

MINI-PROFILE

A DEEP, ABIDING PASSION

WORKING SIDE BY SIDE WITH
TEACHERS IS LINDA MASTERSON'S
GREATEST REWARD

By LEE SHERMAN



ANCHORAGE, Alaska—A hush of anticipation hangs in the darkness. One student giggles. Another rattles some papers. “Shhh!” a third eighth-grader hisses. Behind a backlit cloth hanging across the front of Dave Avery’s science classroom at Goldenview Middle School, the eerie silhouettes of several figures lean over something shaped like a human corpse. *Slice!* goes a scalpel. One of the shadowy figures reaches into the body and removes the ropelike intestines. Then, with exacting motions, he cuts out the heart and lungs. Every kid in the audience is holding his or her breath.

“Welcome,” says one of the presenting students in a Hitchcockesque tone, “to mummification.” The room lights come on to reveal a “corpse” made of cardboard and “body parts” made of rope and other ordinary objects.

The 40-minute team presentation that follows is the culmination of weeks of library and field research supported in large measure by Linda Masterson. The librarian brought her East Coast intensity to this affluent school in Anchorage’s wooded suburbs six years ago when it was still under construction. Undiminished by 20 years in Alaska, her Massachusetts accent rises right to the vaulted ceiling of the library.

Her dedication is as unmistakable as her voice.

“I started this library from scratch,” says Masterson, who was honored in 2000 as School Librarian of the Year by the Alaska Association of School Librarians. “I went all over creation gathering resources and developing the collection. I looked at the curriculum, asked teachers for suggestions, talked to other colleagues, looked at the public library. It was a 24-hour-a-day job.”

But, she is quick to point out, ordering materials is only the tip of school librarianship. The eighth-grade mummification project got her much closer to the quintessential role for school library programs: collaborating with teachers on standards-based classroom activities. The macabre science of mummification is only one of the science-based topics students delve into for their “Passion Project,” an interdisciplinary exploration designed by Avery to turn kids on to learning. Veterinary medicine, pyrotechnics, forensics, aeronautics, cosmetics, heart surgery, and photography are just a handful of the topics student teams have studied during the years.

During the research phase of the project—three weeks of the project’s five-week duration—Avery’s classes spend every science period attacking resources in the school library. Masterson is right in the thick of it. “Linda and I both have the same goal,” Avery says. “We want kids to learn and explore and find out as much as they can.”

To that end, Masterson channels immense quantities of her abundant energies into supporting Avery’s yearly Passion Project unit by:

- Introducing students to the Big6™ information literacy skills and problem-solving process developed by Mike Eisenberg of the University of Washington and Bob Berkowitz of Syracuse University
- Building kids’ skills in: looking up books, videos, and CD-ROMs on-site; using indexes; searching the Internet; accessing online encyclopedias, databases, and university and public libraries; and borrowing resources through the district’s interlibrary loan program
- Keeping tabs on which team is doing what and feeding them Web sites and other resources (for example, a video animation of how the heart beats for a presentation on heart surgery)
- Steering students to local experts and museums for props, field trips, and interviews (where you can get a wolf skin, for example, or what you can find at the Native American Heritage Center)
- Staying vigilant at conferences and scouring catalogs for new resources to share with faculty
- Helping student teams create PowerPoint presentations and Web pages
- Assisting students with bibliography development, note taking, and organizational skills for their written papers
- Constantly adding relevant resources to the school library collection

tion for future years

Masterson works in a similar way with other teachers and their students during a five-week project for National History Day, which is built around a different theme each year—the Salem witch trials, for example, or the Spanish Inquisition. Still, she’s not content. For her, being a school librarian is more than a job, more than even a calling—it’s a deep, abiding passion (“light it up in capital letters with an exclamation point,” she says). Several years ago, she helped develop the state’s library/information literacy standards, formally adopted by the Alaska State Board of Education in 1999.

Masterson fervently wants to share her knowledge of curriculum standards, her research skills, and her informational treasures with every teacher in the building. She doesn’t sit around and wait.

“You’re constantly doing PR, whether it’s at a faculty meeting, going to a PTSA thing, talking with the kids, meeting with the school board—*always*,” she says. “You constantly have to be inventing ways to reach out. You have to be a catalyst.”

To better connect with the school’s 90 teachers, Masterson has developed a Web page, complete with a link to the Big6™ skills approach, which she advocates with rabid ferocity (“Big6™ is *maaaavelous!*” she enthuses). She e-mailed the page to everyone on the staff, begged a few minutes at a staff meeting to show it, and then demonstrated it to each teacher team.

“Trying to steal five minutes of people’s time is difficult, but I’m not a wallflower,” Masterson says. “I wear my passions all over me. I speak out.” ■