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Storytime with Mr. Steve!

Steve Ross' lively readings at Vroman's bring children's lit to life.

By Ilsa Setziol 08/12/2013

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Twice a week, the usual hushed, contemplative air of Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena ruptures as little wild things storm the place. They huff up the big stairs to the children's department and home in on the guy known for his shirts with bright graphic prints. (They'll eat him up, they love him so.) It's storytime with Mr. Steve, where he deftly performs the magic trick of calming them with fantastic tales.

For a quarter century, Steve Ross has delighted children (and parents) with his readings at Vroman's. In the late '80s, when he took a job selling books there, he had no inkling he would become an influential educator, even drawing classes from nearby McKinley Elementary. At 46, he still has a youthful demeanor and unflagging enthusiasm for a good story. (He's also the store's bargain book buyer, which explains Vroman's fantastic selection of bargain kids' books.)

On a Wednesday in June, his audience consists of half a dozen girls in headbands, pink shirts and sparkly shoes, plus boys sporting Disney Cars tennis shoes and superhero shirts. Most listen attentively for an entire hour as Ross bursts into highly interactive and animated readings of "Mouse Paint," "The Day Louis Got Eaten," "Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons," "Dragons Love Tacos," "Fish Out of Water" and other books for kids under six. He voices the mice in squeaky tones, punctuates the action with vocal pops and boings, renders Pete the Cat with a surfer dude voice, encourages the kids to count Pete's buttons, prompts them to identify colors in the pictures and encourages the audience to shout out the stories' refrains.

"The more parts there are to the story that you can engage the kids in [the better]," he says. "If there's a phrase that gets repeated a lot, that's fantastic. My storytime's full of these pregnant pauses while I wait for the kids to chime in."

Parents sip lattes and check email, but they're listening too, smiling at twists on familiar fairy tales ("The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig") and humorous asides added for their amusement. Robert Baumgartner brings his three-year-old daughter nearly every week. "It's helped me tell stories better at home," he says, noting that he has become a more animated reader himself, copying some of the voices Ross uses. "And we've actually gotten books I wouldn't have picked up if he hadn't read them."

Ross' storytelling panache owes a debt to his mother, Irene, who he says has a vivid imagination and a passion for entertainment — books, movies, stories of all stripes. She read to her two young sons about pretty much whatever they were interested in, deploying a range of goofy voices and accents. "Her Dracula was Bela Lugosi on steroids," he recalls, "and she did [Boris] Karloff for Frankenstein." He can still hear the sound effects she made for vampire hunter Van Helsing stabbing Dracula. "Once you hear [that]," he laughs, "you know your mom is really, really cool."

Ross' readings are more than entertainment — reading aloud to little kids not only helps them build linguistic skills, it also correlates strongly with their future school success, according to Jim Trelease, author of "The Read-Aloud Handbook." Among the many research papers that back this assertion is a 1985 National Academy of Education report, Becoming A Nation of Readers, which concluded "the single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children."

Ross grew up in San Gabriel and Temple City, where he still lives behind his parents' home. Young Ross loved action TV shows and movies, such as "Shazam" and "Star Wars," which debuted when he was 10 and "changed everything." "I wanted to read stuff that was like Star Wars," he recalls. "But the pulp magazines that it was based on weren't considered good literature."

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Teachers tried to steer him to classic books like "A Wrinkle in Time," but they bored him. "With all due respect to Wrinkle in Time," he says with a laugh, "it's hippie, touchy-feely sci-fi, not blowing-up-robots-and-spaceship sci-fi. There's not a sword fight to be found."

Then he discovered "Hey Kids, Comics!" at the grocery store. They cost only 25 cents and were action-packed. For the first time, he became an avid reader, albeit of comic books. "But the way comics were written then, the vocabulary was so sophisticated," he says, explaining that they were penned by recent college grads who hadn't really had such a young audience in mind.

Ross' hip mom, who worked briefly as a substitute teacher, thought many classics were overrated and encouraged his interest in pop culture and science fiction. He remembers the copies of Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter of Mars series she picked up for him at a garage sale. They became "the Rosetta Stone to just about everything I had loved before and since," he says.

These days Ross is pleased to be able to refer middle school boys to a banquet of adventure stories, including series like Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Alex Rider, Skulduggery Pleasant and Ranger's Apprentice. And comics and graphic novels are now more acceptable. But he regrets that popular superhero stories are no longer the complex and subversive lore he remembers. "When I read an old Avengers or Spider-Man comic, I often felt like Stan Lee was trying to impart a message to me amidst the mayhem," he says. "Now I feel like the message is: Buy more products."

Vroman's sells plenty of classics, and Ross recommends those too, but he's still most passionate about exciting books with interesting visuals, even for little kids. His storytime picks are usually funny, sound-rich and brilliantly illustrated. They're mostly recent releases — books parents often don't know of and libraries might not offer. (But, of course, no violence or scary stuff for the little ones.) Among his signature read-alouds are Mo Willems' goofy, interactive, comic-style pigeon books (e.g. "Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus").

Ross' passion inspired him to create his own comics and movies, so as a teenager, he took Saturday classes at Art Center College of Design, which he hoped to attend after coursework at Pasadena City College. But after a financial setback, his family couldn't swing Art Center tuition, leading Ross to seek out collaborators to illustrate and publish his stories. Comics artist Ben Dunn invited him to contribute stories and dialogue to his Ninja High School series (Eternity Comics), one of the first anime/magma-inspired comics published in the U.S. The resulting series, about a trio of Ninjas, was called Zetraman. Ross, whose maternal great-grandparents were from Mexico, also collaborated on one of the first comics with a lucha libre/Mexican wrestling theme. He's currently working on a steampunk version of Tom Sawyer. (Steampunk is a science-fiction subgenre that melds Victorian and futuristic technologies.)

Any portrait of Mr. Steve would be incomplete without a nod to his passion for guinea pigs. He's been a "pig daddy" to 10 and recommends Paddington Bear creator Michael Bond's "The Tales of Olga de Polga" (out of print in the U.S., but easy to buy online from the U.K.). "When the time is right," he says only half-joking, "I will write The Great Guinea Pig Epic Saga. It will be a cross between "Watership Down," "The Hunger Games," "The Road Warrior" and "Atlas Shrugged."

After all these years, it's clear Ross still enjoys reading children's books. That's not only a blessing for kids, but a boon to Vroman's. In this era of electronic media, children's books are an expanding piece of the store's sales. "Parents still want to share beautiful picture books with their children," says Allison Hill, Vroman's president and COO, adding "there are children who have grown up with [his] storytime and grew into teenagers who would only take recommendations from Mr. Steve."

True, some teens want to forget that they ever liked Peter Rabbit (or the guy who wedged into Peter Rabbit and other character costumes at storytime special events). "They hit this age where they don't want to know me," he says with a laugh, "but I'm hoping as they get closer to college age, I'll become ironic like Mr. Rogers."

Whether they're reluctant or eager, Ross enjoys chatting with his alums (some are now in college) when they visit the store. Many are doing well in school, he notes, "and are reading tomes that are heftier than Where the Wild Things Are — for pleasure!" He credits the family members who brought his brood to storytime, but he also feels proud that he helped show them that reading can be fun.

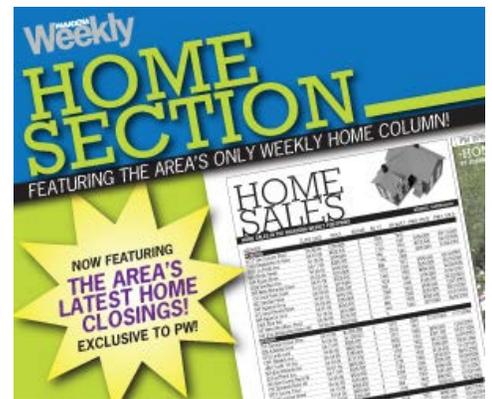
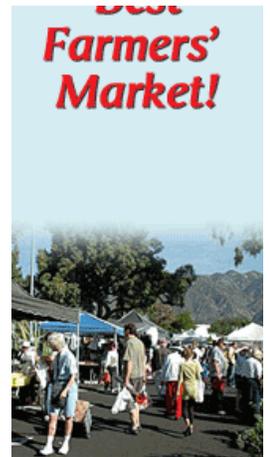
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Rocking Music's ivory tower

Pasadena's Rob Cutietta, dean of USC's Thornton School of Music, gives props to pop in the university's fall launch of groundbreaking degree programs.

By Ilsa Setziol 10/01/2009

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photos by Mark Berndt

This fall, USC's prestigious Thornton School of Music is ushering pop and rock into the decorous world of academia.

The top-ranked school, famous for symphonic, vocal and choral music, is launching an undergraduate degree program in popular music performance, the first of its kind for a major university. Now celebrating its 125th anniversary, Thornton is also adding an undergraduate degree in choral music and a bachelor of arts in vocal jazz.

Ambitious? Precedent-setting? Certainly. The same can be said of the architect of the school's expansion and its fresh take on music education — Pasadena's Rob Cutietta, Thornton's dean for the past seven years. (Listeners of KUSC-FM [91.5] are likely to have heard him answer questions about music on the station's Arts Alive program.) Get to know Cutietta a bit, and this modernizing of the Thornton School seems inevitable.

Of course, you don't get to be a dean at USC without serious academic credentials, such as Cutietta's doctorate in music education and psychology which he earned from Pennsylvania State University in 1982. Still, the dean has the approachability of a regular guy who has spent a lot of time in pubs. Which he has. (He also holds a Mickey Mouse diploma, but we'll get to that later.)

Cutietta, 56, grew up in a Cleveland suburb in the late '50s and early '60s, slaving away on an accordion. "I absolutely hated every moment of it," he recalls. "My dad loved music. He was not trained. He would sit at the piano and play, not well at all, but he loved it so much, he wanted to make sure that my brother and I both had lessons. Being Italian, I had to start on the accordion." Young Cutietta dreamed about switching to piano. Then one day, he snuck a red transistor radio into his elementary school. When he flipped it on at lunchtime, the Beatles tune "I Want to Hold Your Hand" rocked his world. "It was so different from anything else I'd ever heard. Suddenly, I wanted to play guitar."

Cutietta dug into the electric bass and, by high school, he was good enough to play professionally. He gigged five nights a week in local bars (a tradition he continued throughout most of his academic career, playing everything from rock and jazz to country music).

By the time he enrolled as an undergrad at Cleveland State University, he was already a studio musician recording jingles. "I went to college because it was something to do, more than anything else," he says. "It fit in because I worked at night." He couldn't study electric bass at school, so he mastered classical guitar. He also studied choral music and later spent several years conducting middle and high school choruses, as well as church choirs.

It was while singing in the university chorus that he met his future wife, Marybeth. She was 23; he, 19. "Although he was playing in bars, he was too young to go to bars," she recalls. "I was dating other fellows — law students — who took me to bars. With Rob, I would horseback ride."

In graduate school, Cutietta researched how the brain processes and stores music. He held professorships at Montana and Kent State universities. And by the '90s, he was head of the

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School of Music and Dance at the University of Arizona, where he authored "Raising Musical Kids: A Guide for Parents" (Oxford University Press; 2001).

Cutietta loved Tucson, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to head a prestigious music school. And when he saw USC's posting of the dean's job at Thornton in 2002, he thought it was a perfect match. The music school boasted top-notch classical training, including choral programs; it also offered a respected music industry major and an unusual film-and-television scoring program. "If I was going to create a school of music," he says, "this is how I'd make it. When I look at other schools, they're focused on just one thing. I've never been focused on one part of music. There's so much vitality there."

Still, electric guitar players couldn't get an undergraduate degree playing their instruments. To Cutietta that seemed wrong: "We're missing so many great musicians who can't get advanced training simply because of the instruments they play." So he encouraged USC faculty members to write an entirely new curriculum for popular music performance, and he brought in high-profile artists like rocker Steve Miller, Red Hot Chili Pepper bassist Flea, Motown songwriter Lamont Dozier and other professionals to offer input. He also persuaded the classical music faculty to embrace the new program, which could have hurt the school's reputation if it hadn't been properly developed. Cutietta insists the new major is as rigorous as those for classical musicians: "If you're in the popular music program, you're expected to be improvisatory, to be able to create music. So they'll be taking courses in songwriting; that is not an easy skill to learn."

Grant Gershon, music director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale, applauds Cutietta's flair for innovation. "The new programs he's put into place are really groundbreaking in the field of higher education," he says of the pop performance major, as well as the undergraduate degrees in choral music and vocal jazz. "Sometimes even the most successful music schools tend to be insular institutions. That could be said of Thornton in the past."

To help move the school forward, Cutietta has strengthened its ongoing ties to music professionals. He launched an advisory board that includes Gershon and songwriter Randy Newman and recruited heavy hitters such as violinist Midori Goto, cellist Ralph Kirshbaum and saxophonist Bob Mintzer to join Thornton's faculty. "Rob is very unassuming," Gershon says. "Therefore he's able to mix with people in different settings, from cultivating donors to working with nonacademic kinds of artists. People feel comfortable with him."

When not on the job, Cutietta can be found in his attic, manning the controls of his old-gauge model trains, or cruising new ones at The Original Whistle Stop on Colorado Boulevard. He's an unabashed fan of Disneyland and the Disney Institute, the Walt Disney Co.'s leadership training arm, which he attended. He continues to honor his institute pledge to sport images of the Mouse. "You will never find me without something Mickey," he says. "I have a whole collection of watches and lapel pins. I've been doing this since I 'graduated' in 1998, so by this point, I'm superstitious that if I ever dared break the pledge something really, really bad might happen."

For all his accomplishments as dean, Cutietta has one regret: He doesn't gig as much as he used to. He occasionally plays electric and acoustic bass guitars in a jazz trio that includes USC President Steve Sample on drums and former Thornton faculty member Shelly Berg on piano. The trio is called BCS (for the players' last initials). "But it has a double meaning," says Cutietta, "referring also to the Bowl Championship Series that USC football usually wins."

The dean prefers playing music to listening to it. Still, to garner support for Thornton, he and Marybeth schmooze potential donors and artists at concerts — be they at Disney Hall or L.A.'s jazz club Catalina — several nights a week.

When pressed, he cites acoustic folk as a favorite genre. But Cutietta says the music that inspires him has more to do with who is playing it: "There are certain underlying things in music — musicality, artistry, expression; those are much more important to me than style."

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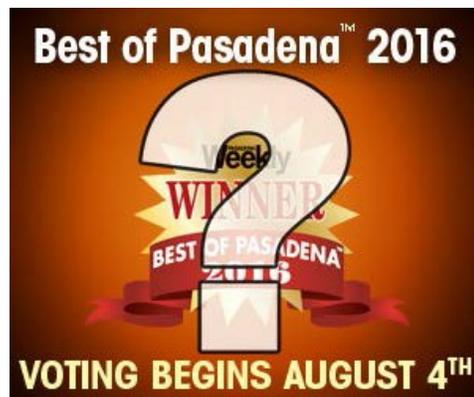
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The Brainiac Mom

Psychotherapist-author Tina Bryson bases her parenting techniques on the latest research on children's brains.

By Ilsa Setziol 07/28/2011

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A Wednesday afternoon at the Bryson family's home in San Marino: Lanky 11-year-old Ben is home from school, sick, and reading Harry Potter on the sofa. Dad is writing in an adjacent office. And J.P. — a 4-year-old with a mop of red hair topped with a Dodgers cap — is hanging out with Mom in the dining room. Before you know it, J.P. Spidermans up a wobbly china cabinet in pursuit of a toy plane. A set of midnight blue floral pottery is about to fly.

"J.P., what are you looking for?" asks Mom, impossibly calmly. She walks over to the boy and places a hand on him but doesn't pull him off. "Stop for a second," she continues. "Does your body feel safe up there? Look at my face. I need your attention. What would happen if these things got pulled down?" He giggles softly but listens. "Be a problem solver. If there's something you want up there, what could you do?" "Ask," he says in a whispery voice.

This mom, known for feats of composure amidst kid tornadoes, is Tina Payne Bryson. Bryson is a psychotherapist practicing at Pediatric and Adolescent Psychology Associates in Arcadia and a popular lecturer on parenting.

The 39-year-old native of Mission Viejo earned a Ph.D. in social work at USC. She had just plunged into those studies when she heard UCLA neuroscientist Daniel Siegel lecture. She was riveted by his understanding of the neurobiology of mental health and became a regular at his seminars for nearly a decade.

Today she's known for using the latest research on children's brains to shape the advice she offers parents and kids. And her first book, in collaboration with Siegel, is due out in October. "The Whole-Brain Child" (Random House) is brainy but concise, designed to be easy on tired parents. "It's about thinking about the struggles with our kids as opportunities to teach them," she explains, "and wire their brains in ways that allow them to be happy and healthy and fully themselves."

With a home bustling with three active boys — four if you count hubby, Mount St. Mary's English professor Scott — Bryson gets plenty of practice at what she preaches. She says conventional wisdom — even tips found in parenting magazines — often doesn't jibe with what brain science tells us is good for kids. "For instance, one of the conventional approaches is, when your child is having a tantrum, you should ignore them and walk away," Bryson says. "But, especially when they're little, when they're having a total meltdown, they have stress hormones like cortisol running through their bodies; the part of the brain that allows them to calm down and think about consequences is not even functioning. So what kids need most in those moments is comfort." Bryson teaches parents to distinguish between these irrational fits, called "downstairs tantrums" — because the limbic system and brainstem are running the show — and "upstairs tantrums" when the cortex kicks in. You can expect kids whose brains are functioning upstairs to respond to a rational request, but not those in the downstairs mode.



Photos: James Reese

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Because kids don't learn much when they're flipping out, Bryson doesn't think time-outs are particularly effective. "I don't know any kid who actually sits and reflects on his behavior when he's in time-out," she explains. "They're thinking about how mean you are." Responding to research on neuroplasticity — the brain's and nervous system's ability to change as a result of environmental input — Bryson wants her boys to practice the appropriate behavior instead. That could mean finding fun ways to get them to complete the chore they've balked at doing. "The brain pays attention to novelty, and when something is fun, it releases all these feel-good hormones and neurotransmitters. So instead of giving a [stern] command, what I try to do is be as playful as possible and try to catch [the wayward behavior] before it escalates. It gives a little dopamine squirt in their brain and rewards them for doing what I'm asking them to do." To get boys to clean their room, Bryson sometimes cranks up some music and challenges them to finish the job before the song is up. Despite having definite ideas about child rearing, Bryson acknowledges there's no one-size-fits-all solution for kids — or parents. Indeed, I suspect many of us don't possess her kid-whispering talent, and not all 4-year-olds are so easily swayed by a disciplinary chat.

As Ben tinkers on the piano, Bryson gives me a tour of the family's 1930s Spanish. In the living room, two large wicker baskets buttress an armoire. "This is the guns and weapons basket," she explains. "This is the superguys basket — the action figures." Another long basket holds swords. Then she lifts the top of a giant leather ottoman parked in front of the sofa, revealing the "extra large weaponry" such as long light sabers. Bryson admits it took her a while to get comfortable with aggressive play, but as she read up on it she decided that, for boys, gunplay is "just like playing dolls or tea parties — it's pretend play." She thinks making it taboo only gives it more power. "We also have conversations about how real guns hurt people." She turns to J.P. "What do you do if you see a real gun?" "Call 911," he whispers.

It's time to pick up 8-year-old Luke from elementary school, so we pile into her silver minivan. On the ride, she touches on her differences with Tiger Mother author Amy Chua, insisting that an overly academic agenda isn't advantageous because play assists the development of the brain's frontal lobes, "which leads to good academic outcomes." On the return home, Bryson says kids need both a lot of nurture and strong discipline. Emerging from the office, Scott notes that, although Tina's no pushover, he's the firmer parent. "If I say it's got to be this way, then I expect the kids to do it that way," he says.

But Bryson's techniques are winning her adherents, among them Elisa Nixon, an Altadena mom of two who attends one of the therapist's monthly parent groups. She says this approach has helped her connect with her kids when they most need it. Nixon accomplishes that "mostly by just really listening to them and respecting them," she says. "Knowing how brain development affects behavior helps you get through moments that are really difficult."

Tips for Parenting Preschoolers

- **Connect and redirect:** When your child is upset, connect emotionally first... Then, once she is more in control and receptive, bring in the left-brain lessons and discipline.
- **Name it to tame it:** When emotions are raging out of control, help your child tell the story about what's upsetting him. In doing so, he'll use his left brain to make sense of his experience and feel more in control.
- **Move it or lose it:** When your child is upset, and after you've acknowledged her feelings, give her reasons to move her body... Moving the body is a powerful way to change a mood.
- **Let the clouds of emotion roll by:** One reason big feelings can be so uncomfortable for small children is they don't view those emotions as temporary... Teach her that feelings come and go.
- **S(H)IFT (Sensations, Images, Feelings and Thoughts):** Talk to your child about his inner world. Help him understand that he can notice and talk about what's going on in his mind and body.

From Tina Payne Bryson and Daniel J. Siegel's forthcoming book *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (Random House)

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CASTLES IN THE AIR

Matt Allio finds the "genius" in every kid at Walden School.

By Ilsa Setziol 09/01/2012

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As a child, Matt Allio wasn't much of a student. All he cared about was playing baseball. Most kids in his South San Francisco neighborhood in the late '60s and early '70s didn't go to college, and he had little expectation of doing so himself.

These days, though, he's a true believer in the transformative power of education. The 53-year-old director of Pasadena's Walden School is as intensely focused on education as he was on baseball—often working 12-hour days—and it's this certainty that his students will thrive that keeps him energized. "When I put my head on the pillow at night," he says, "there's a remarkable comfort in knowing I've worked with a generation of students who truly set out to make the world a better place."

Walden is a respected independent school with a progressive approach (see "Learning Experiences" on page 12), which educates 210 pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade kids at its San Gabriel Boulevard campus. Allio's vision for the place is apparent on a recent day as he makes his rounds. He exits his colorful office—filled with books, two finches, a couple of tiny aquatic frogs and some Lego men, model planes and other toys bestowed by small admirers—cruises past the nearly life-size plush dogs that populate the Walden lobby and heads for the playground. "What's up, Emmett, my man?" he asks a first grader, offering a fist-bump. Emmett wants to play rock-paper-scissors. As they throw down, Matt (as the kids address him) says he meets with Emmett for a few minutes every day to get "a sense of how it's going in his class." Allio surveys his brood several times a day, asking kids for advice and offering meetings in which they discuss everything from hot lunch to whether their math work is challenging enough.

"Emmett's one of the all-time great guys here," he says. Actually, to Allio, every kid here is an "all-time great," and they know it. "He finds something to love about every single student," says Sarah Lougheed-Gill, the admissions director. While some people give lip service to the idea, Allio really means it when he says he sees "a genius in every child." "We work really hard to find that genius and help it emerge," he says. That's particularly compelling, given that Walden admits kids with a range of abilities. Unlike some other independent schools, the school doesn't counsel those with lower academic performance to go elsewhere.

When Allio was growing up, one of eight kids, in a Catholic, working-class Italian-American family in the Bay Area, his hometown was going through a turbulent time, churning with talk of social revolution. As a small boy with a paper route and passion for the Giants, Allio didn't join the fray. But he read the paper at 4 every morning before getting on his bike, and he was a keen observer. He saw older kids strung out on drugs, remembers vividly the telecast of RFK's remarks on the night of MLK's assassination and recalls "a Vietnam vet who came back and set his house on fire while he was in it."

Allio slid into the University of San Francisco on a full baseball scholarship. A writing professor tutored him, bolstering his belief that he had "more to offer the world beyond throwing a

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baseball." After graduation in 1977, Allio needed work, and a local Catholic school needed a math teacher. So he became a teacher, learning on the job. But when he thought he'd gotten pretty good at teaching, Allio was forced to rethink the whole thing. The "game changer," he says, was an appointment at Crane Country Day School, a prestigious progressive school in Montecito. "I came home every night, five nights a week, and sobbed," he recalls, "because it was so hard to aspire to what my colleagues were doing." Instead of lecturing at the kids and telling them what to do, he was supposed to let them take the initiative. Instead of passing out textbooks, he was supposed to help them learn through experiences, like field trips. He was starting to see that his work with children could "help them realize their place in the world."

In 1992, Allio was selected for the Klingenstein Fellowship at Columbia University, where he worked toward an M.A. in education. The fellowship trains promising teachers to become leaders at independent schools. At Columbia, studying the work of John Dewey and other education reformers, Allio sharpened his educational vision. He saw that academic content—knowledge—is important, but it's just the point of departure. "Young people have to use that knowledge to act, put it into action," he explains. Finally, they have to be able to inspire others to act too. "The real power in transformation is to have the skills to organize others."

That's what Allio has done at Walden for the past seven years. He takes in a multitude of ideas—from students, teachers, parents—processes them and leads from there. "He's a steady hand on the helm," says board member Mary Favre. "He's organized, thorough." Allio is also known for respecting and investing in faculty. For example, Walden pays for all teachers to attend a training program at Columbia. "He wants to make the mission alive and vibrant," adds Favre, "and not do things just because that's the way we always did it."

Prior to Walden, Allio was head of the Live Oak School in San Francisco and taught for a couple years at The San Francisco School. He says having the latter's yearbook dedicated to him (by a school known for accomplished teachers) is the highest accolade he has ever received.

Back making his rounds, Allio turns down one of the school's hallways, which are lined with photos of its families. A couple of boys approach him. They want permission to hold a bake sale "to try to buy a solar panel for Walden," says Nicky, a blond 10-year-old. The kids are part of an "energy ponderers" group. "You have to come and talk with me about it," he says. "But I think it's a good idea."

Walden's curriculum is strong on environmental sciences, another synergy between the school and its leader. For 25 years, Allio has biked virtually everywhere, including the commute from his home in an adapted-use building in South Pasadena, 16 miles round-trip. (He even spent a year, midcareer, as a bike messenger, hauling up San Francisco's steep Nob Hill from the financial district more than a dozen times a day. "I loved it," he recalls. "I never brought my work home with me.") His inbound soundtrack is a James Taylor Pandora station; outbound, it's Eminem. He uses his car when one of his three grown children comes to visit.

Back in his office, he confesses his pet peeve: parents saying, "when I was in third grade..." "That doesn't count anymore," he says. "It's a different world these kids live in, the pressure they feel, the sophistication that's expected of them." On a side table there's a book of poems authored by Walden fourth and fifth graders. Inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, each line begins with "I wish." The kids' aspirations are both personal ("I wish I could read fast, so I could read all the books I wanted") and global ("I wish every family had a cozy and warm place to live and sleep").

Allio says he likes working with elementary school kids because they're "wide open to learning." While the job can be exhausting, he says the rewards are worth it—"knowing that I have the potential to make change and seeing that change happen."

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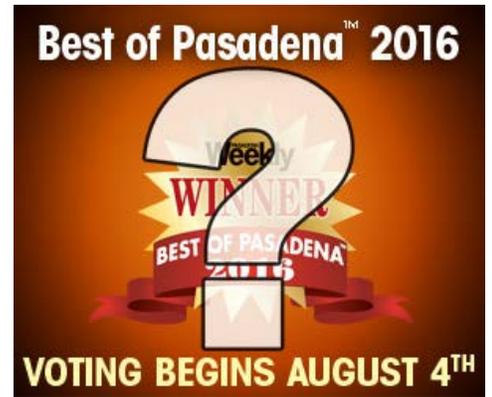
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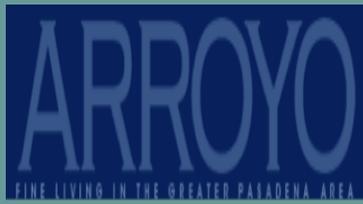
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A FAMILIAR FACE

Actor John Michael Higgins has made a career out of playing memorable comic characters.

By Ilsa Setziol 02/06/2015

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You know this guy. At least you'd think you did, if you ran into him on the streets of Eagle Rock, his hometown. He's a lawyer? Shrink? Publicist? Works with dogs?

Let me help you out here. John Michael Higgins is an actor. Perhaps you recognize him from one of Christopher Guest's mockumentaries — *Best in Show*, *A Mighty Wind* or *For Your Consideration*. He was the adorable Scott Dolan, a flamboyantly gay dog handler in *Best in Show*. He and Jane Lynch played sweater-vested, color-worshipping members of the New Main Street Singers in *A Mighty Wind*. Back in the day, Higgins was privy to Ally McBeal's love-life angst as her shrink, Steven Milter. Or maybe he looks familiar as Elaine's balding boyfriend on an episode of *Seinfeld*. Or super-serious, duck-behind-the-sofa attorney Wayne Jarvis on *Arrested Development*. Perhaps the zoo inspector in Cameron Crowe's *We Bought a Zoo*? He also costarred with Fran Drescher on TV Land's *Happily Divorced* sitcom. The list goes on.

Robert Walden, his *Happily Divorced* co-star and a three-time Emmy nominee, calls Higgins "a very, very strong actor" who will easily outshine performers who can't keep up with him. "He's as inventive and committed and solid with delivery as anyone I've ever worked with."

And yet, Hollywood has, to a certain extent, pigeonholed him. Not surprising in an industry that often resorts to typecasting. "They've responded to one thing he does really well, which is this big comedy," says his wife, Margaret Welsh, a yoga instructor and former actor herself. "He's frustrated because he knows he can do other things."

After the success of *Best In Show* in 2000, Hollywood frequently wanted Higgins to play gay characters. As a straight man, it put him in an awkward position, especially when the characters were supposed to be funny. Some in the gay community objected to his depiction of dog handler Scott Dolan, calling it stereotyped. "Which I was astonished by," says Higgins, 51. "I thought Michael McKean and I were the only happy couple in the entire movie." Having grown up in the theater, Higgins had plenty of gay friends. "I wasn't exaggerating anything, I was just doing what I had observed," he explains. The complaints ultimately faded away and the character remains much beloved.

Higgins now charges more to play gay parts. "Gay pays," he and Welsh joke.

Higgins is a born actor. "I always say it chose me," he says. "I just knew how to do it from the minute I could stand up and speak — I would pretend to be somebody else, put on little shows."

His precocious performances surprised his parents — a Naval officer and a school and hospital administrator — who appreciated the arts but didn't have any experience with that pretend stuff. Funnily enough, being a Navy brat prepared Higgins for an actor's peripatetic life. "We moved almost every year — anywhere in the U.S. where there was a big gray boat in the water," he recalls. Again and again, he had to adapt to a new setting, a new set of players. "You have to be able to make friends fast and drop them permanently if necessary," says the reedy-voiced actor.

A frequent mooring, however, was Washington, D.C., where his father, Captain E. C. Michael Higgins, worked at the Pentagon and eventually the White House on the National Security Council staff, under Presidents Ford and Carter. There young Michael started what would become extensive training at the Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland. At age 9, he began studying acting, voice, dance and mime. Higgins considers the mime training especially valuable. "Knowing where your body is in space, isolating pieces of it and controlling focus with your body is, besides listening, the whole ballgame for an actor — at least this actor," he says. Higgins began performing professionally in fifth grade and later appeared at such venues as D.C.'s Folger Theatre, renowned for its productions of Shakespeare and other classics.

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By college, Higgins had so much experience under his belt, a theater degree seemed redundant. Plus, he'd become interested in other kinds of narratives, so he studied English literature at Amherst College. His stage work informed his reading — and vice versa. "You have to inhabit each character as you read," he explains. As an actor would, Higgins explored literary characters' motivations. "You can't call Cleopatra a spoiled child," he explains. "[She's] a child who has needs that may not agree with the people around her." Throughout his career, Higgins has focused his acting on the story. "That's the difference between a good actor and a bad actor," he says. "One is telling a story and the other isn't — he's showing off or, whatever his choices are on stage, they're not related to the story."

Novels, which often explore the nuances of human psychology and social interactions, are fertile soil for actors whose work involves embodying different characters. "Acting is largely a feat of listening and empathy, of the ability to imagine the interiority of someone else by unbiased observation and imagination," Higgins says. The story "just blossoms" when actors really listen, he adds. This empathy and attentive listening is readily apparent in Higgins' work. It's part of what makes many of his characters so likable.

To this day, Higgins is an obsessive reader, though he's now more interested in nonfiction. "I don't care about fake people anymore, because I have children," he says. Periodicals like *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and *The New York Review of Books* are fixtures in the capacious Craftsman home he shares with his wife, his two elementary-school-age kids, a high-strung blue-nose pit bull named Jimmy and three free-range pet rats. His intellectual prowess and dressing room habits amuse and awe his fellow actors. "He writes music arrangements," Walden says. "He can do this while listening to *The New York Times* read aloud from Audible, which he speeds up...so he can get through the paper even faster."

At Amherst, Higgins sang with the Zumbys, an a cappella group. He wrote vocal arrangements for *A Mighty Wind* and still performs with musician friends, albeit not as often as he'd like. "I'm left driving around singing middle harmonies in the car," he laments, "imagining the parts above and below."

After college, he moved to New York City, a base from which he landed roles in equity theaters across the country, as well as in Broadway and Off-Broadway productions. In 1991, he appeared in the Tony-nominated production of David Hirson's *La Bête*. A couple of years later, he originated the title role in the Off-Broadway production of Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, a hit comedy about a gay actor/waiter. He also played the lead in director Stephen Wadsworth's productions of *The Marivaux Trilogy* by 18th-century French playwright Pierre de Marivaux. His Harlequin was a whirlwind of physical comedy. Originated at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, N.J., one of the plays, *Changes of Heart*, was restaged in 1996 at L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum, where the production and Higgins' acting were critically acclaimed. Strangers in L.A. still stop Higgins to rave about that performance.

He returned to the Taper in 2005 to play Donald Rumsfeld in David Hare's *Stuff Happens*. By then, he was already living in L.A. and well into a successful film and television career. Higgins had come west to portray David Letterman in the HBO film *The Late Shift* (about the scuffle to succeed Johnny Carson) and then relocated permanently. Right out of the gate, he thrived in Hollywood. "I think he's done well because he's diligent and consistent and very talented," says Welsh.

Indeed, he laid out firm parameters when he took on the role of Peter Lovett, the gay ex-husband of Fran Drescher's character on *Happily Divorced* (2011–13), a sitcom loosely based on her real-life marriage. "I told them in the beginning, 'I'm not going to flounce,'" he says. "This character had lived as a straight man for his whole life and now suddenly he's going to be flouncing around? It doesn't make sense." In the series, Peter and Fran are divorced but still living together because they can't afford to separate. The show's strength lay in the tender relationship between the two, as well as its cast of show-business veterans (including Walden and Rita Moreno as Drescher's parents). The show was canceled after two seasons, but it demonstrates how well Higgins, who usually plays supporting characters, can carry a show.

In addition to a wider range of roles, Higgins would like to do more university speaking and teaching. "I think I get more out of it than the students," he says. "It helps to have to explain yourself." Welsh says she hopes he'll get to play a double agent in a spy movie.

When not working or chauffeuring his kids, he likes to hang out with his wife, go to concerts (classical mostly) and, yes, read. "I have little interest in Hollywood parties, events or culture," he confesses. "It all bores me senseless." In fact, Higgins rarely watches film or television. "And I don't like talking about it," he says.

A friendly guy at heart, Higgins can sometimes seem aloof. Perhaps it stems from what he identifies as an occupational hazard of constantly observing people. "You end up being a spy on your own life, or this person's trying to explain something to me and I'm watching the mechanics of it," he says. Welsh chalks it up to a combination of "distraction fueled by anxiety and a typical actor's paradox that he's sort of a quiet, private person who would rather read books or float on the periphery of a social situation."

What could a talented and successful actor have to feel anxious about? "I struggle as all freelancers struggle with anxiety and the fear that the whole thing was an illusion — that a reasonable person could never make a living as an artist," he says.

Perhaps Higgins should sit down with himself, call up one of his therapist characters, and have a chat. After all, he *is* a good listener.

