

In Students' Eyes, P.E. Teacher is Inspirational Star

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On a spring morning on the rural eastern edge of Sebastopol, boys and girls at Hillcrest Middle School are queuing up and heading to the pitch to bowl, which means they are lining up and getting ready to play cricket. Last week, it was rugby.

It's clear this is no ordinary public school physical education class.

Later, at lunchtime, all of the school's 220 students will engage in highly charged intramural competitions in a "house" format reminiscent of the "Harry Potter" books.

Hillcrest's four houses -- Ballotti, Burbank, Libby and O'Farrell -- are year-round teams

comprised equally of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders, who compete in sports, chess, math -- and campus cleanup.

"You've never seen a cleaner campus," said Principal Carole Read.

It's all the doing of Simon Lewis, a 32-year-old P.E. teacher from Wolverhampton, England, by way of Liverpool, who, as part piper and part drill sergeant, has quickly become one of the most inspirational teachers in the west county.

"You hear kids walking out of class speaking in pretend English accents," said Gravenstein-Hillcrest superintendent Linda LaMarre. "They want to be just like him."

One of Lewis' first priorities upon being hired three years ago was to create a cross-country course on the school grounds and a marked and measured track within the confines of the school's old gravel parking lot off Bloomfield Road. Three years later, according to the Presidential Fitness Testing standard,

the Hillcrest student body is pronounced 96 percent fit, compared with about 50 percent when he came on board.

"I have very clear expectations, and I'm demanding," Lewis said. "At the same time, I try to be positive when they produce the work. Some kids are never going to break eight minutes in the mile, but over time, if they knock two minutes off their personal best, that's a huge achievement, and it should be recognized."

"There was one boy two years ago who was acting out and having a really tough time in school," LaMarre said. "But in Simon's class, the effort was completely different. All the kid wanted was an 'attaboy,' and when Simon would give him a pat on the back, it meant everything to him."

Lewis grew up in the center of England, not far from Wales, in a system where children went straight from primary school into high school at age 11. He excelled in swimming, rugby, cross-country, badminton and track-and-

field, while also joining the Air Cadets, the youth branch of the Royal Air Force. His aspirations of becoming a pilot were derailed, however, when, by age 17, he had grown to 6-foot-7.

He earned a bachelor of sports science degree in Liverpool, where he acquired the Beatle-like Scouse accent, which remains intertwined to this day with his original Brummie dialect, sometimes leading to confusion on the Hillcrest campus.

"He'll pick up on the puzzled looks and then translate," said Read, who noted that one of Lewis' favorite expressions, "Oi, cue a pair!" means "Hey, line up here!"

Lewis enjoyed teaching stints in South Korea and Hawaii, but, he said, nothing compared to his four-year experience teaching at the Stepney Green School in Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest boroughs in London, where 48 different languages are spoken.

"It was a seven-story-high enclosed building, with not one speck of grass on the entire property," he said. "It's where I learned my discipline style of not tolerating anything. I learned if you let things slide even a little bit, you lose attention and motivation very quickly."

Nowhere was that discipline style more tested than in the Sierra last November, when, with snow on the ground, Lewis volunteered to lead the entire eighth-grade class on a weeklong hiking trip in Yosemite. To keep the kids busy, he added night hikes, often several miles in duration and with the torches (flashlights) turned off, to his already rigorous day excursions. Although the kids always had the option to sit out a hike, not one ever did.

"It was a fantastic trip," Lewis said. "There were a few little issues, but there always are."

"I'm not sure anyone else could have handled that trip," LaMarre said.

"It would have taken a team to do what he did," said Kay Crocker, a trip chaperone. "He gave it his all. He finally slept on the bus coming home."

Lewis notes two distinct differences between his experiences teaching at Hillcrest and in the United Kingdom.

"There is more parental involvement and support here," he said. "But the kids are less fit. Not overweight so much, but less used to getting a sweat on and pushing things to their limits. At least that's the case until I get hold of them."

Only once during his Hillcrest tenure, say insiders, has the meticulously prepared Lewis been caught off-guard: One of his early assignments was to coach a flag-football team, and he sheepishly admitted he had no idea what the rules were.

Perhaps the greatest measure of a teacher's popularity is how respected he is by the incoming class.

"We had the fifth-graders come to an orientation a couple weeks ago," LaMarre said. "The only thing they wanted to know was where Mr. Lewis was. When they got to meet him, they were looking up at him like he was a rock star. We decided he'd do an actual P.E. class with them, and those kids were acting like they were trying out for the Olympics."

Mitch Miller, who graduates today with his eighth-grade class, likely speaks for many who have been guided by Lewis over the last three years.

"That'd be pretty fun someday to be a P.E. teacher," he said. "That would be pretty cool."

-by Ted Gross

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