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MAKING SCIENCE A DELIGHT

A quick survey of 30 boys in grades five through eight at Shenandoah Valley Academy Elementary School (SVAE) in New Market, Virginia, revealed that science was their favorite subject by a huge margin (as long as recess wasn't an option). Another pizza-munching group of academy students who had all been through SVAE fondly reminisced about their elementary science classes: "Mr. Litten was the best science teacher we ever had," and "We wish Mr. Litten was teaching science in the academy, too." How does Rusty Litten instill such a love of science in his students?

"I don't really consider myself a science teacher," says Rusty thoughtfully. "I am more of a naturalist." Lowell Russell Litten, known as Rusty to his friends and the "nature guy" to youngsters at the conference youth camp, loves to observe all living things. "I grew up on a farm and had animals to play with," he recalls. "My friends included a pony, several dogs, ducks, a cow, a fox, and a woodchuck."

Teaching Observation

Rusty has successfully transferred his love for nature to his students. "I encourage the kids to slow down and observe," he explains, chuckling at how his lively group, on their regular nature walks, will trample joyfully through a field, missing everything if not reminded. In addition to encouraging observation, he sets specific objectives for each excursion

to encourage participation and learning. Students may be told to collect as many different types of seeds, leaves, or wild flowers as they can find, depending on the season.

Hands-on Learning

"I try to have them do as much 'hands-on learning' as possible," Rusty explains. "It is so much more effective than just reading something in a book." His classroom boasts living nature exhibits, too. At the time of the fire that swept through SVAE recently, his room had fish, an iguana, several birds, gerbils, and a ferret. Since then, he has received replacements: a guinea pig, a bird, another iguana, and a rock python, which he refers to collectively as the "beasties."

Training Collectors

Under his tutelage, Rusty's students rapidly blossom into collectors of junk and treasures. "Often it is a little hard to tell which is which," he says.

Indeed, his room is filled with artifacts and memorabilia from many nature excursions. Included in his "treasures" are a 16-inch-long peg and hole from an ancient ship (found washed up on Virginia Beach), the jawbone of a sperm whale, a giant shark's tooth, the vertebrae of a whale, and miscellaneous skulls, shells, feathers, and bird skins.

"I always ask the students, 'What could this be?' and encourage them to make educated guesses, then go back to the classroom and look it up," he says. "Another

BY SALLY DILLON

good question is, "What was this used for?"

Gifts From Many Sources

Rusty's parents worked at the General Conference for many years. People often brought in rocks and shells and other nature goodies for the boys. Rusty says, "I learned to never turn down gifts." This was an important lesson to learn early.

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The SVAE fire completely destroyed Rusty's nature collection, a product of 30-plus years. As the word spread on CompuServe's Adventists On-line forum, gifts started pouring in. He received fossils, mollusks, and miscellaneous sea life, a piece of the cliffs of Dover, rocks from the area around the Giant Pyramid in Egypt, Red Square in Russia, and the Holy Land, as well as an ancient adobe brick. "God is so good!" says Rusty laughing. "I had a wonderful collection that was destroyed, but now I have a wonderful collection that is all labeled! I had never gotten around to labeling most of the artifacts that burned."

Develop a Personal Mission Statement

These aren't Rusty's only secrets of success. When pushed for more information, he pulls a yellowed card from his wallet that contains his personal mission

statement. "This is my goal," he explains. "I often pull it out and read it and ask myself, 'Am I doing this?'"

My mission is that:

I will find individuals who need assistance.

I will be willing to do the most unpleasant task with a willing, pleasant attitude.

I will greet all with a smile.

I will teach in the methods that I would want to be taught.

"I suppose that teaching as I would want to be taught has made the biggest difference in my teaching style," he says. "I find I learn more from doing than just reading or hearing, so I try to teach that way, too. I wouldn't want to be spoken down to, or treated without respect, so I try not to ever do that with my students either." One of his students summed it up when she said, "Mr. Litten doesn't talk to us like we are kids, but just as one person to another person."

Develop Effective Habits

Michael, one of his former students, suggests that Rusty's secret of success comes from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. "Mr. Litten thinks that book is the second best book to the Bible," says Michael.

When this quote was shared with him, Rusty laughed. "I do use that book a lot,"

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he admits. "I found the seven habits so helpful in my own personal and professional life that I have tried to instill them in my students, too." Apparently, he has been successful, for Michael could still quote to me six of the seven habits:

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People:*

1. Be proactive
2. Begin with the end in mind
3. Put first things first
4. Think win/win
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood
6. Synergize
7. Practice balanced principles of self-renewal, including physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual areas of life.

Learn About Their Temperaments

"I also think one of the things that has really improved my teaching and relationships with my students is learning about the four temperaments. I have learned that each temperament needs to be approached differently," says Rusty. "For example, I do not tease my melancholy/choleric students. It hurts their feelings. Sanguines love it, and are often motivated by gentle teasing."

Rusty excels in his relationships with his students. Occasionally, students complain that he makes them learn too much, but his past students universally agree that he was the best science teacher they ever had. Such enduring admiration says much about Rusty's relationship with his students, rather than strictly his teaching style—but then, relationships are a part of Rusty's style.

Encourage Creativity

Rusty encourages creativity. He has helped seed several small home business endeavors. One student, Don, raised and sold venus flytraps. Rusty provided the capital and ordered the seedlings and necessary supplies, and Don raised the plants and sold them. He made enough to break even and to pay off Rusty's investment. "I learned that even if you have a great product to sell, if you don't have a decent marketing plan, you won't make money," Don says.

Michael, another of Rusty's former students, started a gerbil boarding business. He charged his friends to care for

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the babies to afford to keep the special 'pet' ones. I also realized that to take responsibility for a living creature means making arrangements for it whenever you aren't going to be around, and that they cost money to keep!"

Both boys thus learned valuable lessons that many adults have to acquire the hard way much later in life. Rusty gave them a 'leg up' on life by helping them learn these secrets early.

In one of Rusty's classes of 19 students, 15 wanted to enter careers in a medical field. He is beloved by the students he has

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mentored over the past 30 years of teaching, as well as by their parents. Rusty's teaching has been recognized by his peers and the church with the Zapara Excellence in Teaching Award (1993), the Teacher of the Year Award from the Potomac Conference (1989), and by his commissioning in 1992. ✍

*Taken from the book by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

their pets while they were on vacation. He and three friends also began to breed their own gerbils and negotiated a deal with a local pet store to trade in the 6-week-old offspring for credit toward gerbil food and bedding. Michael says, "I learned that if I kept all my gerbil babies, it took all my allowance for gerbil support. I had to separate my males and females or else sell

Sally Dillon is a freelance writer in Timberville, Virginia. She has great respect for Rusty Litten after seeing him survive Dillon boys in his homeroom four years in a row, and in his science classes for six! She lives with the gerbil-breeding company downstairs and the parakeet-breeding company in her living room and holds Rusty responsible for both.