



ONEIDA MOUNTAINEER

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A bi-monthly newsletter of Oneida Baptist Institute

March / April 2026

OBI Singer Makes All State Choir



OBI senior Elena Djibalene represented OBI in the 2026 KMEA All State Chorus.

Elena Djibalene, a senior and a member of the OBI Choir, was selected for the 2026 Kentucky Music Educator’s Association All-State SSAA Chorus. Elena joined other top high school singers in Louisville, Kentucky to rehearse over several days before singing in a concert at the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts on February 6th.

Elena enrolled at OBI in December, 2023 as a sophomore from Senegal. She was born in Brazil to missionary parents. While serving in Senegal, her parents met another missionary couple whose two sons had graduated from OBI.

Elena enjoys singing, but this was her first year in choir. She decided to audition for All State for the challenge and the chance to achieve a top honor in music. Becoming an All State singer requires more than just talent, and Elena worked hard multiple evenings per week to prepare for her audition. She said, “I didn’t have previous experience in music, and I only had two months to learn how to sight sing. I got two points above the needed score, and I was very proud of my hard work.”

OBI Choir Director **John Monday** helped to facilitate evening practices for Elena and a couple of other students who auditioned. He said, “Elena worked tirelessly to attain her goal of making All State. It was truly an honor for me to be able to work with her and help her to attain this great honor.”

At All State, Elena enjoyed making new friends and learning more about music. She said, “My director was really nice and taught me things I didn’t know before.” Another highlight was singing the national anthem with the other singers in the Hyatt Regency tower each night. “The most impressive part was the dedication of singing it after hours of practice. Everyone sounded so good at 11:00 at night!” Elena noted. □

34 Years (and counting)



From teacher to Assistant Principal to Residence Life Director, **Connie Belcher’s** legacy of service continues.

Connie (Smith) Belcher’s connection with OBI began at a Baptist Student Union meeting at Cumberland College in 1982 when she learned about OBI from a couple of recent OBI graduates—**David Robinson** and **Oliver Hawkins**. The young men talked to Connie about teaching at OBI after she graduated that year. Connie received a letter with a job offer from OBI president Dr. Barkley Moore before she met him in person.

Connie taught the next year at OBI and left to earn her Master’s in Education. “I knew one day without a doubt, I would be back at OBI to serve.” She described a few years of resisting the Lord’s call for good reasons like dealing with medical issues and taking care of her mom, but in 1993, she decided it was time. “What a peace I received when I finally yielded to committing to His will. I promised the Lord two years. The Lord has a sense of

(See Belcher continued p. 2)



Oodles of Oranges!

We were blessed with five pallets of “Little Cuties” from God’s Pantry. Easy to peel and just in time for cold and flu season. God is good!

(See Belcher continued)

humor, because 34 years later, I'm still here!" she said.

From 1994-2002, Connie taught a full schedule of high school vocational classes. Like many OBI staffers, her day did not end at the bell. She sponsored many after school student clubs and spent a lot of time with the dormitory students.

In the summer of 1999, Connie and Tim Belcher were introduced by mutual friends in their hometown of Pikeville, Kentucky. Tim joined the OBI staff in the maintenance department and the couple were married in July, 2000.

Beginning in 2002, Connie became an Assistant Principal and started the Career Placement program, a school-to-work program that allowed students to gain work experience during the school day.

Tim retired in 2018. Connie retired in 2022 and became a volunteer educational advisor. Last year, she was asked to serve in a new position at OBI, Residence Life Director (RLD). Connie explained, "My goal is for the young people to feel a sense of belonging and to build a community that reflects Jesus through patience, leadership and love. The houseparents and I are shaping eternity in everyday conversations."

Larry A. Gritton, Jr., has served with Connie both as a new teacher to OBI in the late 90's and later as the president of OBI. He said, "Connie Belcher has been a faithful member of the OBI team for over three decades, and it's hard to imagine this place without her. Her heart for our students, combined with her versatility and willingness to serve wherever needed, even in her retirement, has been invaluable to OBI."

Reflecting on 34 years, Connie said, "People have always said that I could work somewhere else and make a lot more money. I say that you cannot put a monetary value on seeing lives changed and knowing that the Lord used you to make a difference. This isn't a job, it's a calling." □



Class of 2026—It's an annual tradition that our graduating seniors are presented with class shirts in the spring. This day begins the countdown to graduation and is a reminder to them to make every day count!

Documenting an Oneida Legend



Dr. Aaron Mobley sat down for a conversation with Larry A. Gritton, Jr. about leadership, faith and the enduring mission of Oneida Baptist Institute.

What began as a documentary about Oneida Baptist Institute evolved into a story focused on the life and on-going legacy of Larry A. Gritton, Jr., OBI's 12th and current president. It is available to view free of charge on YouTube and Facebook.

Dr. Aaron Mobley is the owner of MB Productions, LLC, a professional audio, lighting and staging company. Mobley has been documenting the people and institutions of southeastern Kentucky in a series titled, "The Journey with Aaron Mobley." He stated, "OBI's founding and century-plus legacy is nothing short of divine providence."

Mobley is no stranger to OBI, noting that many of his family have attended and graduated from OBI including his uncle Eddie "Jack" Mobley, an All State basketball player whose jersey still hangs in the Sparks gymnasium. Aaron's

son, Jacob, graduated from OBI in 2022.

Mobley holds a doctorate from Liberty Baptist Theological seminary, two master's degrees and is a graduate of Clear Creek Baptist Bible College. He is a former pastor and Kentucky Department of Corrections prison chaplain. MB Productions specializes in providing professional audio, lighting and video equipment for live performances as well as installation in churches, schools and other venues.

To watch the conversation with Dr. Mobley and President Gritton, follow these links:

YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSL-bvn2x-Vs&t=352s>



Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/thejourneywithaaronmobley>



Spring Spiritual Emphasis Week

Dr. Jamie Ward, Co-Lead Pastor at Hillvue Heights Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Kentucky, was our guest speaker for Spring Spiritual Emphasis Week (SEW) in March. Dr. Ward brought four powerful messages that centered on the Holiness of God and His call for complete surrender of our lives to Him.

Matthew Bone, Associate Pastor for Worship at First Baptist Church in Pikeville, Kentucky, along with several of the youth worship team from First Baptist, led the worship at each service.



Dr. Jamie Ward

Students at OBI are used to seeing guest speakers in chapel. What makes SEW special is that it is a week of focused concentration on the Lord, and it allows the speaker to delve deeper into the teaching and worship than they could in one regular service. □



Worship Leader Matthew Bone.

OBI Athletics Expands to Meet Student Interest



5th graders on the Middle School Volleyball team L-R: Libby Stratton, Hilda Gay and Kilee Noble. The girls have enjoyed having a winter activity that lets them stay active, learn a new sport and spend time with friends.

As our Lower and Middle School enrollment continues to grow, so has our athletic program. OBI Athletic Director **Tony Hall** noted, “With a couple of parent volunteers coming alongside our staff, we were able to provide these opportunities and meet the interest.”

This year, we added Lower School Boys’ Basketball and Lower School Cheerleading. Approximately 17 boys ranging in age from K-4th grade participated in basketball, and about a dozen girls joined cheer.

This was the second year for Middle School (grades 5-8) Volleyball, and 26 girls participated. About 10 girls in grades 3-4 joined the Lower School Volleyball team, new this year. Thirteen middle and high school athletes joined the new Indoor Track team for the winter season. □



Athletic Hall of Fame Nominations

The purpose of the OBI Athletic Hall of Fame is to recognize and honor our outstanding coaches and athletes. The inductees will be chosen by the OBI Athletic Hall of Fame Committee and will be recognized at Homecoming in October.

Nominees must have been outstanding in their sport(s) and left OBI in good standing. Coaches must have been a varsity coach at least three years. *For full eligibility rules, email Tony Hall, OBI Athletic Director.*

Please email nominations to:
tony.hall@oneidaschool.org

All nominations must include:

- The nominator's full name, address and phone number.
- Name of nominee and decade he or she was at OBI.
- Sport he/she played or coached.
- List of nominee's sports awards, records set, etc.



Lower School Basketball placed second at a county-wide tournament in January. L-R: Coach Zac Kemp, Bryson Napier, Brier Lyons, Gabriel Kemp, Jace Lovins, Tanner Fugate, Garrison Campbell, Kolton Gray, Easton Fugate, Hunter Matthew, Grayson Dodge, Coach Kyle Fugate.



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Accreditation 2026: Strengthening Our Future

OBI has private school accreditation through the National Council for Private School Accreditation (NCPA), the Kentucky Non-Public School Commission (KYNPSC) and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE).

To maintain our accreditation status, every five years we undergo a self-study which is reviewed by a team of educators from other institutions. This team evaluates and certifies that a school meets high standards in these 12 areas:

- Mission
- Governance
- Finance
- Public Relations
- Plant and Facilities
- School Improvement
- Administration/Staffing
- Curriculum
- Instructional Improvement
- School Climate
- School/Community Relations
- Instructional Advancement
- Indicators of Success
- Special Programs

The team then visits the school to conduct interviews with administration,



Connie Belcher (left) and Tammy Mason worked together on OBI's accreditation self-study over the past year. This was Belcher's 6th and final accreditation to work on here at OBI, and she is happily passing the baton!

staff, parents and students plus visit classrooms and tour the campus.

OBI Principal Tammy Mason said, "The accreditation process is important so that we can celebrate our successes as well as be reminded of some possible ways for us to improve to ensure our students are receiving the best education in the best environment possible." □



In Memoriam

Joe Buckner
 Former Houseparent

Jeanette Osborne Baute
 Class of 1950

Bob Howard
 Class of 1957

Frances Patrick Clark
 Former Teacher

Jerry Bevil
 Former Trustee

Lillian Ewing
 Friend & Donor

Important Dates

- May 15 - Graduation
- June 21 - KBC Father's Day Offering for OBI
- August 10, 2026
 First Day of School
- October 17, 2026
 OBI Homecoming