

King of Hearts

Tommy Hager keeps his students jumping – for a good cause

For over 16 years, Pleasant Grove Elementary PE teacher Tommy Hager has combined two of his personal passions to support the American Heart Association’s Jump Rope for Heart campaign.

Since 2001, he has helped to raise more than \$163,000 for the Heart Association. And he has organized many after-school clinics to give students who reach the \$50 donation threshold a special opportunity to work with skilled coaches to perfect their jump rope skills.

He does it all for a cause close to his own heart.

“Our 18-year-old son, Will, had heart surgery when he was one month old, then a stroke just after his first birthday in December of 1999. My dad’s dad died of a heart attack and then I lost my father to a heart attack in 2006. I am passionate about teaching heart health so children and their parents can be healthy, active and strong.”

But heart health isn’t his only passion. He has been teaching students to jump rope since the first clinic he held at the Cary YMCA in the early 1990’s. When he took his first teaching job with Salem Elementary when the school opened in 2000, he also launched the school’s first jump rope team, the Salem Skip-Its. He even coached and taught his son, Will, and his daughter, Foster, while they were at Salem. Now he coaches the Apex Skip-Its. This year marks his 24th season of jump rope coaching and performing.

“Tommy truly puts 110% in everything he does,” says American Heart Association Senior Youth Director Michelle Gray. “He genuinely cares about the health and success of all kids. This commitment is evident in not only how he conducts his Jump Rope for Heart events, but it shows every day in his gym.”

His students agree. Carissa Wadsack-Stewart is a freshman at Green Hope High School. In fourth and fifth grade, she jumped with Hager’s former jump rope team, the Salem Skip-Its. She continued to help out with the team in middle school and still supports it today.



“He is so focused on humility and helping us build good morals,” she says. “It is amazing how much effort he puts into helping us become good people while we also are building our jump rope skills.”

Hager’s commitment to Jump Rope for Heart and helping his students stay healthy and build character are reflections of his personal philosophy on teaching and life.

“True success or failure isn’t measured by numbers, grades or scores,” Hager said. “True success is measured only by one’s determination of heart and their ability to persevere with focused effort – never giving up – until they have accomplished their set goal.”





TEAM PLAYER

Tricia Culley is technically a teacher's assistant, but she's more like a co-teacher

Tricia Culley loves a lot of things about Root Elementary School, where she's been a teacher's assistant since 2000.

But perhaps what she loves the most is that her colleagues don't forget the "teacher" part of her title.

"I work with a great lady," Culley says of kindergarten teacher Wini Boswell. "She was a TA before she was a teacher. She knows what it's like to be a TA. She always says we're working partners. We're a team. I'm just lucky that I have her." The feeling is mutual, Boswell says.

"I consider myself so very blessed to have been paired with her when I began teaching kindergarten at Root," Boswell says, who has worked alongside Culley for seven years. "I consider Trish much more than a TA; she is a co-teacher in our classroom. She makes every day fun with her great sense of humor. I love how we can finish each other's sentences and almost read each other's minds. Best of all is how she interacts with our students. She doesn't just care about our students' educational needs. She looks at the whole child and makes sure she has a personal connection with each student and their family. I can't imagine a better partner in the classroom!"

Culley enjoys it all. Root is the only place she's ever worked.

"I love the kids," says Culley, who graduated from East Wake High School after spending most of her formative years in Trinidad and New York City.

"At the start of the year, they're so scared cause they don't know anything. But as the year goes on, they're like flowers. They kind of bloom. They become these great, amazing kids by the end of the year. Sometimes it's really hard to see them go to first grade."

That was especially true for one student a couple of years ago who entered kindergarten non-verbal.

"He spent two years with us in kindergarten and he grew academically, socially, and emotionally," she says. "By the end of that kindergarten year, he wrote 'I see the cat.' Now that might not seem like a big deal, but considering where we started it was a huge deal. The best part was the smile on his face. He will always have a special place in my heart."



DOMO ARIGATO, MRS. ROBOTO

Sonia Clark has used robotics to unlock the potential of every student at Ballentine Elementary School

Just a few years ago, Sonia Clark didn't know the first thing about robots.

True to her nature, the AIG teacher at Ballentine Elementary School and 20-year teaching veteran, along with her students, "just jumped in and figured it out."

Now her classroom abounds with Lego robotics gadgetry, and her students are loving it.

She says, "It became, 'Ms. Clark, can I stay longer? Can I come in during recess?'"

From uncertain beginnings in 2011, Clark has catapulted her robotics program into a schoolwide and even a nationwide phenomenon.

Teams from Ballentine have competed twice in national Lego robotics competitions, and once in the world championships.

It began as a program just for fourth- and fifth-grade AIG students. Now, every second- through fifth-grade student at Ballentine can build and program a robot.

In 2012, Clark applied for and received a WakeEd Partnership Teacher Innovation Grant to buy more robots and laptops.

"That started the ripple," says Teresa Pierrie, director of programs at the WakeEd Partnership. "She gained community support in the form of volunteers and financial

partners and was able to purchase more robots and expand her program to include the full spectrum of diversity within our school and community. There were countless stories that poured out from parents and volunteers of children who overcame obstacles and achieved and experienced successes in just a few short months. This year, Clark sought and received a grant from the LEGO Foundation to make it possible for every second- and third-grade student at Ballentine to be able to build and program a robot."

This year, Clark expanded the program further to reach out to ID moderate special needs students.

Clark can't hold back her tears when describing the impact this effort has had on these students.

"When you see students with special needs work with Legos, it's amazing," she says.

"I think they surprise even their teachers with what they are able to do."

Clark is quick to thank all those who support the robotics effort, including Gard Poward, a retired rocket scientist who is in class for hours every day to help students design and program their robots.

From knowing nothing about robots six years ago, Clark now sees them as having unlimited potential.

"When students can make something move, there's just a lot of power in that," she says.

"I remember when we went to a state competition at North Carolina A&T University, one of our students was just marveling at being on a college campus. I told him, 'You can go here.' He said, 'No.' And I said, 'You can go here. You're here now.'"



THE MUSIC MAN

Gavin Lindo's first-grade class is bursting with song

There's no post-lunch lull in Gavin Lindo's class.

"We are going to start off our lesson," the energetic teacher tells his first-grade class at Walnut Creek Elementary one Monday afternoon, "by singing our classroom song."

The students enthusiastically comply as the music starts.

To the tune of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," the class breaks into dance and song:

In the jungle, the first-grade jungle, we're ready to learn...

"I'm not hearing you, come on," Lindo breaks in to say.

In the jungle, the first-grade jungle, we're ready to learn

"What are we learning?" Lindo shouts joyfully.

Gavin Lindo's first-grade class is bursting with song
Eeeeeee-eee-eee-eee-eee, Eee-eee-eee-L-A! Maaath,
social studies, and science, oh-oh!

Students keep dancing and singing for another minute or so and then return to their seats, breathless but, indeed, ready to learn.

"We are in the music age," Lindo says. "Children, the whole society, everybody loves music. As a music person myself, I have learned over the years that music helps to captivate the mind, and children learn songs very easily. So if you put the content in a song, to a beat they all know and like, it makes learning that much easier."

Lindo taught in Jamaica for eight years before coming to Walnut Creek two years ago as a teacher with the Visiting International Faculty (VIF) program, now known as Participate. He is a trained singer and led school choirs in Jamaica.

Here in Raleigh, his class is his choir.

There are multiple breaks during the afternoon math lesson to sing. One is more of a chant the class recites as Lindo snaps along:

10 is a group of 10 and zero extra ones

11 is a group of 10 and one extra one...

Another song is just a mini-dance party about how much the kids love math.

Not only does music help students retain the information – Lindo says many students have seen major jumps in their reading levels this year, for example – but it also makes students eager to learn.

"They want to come to school," Lindo says. "I have gotten several notes just this morning from the kids saying they appreciate the songs. We have fun every day."

Watch Mr. Lindo's class in action at wcpss.net/lindo