Report of the Vice President
Teri Harris Jones

Representing the Oregon School Employees’ Association is an honor and a privilege. As vice president of this organization, I want to thank you for your stories, support and solidarity throughout this year. That wonderful sense of magic and purpose that infuses the air whenever and wherever a gathering of our membership takes place never gets old — and to this day still inspires me.

This past year brought me back to the executive board of the chapter that fostered my activism and nurtured my commitment to improving educational experiences and climate. Thank you Coos Bay Chapter 33 for bestowing on me another opportunity to reciprocate all you have given me.

One of my favorite memories of this past year occurred when the Board traveled to Astoria for an informational picket in support of local nurses trying to get a fair contract and safe working conditions. As we poured off three buses with Senator Merkley in tow, a young nurse who I went to stand by gazed with tears in her eyes and said, “We didn’t think anyone knew.” Her comment reminded me of the potential volume of a union. Working together for our own members, and in solidarity with others, we bring silenced voices the means to tell their stories and educate others on workplace injustices.

I also had the privilege to attend the AFT Human and Women’s Rights Conference in Montgomery, Alabama. Panels of civil rights activists, nurses, educators and students shared their experiences and answered our queries. We discussed health rights, diversity, racism, poverty and gender issues. That authentic voice honestly was educational and motivational. In the midst of my journey to Montgomery, I learned of the passing of Congressman Elijah Cummings. Many speakers credited him with inspiring some of their life choices. We honored his memory by sharing stories and committing to the continuation of his life’s work. A little over a year ago he had stated, “When we’re dancing with the angels the question will be asked — in 2019, what did we do to make sure we kept democracy intact?” Belonging to a union is one of the ways I keep democracy intact. How about you?

This past year, I made a couple of treks to Washington, D.C. Last summer, I was part of a contingent that participated in a Community Schools Workshop and discussion. Viewing education as a community resource and partnership is near and dear to my heart. I look forward to continuing this path in my own community and promoting it around the state. Shortly before Covid-19 changed our world, other OSEA members and I joined our fellow American Association of Classified School Employees from around the nation to lobby for educational issues. Speaking on behalf of IDEA funding, infrastructure and Title I programs, we stressed the importance of federal financial commitments in order to improve public education in the United States.

The 2019-20 school year will be known for its roller coaster ups and downs. This was the year that began with hope and the promise of improved educational funding. We had several legislative successes and one notable stumbling block. But the sting of PERS legislation was tempered by the promise of a united union defense against it via the judicial route...again. The possibility of increased programs, at risk population help, lower class
sizes and more classified assistant hours became our focus as we attended community forums, building and district meetings and took part in informational surveys. This was not vain, however, and have faith that we helped set a standard that may be postponed but is not dead in the water.

The frustration of members opting out via the attacks of the Freedom Foundation was lessened by the percentage of new employees signing up. Our January Leadership Summit was a valuable learning and planning success. There was still a lot of work to do, scholarships and awards to present, a Conference to plan, resolutions to fine tune and a budget to assemble. Committees were busy, field representatives were meeting and negotiating, organizers were watching their odometers spin forward and the souls of their shoes wear thin, support staff had phones to their ears and fingers drumming keyboards, government relations were preparing for the primaries and beyond and the baton of management led the organization in frenzied harmony. Then our world confronted a viral obstacle that could not be swerved around; it demanded us to temporarily alter our jobs and our communications. It canceled zone meetings, Conference, disrupted election protocols, and forced us into a virtual world of meetings and incessant phone calls.

OSEA has always been an organization that confronts challenges, assesses possibilities and does the work that needs to be done. Our mission is to work together to improve working conditions, benefits and the wages of the working class. I look forward to collaborating with everyone to make the world a better place. 2020 vision left me when I hit middle age and I use glasses to see clearly now. Like my glasses, OSEA is a resource that helps me do my job better. OSEA gives me clear sight to a better future. Working together, that future looks awesome.