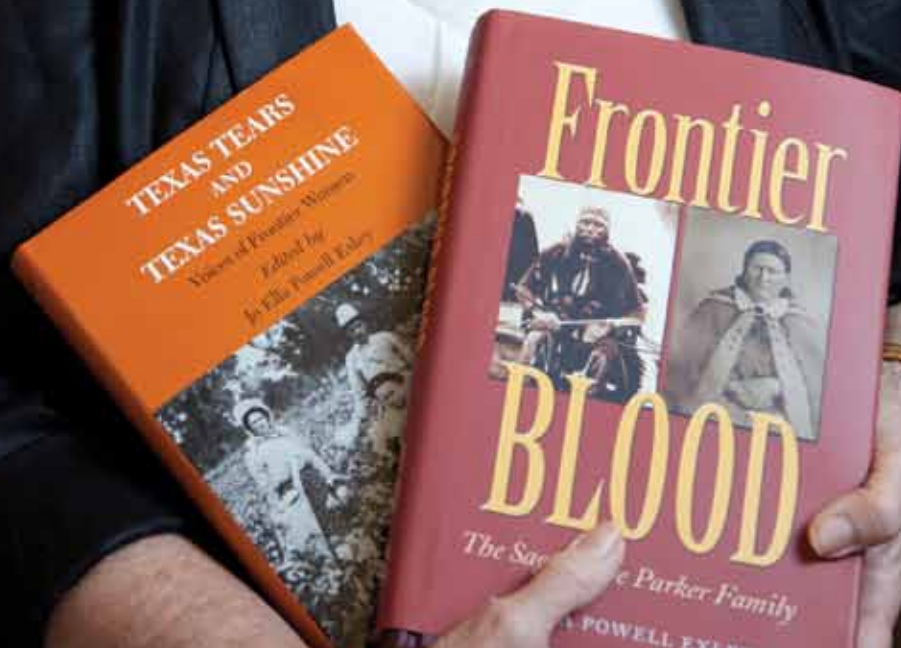


JO ELLA EXLEY'S HEART FOR HISTORY

Katy campus namesake, educator,
and author explores area's historic
frontier while inspiring students

*Written by Heather Lowrie
Photography by Jason Lehecka*



Katy educator Jo Ella Exley shares her love of Texas history in the books Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine, and Frontier Blood, and is currently penning a third book

W

Working late one evening, Jo Ella Exley, an English teacher at Cinco Ranch High School, received an unexpected call. She was asked to attend a Katy ISD board meeting, because the district was thinking about naming a school after her. That was a once-in-a-lifetime call for Exley, who has taught for over 41 years and has called Katy home for 45 years. The recognition was well deserved, and the unsuspecting Exley was truly honored.

“I love relating to the kids,” she shares. “You feel like and know that you are making a difference. It is important to be there for them and encourage them.” The naming of Jo Ella Exley Elementary School started with a letter of recommendation, various nominations, and a board member vote that ultimately sealed the deal. The campus opened in 2004 with a namesake that is as strong as the foundation the school was built on.

TRUE TEXAS ROOTS

As a sixth-generation Texan, Exley’s Lone Star roots trace back to the state’s early days. Her ancestors received a 3,000-acre land grant from Sam Houston. Her family tree is also rich with ancestors who helped settle the city of Houston.

Growing up as an only child, Exley remembers how her parents always took time for her. She carried those memories into adulthood, finding ways to make others feel special and appreciated. “My parents made me feel good about being an only child,” she recalls, adding, “Only children were very unusual back then.”

Exley remembers pleasant Friday evenings playing softball in the park with other children her age. She has great memories of building friendships and even being too small to run the bases, so an older boy would come to her rescue and carry her along the baseline.

Today, she is married to her college sweetheart Jim, who is a popular volunteer at Exley Elementary. In 2006, he was voted the PTA’s volunteer of the year. The two will celebrate 50 years of marriage next year. They have one daughter, Emily Williams, who is married to U.S. Army Specialist Brian Williams. They also have a 3-year-old grandson, James Joseph, named after his grandfather.

WRITING A NEW CHAPTER

Not only is Exley a scholarly educator, but she is also a published writer. There are many amazing teachers

throughout Katy ISD who teach about writing and mastering the English language, word by precious written word. But Exley goes beyond the classroom and into the pages of her very own published books, teaching others by her passion for history and literature.

Writing is an exciting labor of love for Exley. Her first book, *Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine: Voices of Frontier Women*, took her 10 years to write and six years to fact check. “You have to check everything – all of the facts,” Exley explains. “You have to go back and check every one of them, once, twice, or even three times to make sure they are correct.”

BRINGING TEXAS PIONEERS TO LIFE

Her hard work and attention to detail paid off, and the book is now in its ninth print and used in many college courses. It isn’t just the facts that make the book so popular, but also the 16 pioneer women who tell their story and bring those facts to life. “I wanted to know what it was like to be a pioneer woman,” shares Exley. “My ancestors were all pioneers, and I wanted to know how the women lived.”

Exley gave these 16 forgotten women, standing in the shadows of the talked about Texas men, a voice. She brought their hardships, struggles, and accomplishments into the hands of avid readers and has been the winner of four historical awards because of it. Her second book, *Frontier Blood: The Saga of the Parker Family*, is written in five parts and paints a vivid picture of different people in the Parker family.

Exley is currently working on her third book entitled, *The Last Southern Belle: Life and Letters of Varina Jefferson Davis*. She clearly enjoys teaching writing, and that

experience has evolved into becoming a well-respected writer with a publishing family at Texas A&M University Press.

EXPLORING THE KATY FRONTIER

Exley’s love for Katy students is apparent, whether she is greeting former students during a chance encounter out or welcoming a classroom of new freshmen in the fall. As she touches new lives through education and shares stories of the past through her books, Exley continues to forge new paths on the Katy frontier. KM



Jo Ella and her husband Jim Exley have called Katy home for 45 years



HEATHER LOWRIE enjoys encouraging others through her writing. She is married to her high school sweetheart and has three children.

5 FACTS ABOUT JO ELLA EXLEY



Jo Ella and Jim Exley show off their Exley Elementary School pride and enjoy visiting and volunteering at the school

1. Graduated cum laude from the University of Texas, with bachelor's degrees in English and Spanish
2. Graduated with a 4.0 GPA from the University of Houston, with a master's degree in English
3. Has received six citations for outstanding teaching ability from Katy ISD
4. Received writing awards from the English Speaking Union, Colonial Dames of America, Texas Historical Commission, Sons of the Republic of Texas, and San Antonio Conservation Society
5. Included in several books, including *Contemporary Authors*; *Read All About Her! Texas Women's History: A Working Bibliography*; and *Texas Women Writers*

ESCAPE TO PARADISE

CUSTOM POOLS & SPAS
OUTDOOR KITCHENS &
BACKYARD LIVING AREAS

POOLS • OUTDOOR KITCHENS • FIREPLACES & FIREPITS • PATIOS • PERGOLAS

TOTAL OUTDOOR
LIVING SPACES



KID-FRIENDLY
POOL
FEATURES

CUSTOM BACKYARD
RETREATS



BUILDING BEAUTIFUL POOLS SINCE 2001

(281) 693-4896

VISIT OUR SHOWROOM AT 3510 GREENBUSCH RD. • SUNSETPOOLSINC.COM