Charlestown Elementary School & Thomas Paine

by Margaret Downey

With a great assistant I am capable of doing so much. Thanks to the employment of **Sally Cramer** during 2005-2006, I was able to finally finish designing a "Teaching About Thomas Paine" tri-fold that I had been thinking about for several years. While Cramer created a name and address database of all elementary schools located within an 80-mile radius, I concentrated on the artistic endeavor of creating the tri-fold. While Cramer created the mailing labels and Rubenstein's Office Supply printed the tri-folds, I refreshed my colonial costume, shopped for inexpensive colonial-themed prizes and updated the props I would need for a presentation.

The phone rang just three days after our mailing. Our first booking would take place at the Charlestown Elementary School in Malvern, Pennsylvania on April 19, 2006. Unfortunately, Cramer could not assist me during the scheduled event. I arrived at the school fully expecting to unload the car, set up the presentation, deliver the presentation and take pictures on my own.

I was relieved when **Dave Cliffel**, the teacher who had done the scheduling, informed me that he had assigned four 5th grade students to help me. Pictured with me in the photo below are (left to right) **Jesse**, **Jordan**, **Megan** and **Sarah**.

The students were fantastic volunteers! They helped me unload my car and they carefully listened to my directions in order to insure a smooth presentation. I assigned Jordan the job of photographer. Sarah took charge of the music. Megan handled the lighting.

Jesse participated in the actual presentation, portraying the young Thomas Paine. Jesse read a poem written by Thomas Paine when he was only eight-years-old. I gave the parchment poem and a hat to Jesse to thank him for helping me with the re-enactment of Thomas Paine as a youth.

The presentation was very well received by the students and the teachers in attendance. The story of Thomas Paine's life is intriguing and I was very pleased with the attentive attitude of the students. The prizes I gave the students who answered questions (wrong or right) also kept them interested and involved.

Another maneuver I use to engage the audience is to pull a male teacher into the act. When I talk about Thomas Paine's contributions to the Revolutionary War, I bring forward the teacher to read excerpts from *Common Sense* and *The Crisis.* To make everyone laugh, I dress the teacher in a colonial shirt, hat, canteen, and a shoulder strap powder horn. I also give the teacher a wooden gun to hold. The children love to see their teacher transform into an adult Thomas Paine right before their eyes. Below is a photo of Mr. Cliffel outfitted to serve in General Washington's army.

I am scheduled to deliver another presentation at Charlestown Elementary during their 2007 Colonial Days event on Friday, April 26, 2007. I need more volunteers for this special event. Please contact me if you would like to help (phone: 610-793-2737, Email: downey1@downey1.cnc.net). We need people to film, set the stage, and help during the presentation with distribution of prizes. □

Uwchlan Hills Elementary School & Thomas Paine

by Margaret Downey

A Charleston Elementary school teacher highly recommended my "Life and Work of Thomas Paine" assembly to another teacher at Uwchlan Hills Elementary School. Thanks to high praise, I received an invitation to perform on May 31, 2006.

This time my part-time assistants were available to help. **Sally Cramer** dressed in a colonial costume to interact with the children and to stay in keeping with the theme of the presentation. **Christopher Evans** took photographs and filmed the entire assembly.

The program was essentially the same as the Charlestown Elementary School assembly, but we were pleased to have **Alaine Lowell** in the audience. Lowell is the president of the Thomas Paine Society located in Pasadena, California. She was visiting Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to research the possibility of establishing a Thomas Paine Museum in the area. I requested that Lowell take notes and critique the presentation so that we could continue improving what we do.

Lowell liked everything, but submitted a list of ideas that could add interest to the program. Based on her suggestions we designed a PowerPoint slide show, purchased more props and prizes, developed better answers to common questions from children and teachers, and created a pre-assembly lesson plan.

I received a wonderful letter and package from the teacher I dressed as the adult Thomas Paine. He wrote:

> *Dear Margaret,*
>
> *It was a great pleasure having you come in and present a very informative assembly about Thomas Paine. I have been a fifth grade teacher at Uwchland Hills Elementary School for the past 18 years and I even learned a great deal about Thomas Paine that I was unaware of. As the adage goes, you learn something new every day. The pictures you sent were enjoyed greatly by me as well as my class.*
>
> *I'm enclosing some thank you letters that my fifth grade class wanted to send to you about their experiences and feelings they had after seeing your Thomas Paine presentation. My class has been writing all this year and your presentation gave them a perfect opportunity to reinforce this learning.*
>
> *Our grade level will definitely be in touch with you next year in order for you to come back in to present your Thomas Paine assembly to our next year's fifth grade classes. Thank you again for a great learning experience for all of our fifth grade students.*
>
> *Charles Beebe, Jr.*

The letters sent by the students made for delightful reading. Some students used creative Thomas Paine themed stationary that they designed themselves. All the letters were neatly typed. I nearly cried with joy as I read how much the assembly had affected the children. A few children expressed a desire to purchase the coloring book I told them I had written and they wished me well with my endeavors to have a Thomas Paine monument located in Philadelphia and a bridge and a school named after Thomas Paine. I will keep the letters as a dear memento of the time I spent with these lovely children.

Pictured above with me are Cramer and Beebe. The assembly was made possible with a $100 donation from **Drew Devitt** and matching funds from the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia's (FSGP) Thomas Paine Pennsylvania Memorial Committee.

It costs approximately $200 to present a Thomas Paine assembly. If you would like to help sponsor future assemblies, please earmark a donation soon. You will be helping children appreciate the legacy of Thomas Paine—a great American hero who has been neglected and ignored for being too much of a Freethinker.

Thomas Paine was ahead of his time when he questioned tradition and authority. This is the valuable message I deliver to the children while I talk about Thomas Paine's legacy. My hope is that they will learn that asking questions of authority figures is a valuable trait and can change the world for the better. Your donation to the committee through FSGP will guarantee that we will continue to host assemblies about the life and work of Thomas Paine. □