

# Sorrows' history teacher gets top DAR honors



Lesson: Ron Jones teaches history at Our Lady of Sorrows School in Farmington.

By KATHIE O'DONOHUE  
SPECIAL WRITER

Whether he's igniting buffalo chips, wearing an authentic Civil War uniform, showing some of his collection of 1,500 slides to historical places or re-enacting the Battle of Antietam, there's no doubt about it: Ron Jones takes a hands-on approach to teaching history that makes him memorable and teaches many lessons.

Jones was recognized recently in Lansing as Teacher of the Year for History by the Michigan chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, competing against 56 statewide districts, and is now in national competition for the honor. The DAR ceremony also presented awards to student essay winners as well as high school seniors for citizenship. Part of the process entailed a classroom visit by DAR evaluators to Jones' classroom at Our Lady of Sorrows in Farmington where he has taught for 27 years.

## A complete surprise

The award, an honor the unassuming middle school history teacher refers to as "a complete surprise," is considered quite appropriate by many others who laud the educator's phenomenal success with students and use of unique methods of instruction.

Lynn Check, parent of seventh-grade student Kimberly, describes Jones' award as "well deserved. He really tries to teach the concept of history, not just for information gathering but so the students can see the pattern of how history has evolved."

"Mr. Jones teaches the kids how to study and how to master concepts in a way that will last throughout their lives," Check said. "What impresses me most is how he really teaches from his heart. He loves the subject matter and imparts it to the students."

"He gets Kim thinking about the whole process of democracy, how to be a citizen. It's not just memorizing. He has a very sense

of humor and kids who are really listening can hear his dry wit," Check added.

Kimberly, 12, said, "Mr. Jones makes learning about history fun and connects it with what's happening now. He makes you want to learn."

Jones, a native Michigander who has also been a park ranger for the National Park Service since 1984, admits to a lifelong interest in history, and says in high school he was "good at history and band so I decided I guess I better stick to what I know."

When he began teaching, Jones describes himself as "book smart. I decided this has got to change, and my wife and I started taking three-week trips to historical places. I took lots of pictures and showed them in class. It helps me and helps the students. It's better than just buying the video and showing it to them, and they ask a lot of questions based on the slides."

In 25 years of travel, he has visited 47 out of 48 mainland U.S. states, shooting countless rolls of film and bringing home colorful souvenirs to use in class.

"It's one thing to describe a haversack (a bag for provisions every soldier carried), but the students like to actually see it," Jones said, so he brings his in. "I have them make their own hard-tack, a hard, dry bread soldiers ate, made of flour and water with most of the water out." While it's one thing to learn about, he relates, "It's different to actually put it in their mouth."

Through these unique teaching methods, Jones said, "History becomes more real because the students know I've taken the pictures; I can tell them what they're looking at. It's not something out of a catalog. It helps a lot when you're talking about a place to show them slides of the places we study."

For the eighth grade students, a trip to Washington, D.C., and its historical environs each spring is an extra-curricular treat, and Jones shows slides of Civil War battlefields in preparation for the trip.

"Here's what we're going to study and we're hoping to see this in a few months," he tells his students. "It becomes more personal. It sparks their interest."

Jones added that the visual aids "help them to see what something looks like."

## Re-enactments a hit

Students particularly enjoy Jones' history re-enactment when he dresses up in a Civil War uniform and brings in his "equipment" for show and tell.

On another occasion, Jones brings in "buffalo chips" and ignites them to demonstrate how they were used for fuel on the Oregon Trail. "Reading about it doesn't mean a thing till I take them out and light it up and say 'Look, this is how it goes.' Most students are from the suburbs—they don't even know what a buffalo looks like," Jones said.

Valerie Henigan, Our Lady of Sorrows assistant principal and teaching colleague for 17 years, accompanied Jones to the award presentation and says,

"Ron is soft-spoken, but at the same time commands respect. He has high standards and expects his students to meet them. He doesn't apologize for it. He will help out anyone in any way he can but doesn't tolerate those who don't try to put out any effort."

"He stresses study skills and he teaches the students how to study, to take notes. I don't think the kids realize it that much, but that is one of his main goals," Henigan said. "He is adamant in his respect for history and teaches how to learn from mistakes in history."

■ 'He teaches from his heart.'

Lynn Check  
—parent

"I believe he won this award because they were intrigued by his approach to teaching history. The children remember because they see, not just hear."

Don Deisenroth, father of OLS eighth-grader Ryan, believes that Jones has a "good rapport with the kids. He talks to them like he's confiding in them. He pokes gentle fun at society and tells them stuff they wouldn't expect to hear from an adult. Mr. Jones' name frequently comes up around our dinner table. I consider the kids really lucky to have had him."

Ryan Deisenroth concurs. "He's a really good teacher. He doesn't just write on the board and tell us to read the book. He brings history to life for us. He explains things from both points of view and we decide what we think about things."

What does Ryan consider most memorable from Mr. Jones class so far? "Roasting marshmallows over buffalo chips," he said laughing.

As one of few area elementary schools which offer two full years of history, Jones states that students are prepared for high school. How does he know? They come back and tell him. He also tells them, "Save your notes. I know some who have still used them in college."

"Kids are kids," Jones said, though the textbooks may change over time. "I keep moving around till I find something that works and I stick with it."

"I tell them travel around, see where history happened ... I know that makes me a better teacher and helps them understand."

The national DAR award competition takes place in April.

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