

PUPPETS, PENS, & PERFORMANCES

A Conversation with Val Hilliker

Val Hilliker had been a ventriloquist/puppeteer for about 30 years before she undertook her first artist residency in a public school this past March, and when she did, she didn't start small. This first adventure involved (and engaged) every student in Terrace Road Elementary (Calgary, Alberta, Canada)—all 132 of them.

While your imagination works out what it would take to help that many kids each build a puppet, be part of a show, and have a great experience doing it, a little background on Val.

Val lives in and works out of Calgary, but grew up and went to school in a very small town, Williams Lake, British Columbia. As her high school graduation approached, she and her classmates wondered "what next?" At the time there were no Universities or other educational opportunities nearby.

For Val, it was a book, a single book, that determined her future.

VH: A month before I graduated I was working at the professional library and I ran across a book "Teach Yourself to Be a Ventriloquist;" so, I did. I graduated, and 30 days after, I got my first paying gig as a ventriloquist.

The book said, don't move your lips, memorize your script—inside out and backwards and upside down— and it taught about puppet manipulation. So I sewed my very first puppet out of a simplicity pattern – I'm a seamstress, I enjoyed doing that in school – and I put a puppet together, an Emu, and put in on my arm and away I went. And the first gig was out of town, so that was an adventure for a grade twelve student who had never really traveled; that was my first traveling experience.

It was a little hippie tea house. We don't refer to them as hippie tea houses now, but that's what we called them then. They would gather every Friday night and they would have tea.

When the curtains rose the puppet was looking at me. And then I realized the puppet manipulation is what it's really about, because as soon as the puppet turned and looked at the audience, the audience burst out laughing. It was such an innocent part of me...I just realized the puppet should be looking at the audience, but when it did... instant laughter and I thought "Wow! This is really it!"

Over the next thirty years she would go on to develop a career entertaining in all sorts of venues.

VH:...Corporate gigs, school shows, festivals and fairs, anywhere where families are gathered. I do walkarounds for the theme park [Calaway Park] here. You just put a puppet on your arm and you walk around and talk to people. What I do is talk to people about the virtues I see inside of them, like courtesy, or their patience waiting in a long line – that's normally where I will perform, where the long lineups are, so they're entertained while they're waiting for their rides. I just love it. You go out and you meet people from Saskatchewan or Manitoba or Ottawa or Vancouver, or other countries that I've performed in, and they recognize me.

Val had done residencies for puppet and theater companies, but the move into the school setting was a new direction for her and for her creative partner, Simon Rose. Simon is a writer who has published five children's books.

Their talents and strengths complement each other – Val the builder and performer, Simon the scriptwriter and author. They brought these gifts to Terrace Road Elementary in Calgary to share with the kids for a very full week of creating. The school called it a "puppet/author" residency.



Val Hilliker and Simon Rose preparing their workshops

In preparation for the week, Val and Simon worked with school principal Mary Ellen Dewar. In addition to teaching puppetmaking and performance, and the value of working cooperatively, the residency would support other curriculum and school development goals that are in place for the school:

Literacy development, through storymaking, scriptwriting and speaking;

Science, with work on levers and pulleys - as used for opening and closing the mouths of ventriloquist figures; the fourth grade classes would work on this.

But for all students the major overarching goal for the week was to support the virtue that has been the school's yearlong focus - Respect. Respecting yourself, respecting others, and respecting the environment.

A virtue. That may call for a little explanation. "The Virtues Project" was founded in Victoria, B.C. about 20 years ago and is now being used and embraced in many Canadian Schools, grades K-12, and in fact in at least 96 other countries around the world. In brief it's an effort to influence behavior, thought and language in a positive way, to cultivate character by nurturing the "virtues" that most people (including most of the world's religions) can agree upon: kindness, patience, service, honesty, generosity – a long list. You can learn more about it at www.virtuesproject.com.

Respect for the environment was the specific focus for this week, and all the planning would support that. Before the actual residency began, Mary Ellen Dewar and her teachers worked with Val and the students to prepare.

VH: Prior to going there I sent them a list of environment questions. What are you doing for the environment, what does our city do, what does our government do, what can be done? What should we be doing? What are you doing locally and in



your family. So they answered those questions.

I also sent a couple of puzzles so they would be set up for the week to succeed. The puzzle that I sent is on courtesy, kindness, courage, helpfulness and joyfulness. We wanted to bring those to the table. We met with the teachers three times before we were actually working there.

Prior to the residency, Val and Simon also did a presentation and show for the entire student body.

How would pulleys and levers fit into the plan?

VH: A ventiloquist puppet is [a head] on a stick. So I really wanted to show them what a ventriloquist puppet looks like. (I don't use that kind of puppet in my shows, because most people are scared off by that kind of puppet. They've all seen the movies.) But I do have one and I showed it to them...and I built one so they could see the mechanism of how it works and the teacher was going "Yes! We need that!" So we had all the kids in grade four build a pulley and lever puppet.

One of the teachers ... cut all the wood for them and pre-drilled the screw holes, and the kids got to screw the screws in and put the levers on with recycled materials.

We looked at doing the puppets from recyclables...we had a huge amount of materials donated to us - furs and that sort of thing. So all the recyclables were donated and the kids [used them] to make their own marvelous creations. Each child made their own individual and unique puppet, so no two were the same.

How was the week organized? The school has eight classes, kindergarten through sixth grade. For the puppet project they were consolidated into five classes who were brought to Val's work room - about 35 at a time. For the first three days of the week, she worked an hour a day with each of the five groups. In short, each kid had three hours over three days to make a puppet. Lest you think it impossible for Val to make this happen all by herself, she had a number of parents who came in to help every day. Val showed the kids how to make the structure of a mouth puppet, then how to make a pattern for covering it with fabric, how to cut fabric, even how to sew.

VH: They really had to use items they never had to use before, in a different way. We just encouraged creativity, allowed them to develop the courage during the week, to overcome the fear of using these items. My job there was to companion the students through the creative process. What shall we use to build a dragonfly? How shall we build a dragonfly? So I'd give them an idea, and say this is just an idea. What do you think? And then they would go.

Each group also spent an hour a day with Simon Rose, developing a story and then a script. Which came first, the story or the puppets? It depended on who the kids met with first on the first Monday. Some groups got a start on the story and then went off to meet with Val to build the puppets they would need for their play. Others worked with Val, dreamed up characters, and then off to work with Simon to make a play that would involve those characters.

Thursday was the day to put it all together, puppets and plays.

VH: And we developed character voices for their puppets and they learned a little about how to punch the lines and do a little bit of acting with the puppets. We had them dress in bunraku style; when I visited Japan [puppeteers] all dressed in black. The kids didn't put the hat on, because in Japan they study for ten years before they put the head covering on. I showed them the blocks they would be wearing [on their feet] if they had studied for ten years, but being that it was five hours, we felt that it wasn't a good thing for them - we had a bit of a chuckle over that - and we agreed that wouldn't be good.

And then on the Friday afternoon - that would be the fifth class - we all got together in the gymnasium and they performed for the entire school, and that night they performed for their parents.

Each class came up with one story. It was an hour total with five groups of kids, so there were five different plays about ten minutes each. One teacher played guitar and that helped with his class. They each excelled in their own special area. The kindergarten kids and grade one had a song written to "Happy Birthday" about how they were going to save the planet, or how they're going to save their neighborhood.

The principal, Mary Ellen Dewar, was so excited about seeing everybody working together - that would be unity and that would be a virtue. She was so careful about getting everything she needed into the program in the way of literacy and her education goals, and everything was met. It was clearly and intentionally defined so that we knew exactly what needed to happen.

The week was...we like to call it organized chaos, and Simon and I and the principal will now admit we all had our doubts. But it all came together at the end, and worked really well. When you look back it's quite an amazing feat to see all those kids working together to produce something.

Val Hilliker will be working with The Virtues Project, developing programs for presentation in New Zealand, Australia, Guam, the Marianas, China, Japan and Thailand.