

Abraham Lincoln: Schoolmaster for a Day in Peters

By Greg Suriano | Photos by Wade Massie

Honest Abe seems to be popping up everywhere recently. The original visited Pittsburgh on the way to his 1861 Washington inauguration, and Soldiers and Sailors Museum in the city is currently displaying artifacts from that stay. (See story on page 12). The president's modern incarnation, in the person of Fritz Klein, recently mesmerized the children of two Peters Township elementary schools—Bower Hill and McMurray—on October 22 and 23. Mr. Klein came all the way from Springfield, Illinois (yes, that traditional land of Lincoln is really where the actor hails from), to relive the Civil War era through presentations accenting Lincoln's storytelling, life, and homespun philosophy.

Mr. Klein, the spitting image of the tall, bearded Lincoln, is virtually (when he chooses to be) the sixteenth president. This Lincoln, in his monologues and answers to student questions, was able to impart vivid, you-are-there history lessons to the children, while also employing the noted Lincoln character traits to provide lessons on honesty, moderation, the evils of slavery, mediation, and the importance of humor.

It was refreshing that on several occasions, the Lincoln impersonation ended and the actor introduced himself to the children in a seamless manner. But on the whole Lincoln was really there, absolutely accurate in regard to dress, backwoods drawl and speech peculiarities, props (a Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper of the period, nineteenth-century coins, and even a toy wooden top), and attention to remaining firmly in the 1860s in all his references.

There were several assemblies geared to entire grades; a student "press conference"; honesty workshops; a special Q&A lunch; and a musical performance of songs popular with Lincoln and in the nation during the mid-1800s. For the music, Mr. Klein reverted to his own persona (Lincoln was a notoriously bad singer) and presented a history lesson about the songs, accompanied by his captivating guitar playing and vocalizations.

Especially in the larger assemblies, this visiting Lincoln enlivened history for the students through stories and jokes about his own childhood and home life. He had a horse named Bob; he liked to listen to people who sing; he brought roasted potatoes to school not only for lunch but to warm him on the cold-morning walk; and his favorite author was the humorist Artemus Ward. Once, after being scolded by his fastidious mother for muddy footprints in the house, he created similar footprints on the ceiling (and made her laugh) by holding his stepbrother upside down to walk in the manner of a now-famous cartoon Spider-Pig.

Through his Lincoln Institute for Education (www.LincolnInstitute.com; 800-746-4223), Fritz Klein has been offering these historical performances since 1980. "An exciting part of these shows has been a combination of entertainment and education, both at the corporate level and in schools," says Klein. "It is amazing how well Lincoln's words and ideas bear upon the present." In his engaging presentation to the students of the Peters Township elementary schools, this Abraham Lincoln brought the Civil War era to life with a warmth and humor that would have made our own Mr. Rogers proud. □



Fritz Klein as Abraham Lincoln captivates the morning kindergarten assembly at Bower Hill Elementary.





School Calendar

DECEMBER 2007

24-31 Winter Recess - No School

JANUARY 2008

- 1-2 New Year's Day No School for Students
- 3 School Resumes (from Winter Recess)
- 18 End of Second Report Period
- 21 Martin Luther King Day - No School
- 22 Faculty Clerical/In-Service
No School for Students
- 24 Report Card Distribution

FEBRUARY 2008

- 15 Faculty In-Service -
No School for Students
- 18 President's Day - No School

MARCH 2008

- 19 Faculty In-Service -
No School for Students
- 20-24 Spring Recess - No school for students

APRIL 2008

- 2 End of Third Report Period
- 3 Faculty Clerical/In-Service -
No School for Students
- 7 Report Card Distribution

MAY 2008

- 26 Memorial Day - No School

JUNE 2008

- 6 Last Day for Students
End of Fourth Report Period
Graduation
- 9 Faculty Clerical / In-Service
- 11 Report Card Distribution
- 17 Kennywood Picnic

School Closing Make-up Days:

1/21/08, 2/18/08, 3/19/08,
after June 6, 2008

Kindergarten is Her Calling

By Astrid Cook

Maybe the third time is the charm. For Traci Long Stuneck, who has twice been nominated as Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year, doing what she loves is all the award she needs. For 23 years, she has been teaching in Peters Township, and for all but one year she has been teaching Kindergarten.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about this woman is not that she is adored by her charges and their parents or that she is highly respected by her colleagues at Pleasant Valley Elementary, but rather that after more than two decades in teaching, she still chokes up when talking about how much she loves her job.

"I try to connect with each individual student," Stuneck explained while tears welled in her eyes. "I just can't let anyone (fall) through the cracks. Some people say, 'every child can learn.' I believe every child will learn."

It is because of this commitment that Pleasant Valley Principal Mary Hamrick has nominated Stuneck for PA Teacher of the Year for the past two years. Hundreds of teachers are nominated throughout the Commonwealth, with approximately 30 being asked to complete an extensive application that includes a video presentation with classroom activities and a recorded speech. From this group, a dozen teachers are invited to the finals in Harrisburg. In 2006, Stuneck made it to the semi-final round. This year, she was among the 12 teachers who attended the Harrisburg workshops and awards presentation in October.

"It was very elegant and I felt so fortunate to be there," recalled Stuneck. The group took a private tour of the Capital building and attended a reception at the Governor's residence.

Sharing the moment with Stuneck were her husband, Rick, Principal Hamrick and the Michalski family, whose daughter was one of Stuneck's pupils. Annie Michalski, a third grader at Pleasant Valley prepared a speech where she introduced Stuneck in front approximately 200 people at the awards ceremony.

Hamrick counts Stuneck among her best teachers.

"She is truly an exemplary educational leader," Hamrick said. "Because of her strong dedication to the education of children, her students and their families actually adore her."

Stuneck is quick to share that praise with her co-workers.

"There are so many great teachers here," Stuneck said. "We've had a Teacher of Excellence and two years ago a Social Studies Teacher of the Year. There are only 30 of us on staff, and it's been one after another (receiving awards)."

Although Stuneck was not the final winner for Teacher of the Year (David Woten of North Allegheny won that honor), she found the experience in Harrisburg to be a moving one. Of course, her emotions are to be forgiven if they seem a bit strong: after her mother's sudden death in March, Stuneck went ahead with her marriage this summer. Shortly thereafter she found out she had made it to the final round in the nomination process. It has definitely been a whirlwind year for her.

Perhaps 2008 will be the one where this revered teacher brings home the title crown of PA Teacher of the Year. As far as her students and co-workers at Pleasant Valley are concerned, she already is. □



Traci Long Stuneck, husband Rick is pictured with student Annie Michalski and her sister Abby. Annie introduced Stuneck at the awards ceremony.

Clean Hands Campaign

The Peters Township School District is seizing upon recent studies that show the best way to “cure” commonly transmitted illness such as the flu, MRSA and other viruses, is to wash wash wash your hands.

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps you can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. The school district is offering tips as part of its “Clean Hands Campaign.” Colorful posters will remind both children and adults to wash their hands before eating, after going to the bathroom and always after blowing their nose, coughing, or sneezing.

Although it is best to wash your hands with soap and clean running water for twenty seconds or longer, you may also use an alcohol-based product to clean your hands. The Clean Hands Campaign will be posting reminder signs for our children in restrooms, classrooms, cafeterias and nurses offices. The school district is asking parents to reinforce the campaign at home and encourages the whole family to wash their hands to ensure a safe and healthy lifestyle.

Local Artist Recognized

Congratulations to Brendan Vislosky, whose artwork was chosen this past spring for recognition by Congressman Tim Murphy. Vislosky received an honorable mention for his work that was submitted last spring for the Congressional Art Competition.

Vislosky attended Peters Township High School at the time of his submission.

“I would like to thank all the students and schools participating in the contest,” said Murphy. “The quality of work and level of competition were extremely high... I congratulate each young artist and urge them to continue to pursue their talents.”

Jankowski, Rider Commit to Colleges

Two major contributors to Peters Township High School’s WPIAL playoff championship last spring have made verbal commitments to attend two Ohio colleges in 2008.

Jordan Jankowski will play for Mid-American Conference school Miami of Ohio. According to West Penn Baseball, Jankowski, who catches and is a relief pitcher, pitched as fast as 89 MPH last season with the Allegheny Pirates club team and for PTHS batted .464 with a WPIAL high 12 homeruns and 37 RBIs during last year’s regular season. Jankowski has been named to the Post-Gazette and Observer-Reporter All-Star teams.

Jim Rider will be playing for rival Mid-American Conference school Kent State. Rider is considered a topnotch defensive player, who hit .435 with 31 RBIs last year. He was chosen for the Post-



Gazette’s All-Section team, as well as the O-R’s All-Star team. He also plays for the Steel City Wildcats in the WPEBL during the summer months, as well as playing with teammate Jankowski for the Allegheny Pirates.

Power School Implemented

The Peters Township School District has acquired a new, centralized and more powerful integrated student information system. Dubbed “Power School,” the system replaces three different applications that were used previously: individual school information systems, two different electronic gradebook programs and the Edline application used to publish online grades and attendance in grades 7-12.

Power School will combine all of these elements into one, in addition to incorporating the transportation and special education departments’ student databases. This will provide the district with a more secure, accurate and comprehensive student management system. Eventually operations should be streamlined and redundancy in information across the district will be eliminated.

As of mid-November, the attendance/grade portion of Power School for both the high school and the middle school is available. At McMurray, Bower Hill and Pleasant Valley Elementary Schools, the new student information system will impact students and parents due to formatting changes in report cards as teachers implement the Power School grade book application; the hard copy grade reporting formats will change in appearance and in information. Parents may also notice a change in progress reporting procedures until online access is provided later this year.

For more information and for updates, please visit the school Web site at www.ptsd.k12.pa.us.

Read-a-thon Makes History

The 2007 Bower Hill Read-A-Thon, sponsored by the Bower Hill PTA, yielded the best results for any reading event in the district. Students at Bower Hill read a total of 260,538 minutes, which was 25,000 more minutes than last year’s record. Students used the event as a fundraiser and managed to raise over \$25,000.

“Fifty percent of our Bower Hill students read for 400 minutes or more,” said Kelly Gustafson, Principal. “That’s half the school who managed to read more than six hours. As a result, we gave out a total of 784 medals to the students as a result of their hard work and dedication to the importance of reading.”

Top readers in each class were: Daniel Hecht, kindergarten, (1,200 minutes); Arianna Ranello, first grade, (1,120 minutes); Finn Sanders, second grade, (1,915 minutes); and Mackenzie Mendenhall, third grade, (2,545 minutes). □