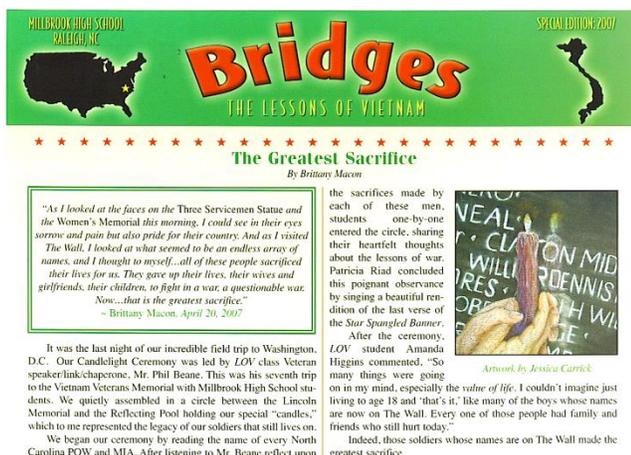


# ***Best Practices in a Community-in-the-Classroom Social Studies Program\****

By Lindy G. Poling

Since I was a child I have loved the study of history, but as a young teacher, I quickly discovered that not all of my students shared my passion. So I began experimenting with different methods to make the study of history more inviting. The most successful method has proven to be inviting community speakers into the classroom: veterans, public policymakers, lawyers, professors, journalists, peace activists, refugees, business people, and others. I have been using this experiential learning approach, called “Community-in-the-Classroom” since 1984. In the beginning, we had a very limited number of resource people and no budget. Our program now has a “volunteer team” of more than thirty guest speakers, mostly from our local community, who help me “team teach” our *U.S. History* course and *Lessons of Vietnam/Recent International Relations* elective each semester. The PTA and community members also provide resources to help students publish a quarterly newsletter called *Bridges* which is fully written and produced by Millbrook High School students (Figs. 1a & 1b).



Guest speakers in the *Community-in-the-Classroom* program help students see and feel a historical period from their personal point of view, and this naturally combines the lessons of history with real life. Discussions with classroom speakers who "were there" make the study of secondary level U.S. History course more like an intellectual *Outward Bound* experience! Students who enter your classroom holding

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the view that history is "boring and useless" will be *disarmed* by the emotional experience of having a Vietnam Veteran, like Carl Bimbo share pictures with the class of his "lost buddies." Having this type of experience gives the student a real understanding of *the true costs of war*.

***Freedom is not free!*** A highlight of each semester for the students is a visit from Brigadier General George B. Price (Ret.), who travels all the way from Columbia, Maryland to spend a full day with my students in Raleigh, NC (Fig. 2a). He helps the students understand the importance of not taking the freedoms and opportunities we enjoy as Americans for granted. And, as a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, General Price delivers the message that we live in a peaceful and prosperous land because of the ultimate sacrifice that so many American men and women made to preserve our liberty and freedom. From his visit, my students are left with a whole new level of respect and appreciation for the moral courage and sacrifices of the men and women in our nation's military.

The Vietnam War deeply divided our nation; and sadly, our country did not "do right" by the returning veterans of that war, or the 58, 286 service men and women who died for their country as a result of that war. General Price was one of the earliest supporters of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall). He tells my students, "American service members never defaulted on a contract with America, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial affirms that the American people will never break a contract with those who have served."

This distinguished U.S. Army Brigadier General not only challenges my students to rethink the simplistic generalizations relating to Vietnam War, but he exhorts them to use the lessons learned in this very difficult era in our nation's history to build a better future. My students were particularly moved last spring when he stopped for a moment, looked at all of us in the room, and said, "Your challenge as Americans is to find the profits of peace."

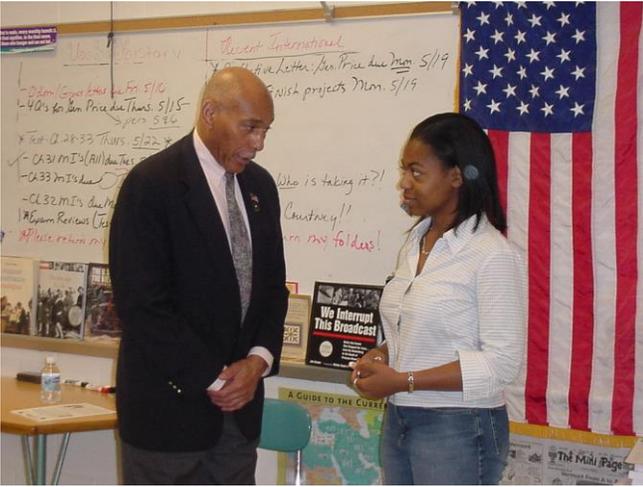


Fig. 2a. General George Price with student



Fig. 2b. Another CIC speaker, Ivan Waldorf

One Millbrook senior wrote after his spring visit, "General Price inspired me to believe we can do anything we put our minds to by being an example of a person who grew up in a segregated Mississippi and rose to become one of the nation's outstanding Brigadier Generals through a lot of hard work and perseverance. He is a man whom the entire world could benefit to hear."

**Multiple Viewpoints.** Guest speakers challenge your students to be more open-minded in interpreting complex historical events for which there are no "right answers." By having several community members "team teach" the Vietnam Era, for example, students are given more than one view of this controversial war and are able to adopt a more balanced perspective.

Each semester, Millbrook High School Dad, Ivan Waldorf (Fig. 2b), visits our classroom. He shares articles that he wrote as editor of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill *Daily Tarheel* newspaper in 1968 that were highly critical of America's foreign policy during the Vietnam Era, as well as President Johnson's rationale for dramatically escalating the number of American troops in Vietnam. When asked by a student, "Why did you protest the war?" He responded, "I could not make the connection between the spread of Communism and America's need to fight a war in Vietnam." By presenting history as stories with multiple interpretations and points of view, students become much more engaged and interested in a historical period on a personal level.

***Teaching Subjects in American History that are Difficult to Understand.*** Few units are more difficult to teach, nor more important for our students to understand, than the U.S. Constitution! Rather than totally relying on myself to help my American History students grasp the complexity of the Bill of Rights, I will invite a public lawyer, such as Assistant District Attorney Shelley Desvousges, and then a private lawyer, such as Mr. David Kirby, into my classes to "team teach." After brief introductions, the legal experts entertain a myriad of questions that have been carefully and critically developed by each student. Exciting discussions inevitably evolve, and as a result, the *Bill of Rights* is no longer a document written for the 1790's, but rather one that can be applied to today.

***Affirming the Importance of Good Character and Good Citizenship.*** The 1999 New Millennium Project sponsored by the National Association of Secretaries of State concluded, "Our educators should make every effort not only to encourage students, but also to teach them how to be effective citizens." Having parents and community speakers come into the classroom is not only a powerful tool for bringing history to life, but it is also effective in *affirming the importance of good character and good citizenship*. I firmly believe that a key dynamic by which students acquire important intellectual values and *character traits* is through exposure to attractive models of behavior. The *Community-in-the-Classroom* "guest teachers" challenge students to ask inquiring questions about their lessons, and they often become more interested in thinking about their own values and goals in life. After a visit by former North Carolina State Senator Eric Reeves, a Millbrook Junior wrote: "You have definitely made an impact on the way I feel about politics and law. I believe this may be my new direction as I enter college in the next couple of years." Another student commented: "You captured my interest when you discussed why you chose politics. I remember you stating it was something you always had an interest in, and you enjoyed getting involved through various projects in high school and college... You confirmed my thoughts that it was important to get involved."

***Connecting With Difficult-To-Reach Students.*** I find that the *Community-in-the-Classroom* approach with its emphasis on oral history and firsthand experience is powerful enough to invite the interest and

successful participation of the most unmotivated and difficult-to-reach students, the ones who may have "fallen through the cracks. " The cumulative effect of classroom visits by several guest speakers in a recent U.S. History class inspired one of my students to dramatically improve his academic performance enough to earn a nomination to North Carolina Boys' State where he went on to be elected Lieutenant Governor!

***Identifying and Preparing "Guest Teachers:*** As a busy teacher, you may be wondering, how do I go about recruiting guest speakers from the community? For starters, it is amazing how valuable your personal participation in various civic activities with your students can be in terms of building up your network of "guest teachers." We actually met General Price at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dedication of the NC Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the State Capitol in Raleigh (Memorial Day, 1997). He reacted very positively when I told him about our *Community-in-the-Classroom* Program, and *he* expressed his interest in becoming a part of it. He has visited my classroom every semester for the past ten years! I also find that by being involved in various community activities and teacher professional development programs, one does increase the odds of running into "new recruits." Let's face it! Improving public education is one of the top "issues" of the day. Politicians are often very eager to form direct classroom links that provide them a real opportunity to interact directly with students and teachers, and become more understanding of the problems that we as educators face. They see the crowded classrooms, and become more concerned about the real effects of limited school funds on the overall quality of the educational programs we offer.

In the final analysis, getting good speakers to come to your classroom is not the issue. The main problem is that we (teachers and administrators) have not told them (the community and parents) about how they can become more involved, and have greater ownership in the delivery of a quality educational program. To reinforce this very point, Tom Oxholm, representing the Business and Education Leaders in our Community (BELC), said after one of my *Community-in-the-Classroom* presentations for our Wake County Public School System, "We are just waiting for the teachers to tell us what to do!"

***Finding the Right Speaker:*** Start with your students. At the beginning of each semester review the upcoming units of study with your students and ask them to assist you in making contacts through: parents, grandparents, family and friends, city, county, state and national officials, veterans' chapters, Red Cross, Kids Voting, church and civic groups, PTA, community volunteers, your own speakers! That's right. Take advantage of your speaker network for their contacts. The following student guide was created by several students in one of my American History classes:

## **Student Guest Speaker Planning Guide: Creating a Learning Community**

**Goal:** To maximize student learning and establish the importance of good character and citizenship through the use of guest speakers in the classroom.

- A. Students will become familiar with the speaker's background and connection with our studies.
- B. Students will prepare questions which will be reviewed by the teacher. The teacher will send them to the speaker or discuss major question themes with the speaker before the classroom visit.
- C. Questions will be returned to each student at the beginning of the period(s) of the guest speaker's visit. (This allows students to feel more comfortable asking questions in class.)
- D. Students and speaker will understand that time will be allotted for questions and discussion.
- E. After the guest speaker's presentation, each student will write a **reflective letter** discussing what he/she learned from this experience and additional questions he/she may have. The teacher will mail these student letters to the classroom visitor.
- F. **Expanding our learning community:** Student will write articles for the PTA Newsletter, school newspaper, classroom publication (see our *Bridges* /Lessons of Vietnam Newsletter): or local newspaper about the positive contributions of our community resources to our studies.

***Putting It All Together! Structuring a Community-in-the-Classroom Program.*** The transition to a more experiential learning process that utilizes a *Community-in-the-Classroom* program can be challenging for high school educators. The following lesson plan, *Community Role Models in the*

*Classroom*, can be applied to every social science subject area. Following the lesson plan, I have included a sample of actual student questions developed for a variety of community speakers. As an added note, this lesson plan connects directly to state goals and objectives. In other words, a *Community-in-the-Classroom* program can prepare students for End-of -Course (EOC) tests!

## **Part 1: *Community Role Models in the Classroom* Lesson Plan**

**Goals and Objectives:** The student will acquire information from a variety of sources—including primary sources--and use this information for problem solving, decision making and planning. The student will develop a mutual respect between human beings and identify situations in which social action is required. The student will describe and analyze the effects of war on American economic, social, political, and cultural life. The learner will compare different points of view of the proper role of government in the personal lives of citizens. The learner will identify political events and the actions and reactions of the government officials and citizens, and assess the social and political consequences. The learner will evaluate the influence of ethical and moral principles on the development of our economic, legal, and political systems (N.C. Social Studies Standard Course of Study).

**Length of Activity:** One to two class periods plus homework (critical thinking questions plus reflective letter) for each guest speaker visit. **Level of Activity:** All levels of secondary social studies

### **Instructions:**

1. Build a network of community speakers for your social studies course through parents, PTA, business, education, government, and veterans' organizations. Never has the community been more willing to contribute to our educational programs!
2. Call the prospective guest speaker and discuss how he/she might be able to enrich the curriculum, as well as **serve as a positive role model** for your class. Assure the speaker that he/she can add a special vitality to the classroom by sharing expertise and interacting with the students. Describe your class to the speaker. Ask that he /she plan to allow plenty of time for student questions. Reassure him/her that you will keep the ball rolling! Set the date!
3. Familiarize students with the background of the speaker and his/her connection to the curriculum.
4. Conduct a "brainstorming" session--students share ideas for questions and discussion.

5. Instruct each student to prepare five questions for homework. Collect and review student questions the following day with your students..
6. Discuss question themes with guest speaker and /or mail questions to speaker ahead of time.
7. Return questions to each student prior to the guest speaker's visit. (Students will feel more comfortable if they can refer to their carefully prepared questions.)
8. Arrange for a student to meet the speaker at the front office.
9. When the class begins, introduce the community guest or, if appropriate, have a student who has prepared an introduction do so. Let the class know whether they should hold their questions until the end. Be ready to ask questions yourself if necessary.
10. Assist the speaker in bringing the class to a close a few minutes before the period ends. Instruct students ahead of time that polite applause is very appropriate.
11. Arrange for a student to escort the speaker back to the front office.
12. As a follow up activity, have each student write a reflective thank you letter to the speaker. Be sure to mail the packet of letters to each classroom visitor. Not only do they demonstrate caring appreciation, but they often help the speaker better prepare for future visits. These guests are often willing to serve as student resources throughout the year. (Please refer to: "**Creating a Learning Community**".)
13. Encourage students to write articles for the school newspaper, PTA Newsletter, classroom publications (for example, The *Bridge* Newsletter) and local newspaper regarding how these exciting community members have made positive contributions to our educational program. Other teachers, students, and parents will see the benefits of inviting community role models to our classrooms as well.

## **Part 2. Sample Student Questions for Community Speakers**

### **Questions for Assistant District Attorney:**

1. What is the most difficult case you have had to try?
2. What educational background is required for your job?
3. Do you feel that justice generally prevails in the courtroom?

4. As one who has prosecuted students for a variety of crimes from misdemeanors to murders, what advice do you have for teenagers today?

### **Questions for Private Civil Attorney:**

1. As one who fights for the rights of innocent victims, do you feel that our court system is fair?
2. Do you think the public stereotype of lawyers as opportunists is justified?
3. What case in your career has given you the most satisfaction?
4. How does the Bill of Rights affect our lives today?

### **Questions for State Legislator:**

1. What are the most important issues facing North Carolina legislators in the new session?
2. How can students become more involved in political decision making?
3. What are the characteristics of an exemplary politician?
4. How can we become involved in the legislative page program?

### **Questions for a Vietnam Veteran:**

1. What are your thoughts re: the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution today? The Domino Theory?
2. It seems that every veteran fought a different war. Do you feel that way?
3. Have you visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? If so, what does The Wall mean to you?
4. Were there any lessons that you have learned that you have been able to carry throughout your life?
5. What do you want future generations to learn from Vietnam and the era surrounding it?

**Helpful Tips:** I am often asked questions similar to the following by educators who are interested in implementing a *Community-in-the-Classroom* Program as part of their social studies curricula. I would like to share some of these questions and answers with you.

**Q: What are the key benefits of a Community-in-the-Classroom Program?**

A: All levels of students enjoy having "living history" resources and/or community speakers who have special expertise in specific subject areas visit their classroom. Critical thinking skills improve as students learn to develop intelligent questions. Communication skills improve as they learn to ask their questions in front of a large audience. Writing skills improve as they write numerous reflective letters to our community guests throughout the year. Students begin to make connections between social studies and the real world! Most of all, it is interesting and exciting!

**Q: Have you ever had an ineffective guest speaker visit your classroom?** A: Yes, but we all learn from experience. It is important for the teacher to get to know his/her "guest teachers" by telephone and/or personal discussions. Speaker recommendations from colleagues and friends are also very helpful. The biggest problem I have encountered is the tendency for some speakers to focus on themselves too much. As a result, they fail to listen to the students. Others may speak too long, therefore not allowing enough time for Q & A (often the best part of the class). Careful preparation on the part of teacher, students, and speakers can prevent these problems from occurring. Our community resources have been outstanding!

**Q: How do we as social studies teachers justify a Community-in-the-Classroom**

**Program, especially with the current emphasis on End-of-Course Test scores?** A: A

*Community-in-the-Classroom* Program can link directly to state Social Studies Standards. Bringing into our classrooms those who have lived the history and/or those who have great expertise in a social studies subject area can help students learn more and remember what they learn longer.

**Q: How does one find the time to coordinate such a program?** A: It does take time to set up your initial network--and keep building upon it, but if the speaker's experience in your classroom is a positive one for everyone involved, we have found that he or she is very willing to return--often on a bi-

annual or annual basis. Many of our history community resources simply wait for that yearly phone call or e-mail. You might also ask your Community Development Coordinator to make some initial contacts for you. However, it is very important that you, the teacher, establish a working relationship with each of your community resources. Never have our parents and our community been more willing to contribute to our schools! Why not let them share their time and expertise with our students if this can help enrich learning.

**Q: How do these community resources help our students expand their education? A:**

Many students spend a day job shadowing with our guest speakers as a follow up to these classroom visits. New career interests are sometimes tapped. Thanks to visits by numerous public servants, several students have served as legislative pages and as representatives at Boys' State and Girls' State. Many MHS students became very involved in the Kids Voting Program. Classroom visitors often give valuable career advice.

**Q: Has your Community-in-the-Classroom Program produced some surprising**

**results? A:** Absolutely! We have discovered that a caring community can contribute greatly to students' knowledge and character development. The reflective letters written by students to these "guest teachers" are incredible. Challenging classes inevitably become respectful audiences. Few students are absent when they know an exciting guest will be visiting their classroom. Many students interview these community speakers for various projects. Some speakers respond with their own thank you letters. A true school-community bond often occurs!