

SCHOOLS

TEACHER PROFILE

In his classroom, students are seen and heard

By Jesse Fox Mayshark

After 21 years as a teacher, Brian Bonkowski has learned something other educators sometimes forget.

"You only remember 6 or 7 per cent of what any teacher taught you. But you always remember what kind of person they were. Think about it," he said with a broad grin.

His point isn't that teachers shouldn't worry about what and how they teach, but that they should think of children as human beings first and students second.

That's why members of Bonkowski's fifth-grade class at Mother of Sorrows School are both seen and heard, guided but not dictated to by the man they call "Mr. B."

Bonkowski, a big man whose boundless energy and animated face make him seem almost larger than life, keeps his students actively engaged at all costs. The classroom, he reminds them and anyone else who will listen, is their home for seven hours a day.

As an example, he gestured to drawings of pond ecosystems that decorate the front wall of his room.

"This is their work. That's important," he said. "I could go out and buy a lot of those things, you know, cut-outs you put up for the holidays. I don't. That's their work."

Bonkowski has been teaching at Mother of Sorrows for 12 years, part of the time as an eighth-grade science teacher and part of the time in his current slot as language arts and science teacher for the fifth grade. He prefers



Mother of Sorrows teacher Brian Bonkowski talks with fifth-grade students about what makes a lever work, during a lab exercise Tuesday.

the elementary setting, away from the higher grade's rigid 40-minute periods.

"Kids enjoy being active," he said. "Everyone likes to take part. And you'd be surprised what you discover in terms of their talents."

Bonkowski knows something about

hidden talents himself.

The son of a sixth-grade Seneca Falls teacher and a career military man, Bonkowski labored in school in the shadow of a "brilliant" twin sister (also a teacher now, in Iowa).

Despite his academic difficulties, he settled on teaching early on, during a

Summer of learning on a tour of Europe when he was 14. Disappointing his father by choosing SUNY College at Brockport over West Point, Bonkowski earned his master's degree at Nazareth College and spent 10 years teaching at a Catholic school in Geneva.

He met his wife there, and the two moved to Rochester.

"We wanted to come to the big city," he said with a laugh. They live in Charlotte with daughters Julia and Anna.

Bonkowski's own scholastic struggles have given him a lasting appreciation for the challenges and opportunities education presents to all students.

His particular passion these days is for language arts skills, what used to be called "English." A firm believer in process writing and the whole language approach, both of which aim to provide a broad context for students' lessons, he insists on hours of reading and writing each week.

But it's all presented with his trademark zest, an infectious enthusiasm that does not go unnoticed by his students.

"He's really fun. He does experiments with us and stuff," student Erin Hyatt volunteered.

It's no wonder that students write or call Bonkowski years after they've left his classroom, some to reminisce and some still looking for guidance, which he willingly provides.

It lends credence to his assertion that teachers are remembered as people more than educators. But how does Bonkowski, a fly fisherman, hiker, and Civil War buff in his spare time, hope to be recalled by his students?

"He was humane," he said. "If that's all they can remember me as, that's a legacy to top all legacies."