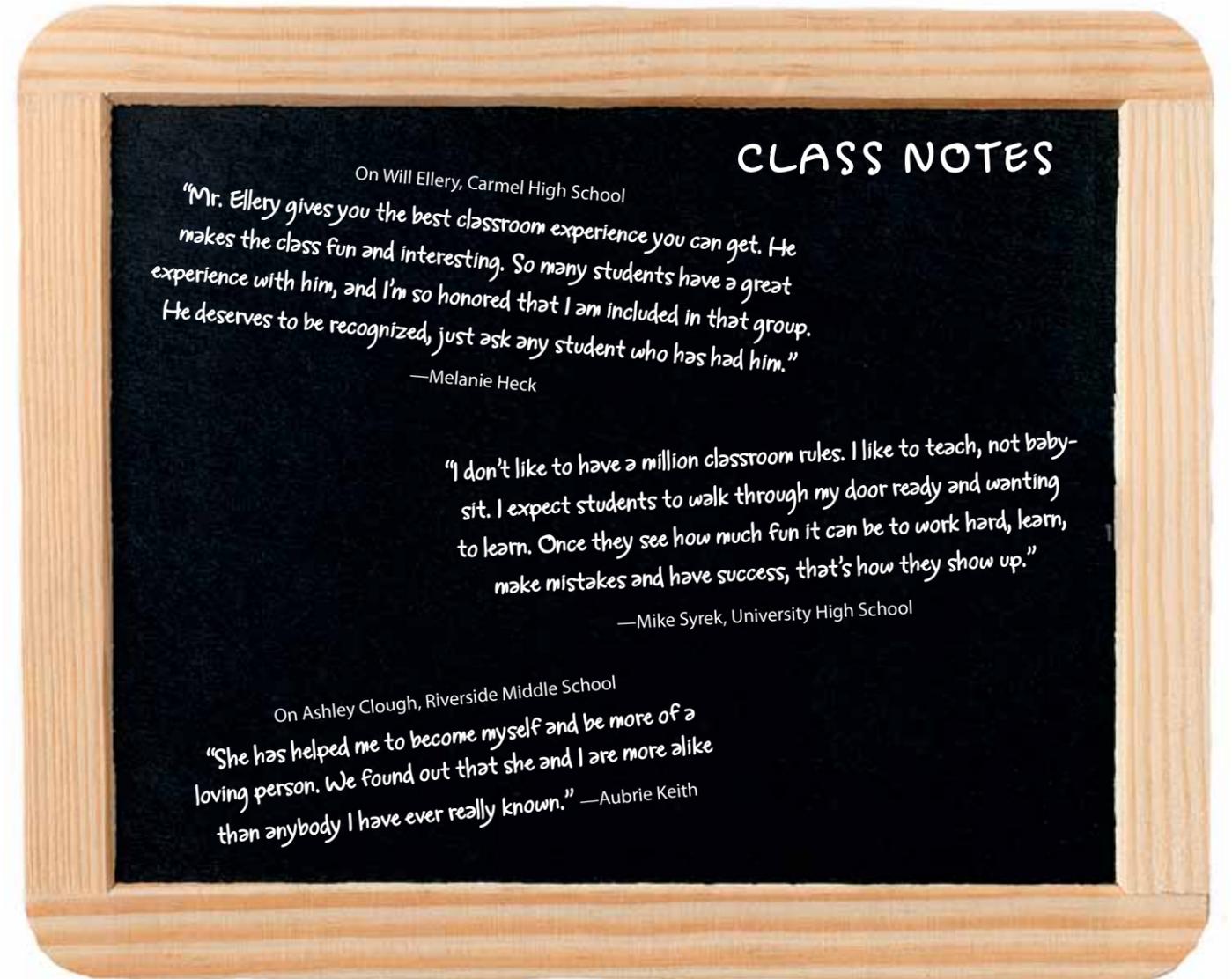




THE TEACHERS LOUNGE

We headed back to school to meet some of the northside's most celebrated educators

Story by Ashley Petry and Sherri Cullison ▪ Photos by Brand PhotoDesign



CLASS NOTES

On Will Ellery, Carmel High School

"Mr. Ellery gives you the best classroom experience you can get. He makes the class fun and interesting. So many students have a great experience with him, and I'm so honored that I am included in that group. He deserves to be recognized, just ask any student who has had him."

—Melanie Heck

"I don't like to have a million classroom rules. I like to teach, not baby-sit. I expect students to walk through my door ready and wanting to learn. Once they see how much fun it can be to work hard, learn, make mistakes and have success, that's how they show up."

—Mike Syrek, University High School

On Ashley Clough, Riverside Middle School

"She has helped me to become myself and be more of a loving person. We found out that she and I are more alike than anybody I have ever really known."

—Aubrie Keith

PEGGY SAVIN: Quite a Catch

Be there. Play. Make their day. Choose your attitude.

Those are the components of the Fish Philosophy, a districtwide initiative at Hamilton Southeastern that seeks to boost enthusiasm and strengthen teamwork and communication. The philosophy got its start in Seattle fish markets, where fishmongers entertain customers by tossing around their wares. In Hamilton County, nobody embodies the philosophy better than Peggy Savin, a second-grade teacher at Fishers Elementary School.

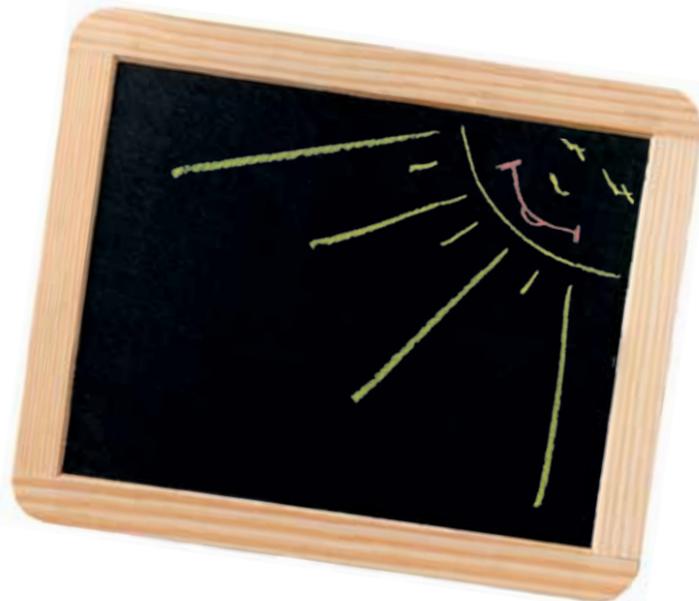
"You have to go out of your way to find time to play," says Savin, who was recently recognized as the school's teacher of the year. "There are so many stresses and so many things that have to be done, but ... you're supposed to love what you do and be there for each other."

Savin—who is infamous for playing practical jokes on her colleagues—frequently incorporates play into her lesson plans. When she teaches contractions, the students take turns being Contraction Kid, a superhero who wears a cape, destroys unnecessary letters and inserts apostrophes. To emphasize reading skills, she coordinates "reading theaters," in which her second-graders perform their favorite tales for older students. "We have a lot of hands-on activities," she says. "We do things with music, with acting—I don't want them just sitting there and memorizing words. It needs to be fun."

Savin may come across as a jokester, but she also has a serious side. A few years ago, when one of her students was diagnosed with cancer, she led a successful fundraising drive for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. To improve her teaching skills, she takes graduate courses at Indiana Wesleyan University focusing on differentiated instruction to address kids' different learning styles. And she works on a range of school and districtwide committees, serving as co-chairwoman of the discussion group that coordinates communication among administrators and teachers.

She has also raised three children of her own, who range in age from 11 to 20—but that doesn't mean she sees herself as an adult. Ultimately, that child-like attitude is what helps Savin connect with her students. "There's nothing better than seeing the world through the eyes of a 7-year-old," Savin says. "I've never grown up, so who better to keep me that way?"

—Ashley Petry



ALEX KING: Master of Disguise

When Alex King wants to teach his students about verb conjugation, he dons an eye patch and talks like a pirate. In October, he becomes a mad scientist, conducting dry-ice experiments to explore the states of matter. And each spring, the fifth-grade teacher at Sand Creek Intermediate School becomes a fairy godfather, wearing sparkly fairy wings to introduce a literature unit on fairy tales.

When a costume won't do, he turns to music instead. He starts each school year with "Mr. King's boot camp," where the students learn to perform certain actions when particular songs are played. The "Imperial March" from "Star Wars" means it's time to line up at the door, and the Super Mario Brothers video-game soundtrack means it's time to turn in papers. The sound files are short, so they speed up tasks that could otherwise be time-consuming; the record for lining up at the door, King boasts, is just 12 seconds.

"It's a way of teaching the kids what I expect in my classroom," he says.

Another of King's favorite activities involves begging 50 pounds of cornstarch from the school cafeteria, dumping it into a sandbox with some water and mixing up a batch of oobleck—a seemingly magical substance with the properties of both a liquid and a solid. The oobleck lab is so popular, in fact, that King gets a substitute one day each year and presents the lesson to other classes.

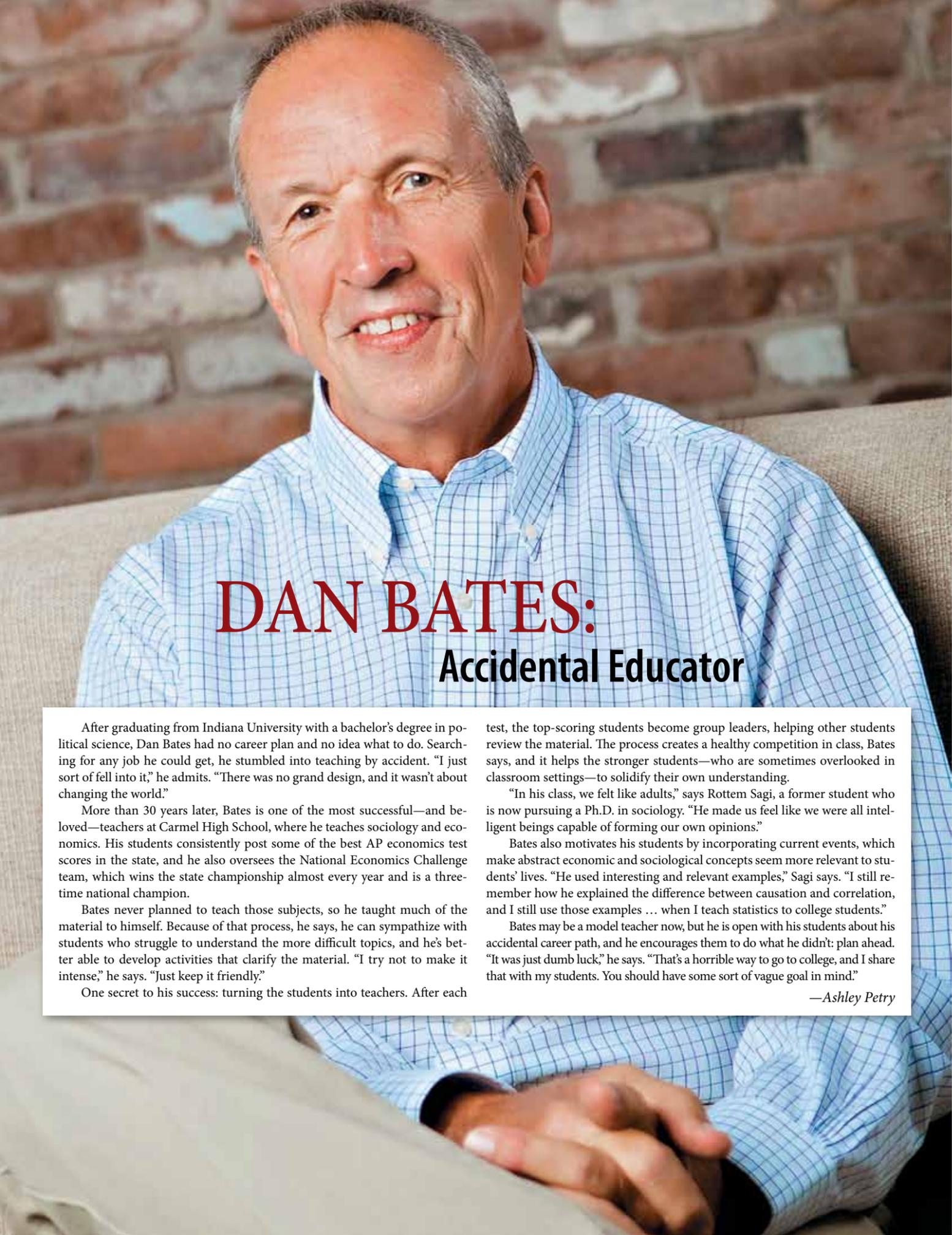
He is also well known for using technology in his classroom—and not just the sound clips on his iPod. To support the district's Fish Philosophy, he made recordings of teachers reading inspiring quotations and then created computerized fish who read the quotes aloud. Teachers throughout the building use the animations to introduce lessons related to the Fish Philosophy, yet another way to emphasize school values and get students excited about learning.

"He's a master of being able to get (students) engaged in class," says Brent Farrell, assistant principal. "It's discipline, but it's also fun, so he's a real master of balancing those two out."

King has always known that he wanted to teach, and he has fond memories of an elementary-school teacher who helped him develop a love of learning. But these days, he says, his most important inspiration comes from his own colleagues. "It was like I was destined to be here," he says. "It's the perfect fit for me, and I think everyone that works at Sand Creek Intermediate is just fabulous. We really meld together like a family."

—Ashley Petry





DAN BATES: Accidental Educator

After graduating from Indiana University with a bachelor's degree in political science, Dan Bates had no career plan and no idea what to do. Searching for any job he could get, he stumbled into teaching by accident. "I just sort of fell into it," he admits. "There was no grand design, and it wasn't about changing the world."

More than 30 years later, Bates is one of the most successful—and beloved—teachers at Carmel High School, where he teaches sociology and economics. His students consistently post some of the best AP economics test scores in the state, and he also oversees the National Economics Challenge team, which wins the state championship almost every year and is a three-time national champion.

Bates never planned to teach those subjects, so he taught much of the material to himself. Because of that process, he says, he can sympathize with students who struggle to understand the more difficult topics, and he's better able to develop activities that clarify the material. "I try not to make it intense," he says. "Just keep it friendly."

One secret to his success: turning the students into teachers. After each

test, the top-scoring students become group leaders, helping other students review the material. The process creates a healthy competition in class, Bates says, and it helps the stronger students—who are sometimes overlooked in classroom settings—to solidify their own understanding.

"In his class, we felt like adults," says Rottem Sagi, a former student who is now pursuing a Ph.D. in sociology. "He made us feel like we were all intelligent beings capable of forming our own opinions."

Bates also motivates his students by incorporating current events, which make abstract economic and sociological concepts seem more relevant to students' lives. "He used interesting and relevant examples," Sagi says. "I still remember how he explained the difference between causation and correlation, and I still use those examples ... when I teach statistics to college students."

Bates may be a model teacher now, but he is open with his students about his accidental career path, and he encourages them to do what he didn't: plan ahead. "It was just dumb luck," he says. "That's a horrible way to go to college, and I share that with my students. You should have some sort of vague goal in mind."

—Ashley Petry

CINDY & STEVE BANEY: A Teachers' Union



Cindy Baney says she made up a lot of songs as a kid. She makes up even more as an adult. The general music teacher at Carmel Elementary School studied the piano from when she was 6 years old until she received her Bachelor of Music Education degree from Indiana University. She now fills her days with song, teaching the kindergarten through fifth-graders myriad lessons through music, and she loves "making stuff up," she says.

Cindy's husband, Steve Baney, meanwhile, provides his students with the tools to add stuff up. The math teacher at Fishers Junior High School—whom Cindy Baney met while she was a freshman at IU—has taught sixth, seventh and eighth grades since the mid-'90s. Through his classes, as well as the experimental lab that he worked in to help kids struggling with mathematics, Steve feels he has contributed to laying the foundation for his students' futures. "You have to have a certain command of kindergarten through eighth-grade math just to function in the world," he explains. "I view myself as a teacher of students more than a teacher of mathematics. Math is a tool we're there to help provide for them."

As for Cindy, who also performs outside the classroom at venues like The Indianapolis Zoo and The Children's Museum, the music author, composer and arranger says she wants to share her passion for song with the younger set in any way she can. "Creativity is a strength," she says. "I love the energy I get from ... taking an exciting idea and involving the kids. I'm so proud of how our students embrace ideas."

One of those ideas includes a full-length musical that she wrote called "The Three Little Pigs, a Cautionary Tale of Consumerism." The tale, which includes 13 original songs, follows one little pig as it gets into financial trouble, ends up in a courtroom and learns a sound fiscal lesson. "The kids were so funny," Cindy says. "It was fun to present the idea to them and see them work the characters up themselves."

Steve, who also serves as a coach for the girls golf and basketball teams, helped to create a new two-period block of math classes to give struggling students the extra time and attention they need to learn. Adding an extra math class for slower students is a small "victory," Steve says. "We help kids who are not just kids who qualify for Special Ed services. (They are) kids who fall through the cracks; they don't have learning disabilities. They are right on the bubble as far as passing the state standardized tests."

Steve says the classes "help these kids learn to be better problem solvers; (we) work with their math reasoning skills, develop their confidence that they can actually learn math. I find no greater satisfaction than a kid who doesn't love math but can learn to get along with math. My goal as a math teacher is to help fill out that tool belt a little more, to help them see a bigger picture."

—Sherri Cullison

MARK WEAVER:

The Collector

Mark Weaver has always used dress clothes to expand his understanding of scientific principles. As a child, he grew tomato plants in the lined pockets of his suit coat, a project that greatly annoyed his parents, even though both of them were science teachers.

Now, as a science teacher at Clay Middle School, Weaver is known for his ties, which often reflect the topic he plans to teach, such as a fish-themed tie on the day the students dissect fish. He has so many ties, in fact, that he never wears the same one twice during the school year—and ties are just one of many things he collects. His classroom is filled with more than 70 clocks (all set to different times); live animals, such as turtles, frogs and cockroaches; and stuffed animals, including deer, fish and a buffalo (which also happens to be a puppet).

"I like to go out and collect different specimens here and there, and the room is full of them," he says. "Every day, I try to make sure there's something different in the classroom."

Weaver also seems to collect teaching honors: In 1995, he received the IPL Golden Apple Award, and in 2004 he was named Indiana Teacher of the Year. He's also been recognized by the Milken Family Foundation and the Disney American Teacher program. For Weaver, those honors—which sometimes come with monetary rewards—only serve to further his educational mission. He used the Golden Apple and Milken funds to create a documentary about polar bears in the Arctic, which he uses in his own classroom and

makes available to teachers nationwide.

Another of Weaver's favorite projects is the annual Great Explorers and Survival Week, starting on Columbus Day, when students learn about Indiana's history and environment. The event culminates in a feast, in which students learn about biology and anatomy by roasting—and eating—a whole pig, crickets, maggots and other "survivalist" foods.

"He just does an excellent job of making learning come alive for students," said Amy Dudley, assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction and assessment. "He really hooks them into enjoying science and wanting to learn more."

Weaver also coordinates the school's outdoor laboratory and bird-watching program, and he leads the Naturalist Club, which organizes field trips to places like Mammoth Cave and regional zoos. With Weaver's guidance, club members have studied butterfly migrations in Canada, gone spelunking in southern Indiana and raised funds for local wildlife rehabilitators.

The little spare time Weaver has left goes straight back to the school district: He announces Carmel High School basketball games and runs the clock for the high school's varsity football team. He also volunteers at Clay Middle School's football and basketball games.

And he wouldn't have it any other way. "I look forward to it every day," Weaver says. "To watch a light come on for kids and get them excited about science—gosh, how cool is that?"

—Ashley Petry

