KATHERINE GERTRUDE DUNN

At A Glance

Birth: August 14, 1905, in Sacramento, California

Death: August 24, 1985, in Sparks, Nevada.

Race/nationality/ethnic background: White

Primary city and county of residence and work: Sparks, Washoe County.

Burial: Our Mother of Sorrows Cemetery, Reno, Nevada

Major fields of work: Educator, principal

Other role identities: philanthropist



Katherine Dunn
Nevada State Journal, 1969

Longtime teacher, principal honored for her dedication

Katherine Dunn loved her roles as an elementary and middle school teacher and principal. She chose to spend her whole life in her hometown schools.

Katherine Gertrude Dunn was born on August 14, 1905, in Sacramento, California, to parents John Edward Dunn and Rosie Ann Reilly Dunn. Katherine was the youngest of three siblings, six years younger than her brother Thomas and three years younger than her sister Mary. The family moved from Sacramento to Sparks in 1912, as John worked for Southern Pacific Railroad and the railroad industry. John was the boiler foreman in Sparks until he retired in 1935, so the Dunn family watched Sparks grow and change exponentially. The family settled in a house at 402 5th Street.

Katherine said her love of education started when she was just a girl, taking care of the neighborhood children and teaching them, as well as looking up to the educators who influenced Katherine's schooling. All the Dunn children were educated in Sparks schools, and when Katherine graduated from Sparks High in 1923, she was class valedictorian. She then attended the Normal School at the University of Nevada, where she graduated in 1925.

After her graduation, Katherine started teaching at the Kate M. Smith grammar school (later called Kate Smith Elementary School), as a third-grade teacher. At this time, the school was very small, with only three classrooms. When Katherine started teaching, women weren't supposed to teach in their hometowns but were expected to move away

and teach in other places. She said the Sparks School District hired her "by accident," but she was able to break that barrier and teach in her hometown. Her second year at Kate Smith, she taught fourth grade and then moved to Robert Mitchell School in 1927. Until 1932, she taught third, fifth and sixth grade at that school. In 1932 she moved to Sparks Junior High, teaching social studies for all grades. She recalled how,

> "When Mr. Dillworth asked me to go to junior high school, I felt that I really had become successful as a teacher. Because I was able to stay in the community, I think it furthered the acceptance of young people to teach in their home town."

She spent 14 years at Sparks Junior High, teaching both English and social studies to hundreds of students. In 1946, she moved back to Kate Smith school, where she became part of the administration. She was appointed principal, but the school was small enough that she also still taught in the classroom. She was never able to pick her own grades to teach, so she taught almost every age of student during this time.

While she taught in the classroom during the school year, she spent summers and other breaks switching from a teacher to a student. She earned college credits at universities like University of California Los Angeles, San Jose State, University of Washington, and University of Nevada. In 1951, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree.

By 1956, the Sparks School District was incorporated into the Washoe County School District, and Katherine moved into a full-time principal position at Kate Smith School. By the time of her retirement in 1969, the school had expanded into twelve classrooms and included a kindergarten program. She was a beloved teacher and administrator and was honored as an outstanding professional woman by the Sparks Business and Professional Women's Club in 1954, calling her a "popular teacher with a splendid record. […] Through Miss Dunn, The Sparks Club gave recognition to all teachers who play such an important role in community life."

She was so beloved that when the 1979 Washoe County School Board decided another Sparks elementary school needed to be built, her name was chosen to grace the new school. By 1981, Katherine Dunn Elementary School had opened. She spent a total of 44 years educating the next generation of Nevadans and helping countless students. She never married or had children. Instead, she put her career as an educator first in her life, something rare for a woman of her time.



Katherine Dunn
Reno Gazette-Journal, 1985

In 1985, the school was formally dedicated with a ceremony. Two hundred people attended the 80-minute dedication, and Katherine herself spoke about

> "feeling very humble… because I feel I don't deserve all this. There are lots of hard-working teachers today who deserve just as much attention."

Former students, like then-Superintendent of Washoe County School District Marvin Moss, remembered her teaching fondly.

> "She was a real doer in this community, a well-respected person. She has been for a long time."

Proctor Hug Sr., Washoe County Superintendent during much of Katherine's teaching tenure, called her

> "one of the finest teachers we've ever had. […] I just couldn't say enough nice things about her. She was a very strong teacher, and she was kind, she loved children and got along well with parents."

As a member of the Catholic Church, Katherine also prioritized charitable action. She helped numerous students acquire school supplies, backpacks and food. She also ran Jacks Carnival for many years, helping to raise funds for Kate Smith Elementary. She was a longtime member of the Kate Smith School PTA, the National Educational Association, the Nevada State Education Association, the Washoe County Principals Association, and the National Elementary Principals Association.



Just five months after the school's dedication ceremony, Katherine Dunn passed away on August 24, 1985. She was 80 years old. She is buried in the Our Mother of Sorrows Cemetery, Reno, Nevada. Her parents, sister, and brother are also buried there.

Without telling her family, she gave most of her retirement savings to charity, knowing her health was worsening. In her honor, her family requested donations be made to the Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Marvin Piccolo School, and two local organizations to help special-needs students in Washoe County and Fallon. She is still remembered today through the Sparks elementary school bearing her name and she deserves the recognition for being one of the best educators in the area, fiercely championing to help educate the town she grew up in and loved so much.

Researched by Patti Bernard and written by Aubrey Garrard, 2026

Sources of Information

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