



Teacher Awards  
Honoring Creativity in Teaching

# Disney Magic



On Tuesday night March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2004, while on my way to Halifax men's basketball, Karen called my cell phone. She had received a message from Terry Wick, a representative from the Disney Company. Karen thought it might be important, and encouraged me to return home. I had mixed thoughts – I really didn't want to be late for basketball- but *Disney* had called.

I had filled out the extensive application, resume, and essays again this year as I had in the past in hope of a teaching award for my classroom. I thought maybe they had a question about my application. Perhaps I was being considered as a potential candidate! I called Terry back and was told that she would call me back in a few minutes. She did. Terry told me that I was selected as a winner of the DisneyHand Teacher Award and that they would be in contact with me soon. I hung up and told Karen the news. We were both stunned, but had no idea what was in store for us. I went upstairs to look up some details from the application copies that I had made. It was then that I told Karen and Kristin “ I think I have won \$10,000 and another \$5000 for my classroom!” With skeptical excitement, I went off to basketball and didn't tell anyone.



For the next few days, the many e-mails from Terry Wick, Laura Giron and Liz Grissom convinced me that this was *real*. I called my parents, Karen's mom (Mildred), and told a few of my closest colleagues. News spread fast and my team of teachers and students organized a congratulations ceremony. This coincided with an end of the term “Red Rewards” party for students. Marcia Goodless, Special Needs teacher on the team, had called me to the office to discuss a particularly antagonistic parent. It was a decoy, but I fell for it. When I returned to my classroom, every student and teacher on the Red Team was wearing Mickey ears that they had made. Karen Rymsha, a passionate, energetic teacher, Gabby Grossman, a young enthusiastic team-mate, and Marcia had done most of the planning and work behind the celebration. There was a large cake (enough for 130!) and I had given up sweets for Lent. The cake had a toy Mickey in an airplane for a decoration, which makes a great memento of the event. Lyman Goding, the Principal, was there to congratulate me. I was presented with cards and a poster. Three students (Ashley Dion, Sheila Fey, and Sarah Forman played “It's a Small World” and “M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E” songs on their flutes. I tried to hold back the tears – music always plays on my emotions.



The next months were busy with school, work, and numerous e-mails. These e-mails included plane reservations, tux measurements, hotel accommodations, and a scheduled class visit with Disney TV cameras. The Disney Company hired Patrick Davidson Productions to produce a video of each DisneyHand teacher's classroom activities. I was told that Bart Rowen would be contacting me about a visit. Shortly thereafter, he called and we made plans for his visit on Friday, May 21, 2004. I was told that he would spend all day with me along with two camera men. I was surprised to find out that they would spend all day, yet the final video would only be one minute! Bart told me that they would also edit a longer version that could be used by local cable, etc. I tried to think of the best way to get the most students involved so that they would



remember the experience. I asked Bart if he would agree to be interviewed by students as one of our monthly guests. He agreed, and I felt better about the visit, knowing that all students would participate. Now I had to pick three classes (out of five) that would be videotaped. Over the next few days, I watched their enthusiasm and personalities to try to get diverse groups for videotaping.

The day of videotaping was amazing! The production crew arrived at 7:30 A.M. and did not leave until 5:00 P.M. They videotaped most of the day, so they must have had about 6 hours of footage! Each class was taped from beginning to end, and the lessons were varied, including microscope work, capillary action demonstrations, science songs, scramble, Internet work, and science toys. I had decided early on that I did not want to alter my lessons to put on a show. Rather, I wanted the video to showcase students in their daily routine. One exception was the science fair singers, who performed "The Element Song" and "The States of Matter" in their atom t-shirts that they had created. The morning went well, with students almost unaware, going through their daily rituals. Although the science toy routine appears chaotic, it gives students a chance to experiment and it gives me a chance to interact with individual students on a personal level.



I'm glad that Bart also got to see my news crew (during my duty period) which consists of 7 students who produce the weekly PCIS News. The students had many questions about television production and his experiences. Bart's crew was also very interested in *our* production facility at the "Little Theater" and I think that both groups benefited from the exchange. After lunch, the science singers performed their songs and formed the periodic table in their element T-shirts. Bart interviewed Emily McCune, Brianna Garland, Sheila Fey, Andrew Cullivan, and Rosemary Kelly about my teaching abilities. Then, the entire team assembled to watch and participate in a TV interview of Bart Rowen. Surprisingly, he was not one of the best guest interviews because of his reserved personality. Anyway, *some* students were really impressed and benefited from the experience. One of those students was Trevor Morini, who wants to be a TV Meteorologist when he grows up.



The videotaping continued after school with the garden club. These students meet as needed to

spread mulch, weed, and plant gardens around the school. The camera crew followed us to the various garden areas we had constructed. They spent quite a while at the water



garden. Most of this video was staged to get kids performing different activities. After the students left, Bart set up my classroom for an interview with me. Gaby and Karen Rymsha were bragging about my achievements to Bart and were very supportive. The interview lasted another 45 minutes and wrapped up around 4:45. It had been a very exciting and rewarding day! I felt very good about the results, but mostly very appreciative of the red team teachers and students for their support and encouragement.

After the visit, the e-mails decreased and things returned to near-normal, just waiting for the upcoming trip to Disneyland in July. Occasionally, I would jot down ideas and thoughts for the three minute speech. Like most times in teaching, there was no time to dwell on this or worry about it. Day-to-day lessons, grading, and classroom issues keep you busy every day. This is not a boring job, but it is a difficult and demanding one! I cannot believe that I will be entering my 30<sup>th</sup> year of teaching!

As school finished for the year, I had to get prepared for a JASON Conference in Milwaukee. Then I attended a Brain-Based Learning” Conference in Plymouth that was excellent. It was only then that I began assembling my speech. Unfortunately, the speech lasted 10 minutes. I had to cut it in half, omitting important people and events. Then cut it some more. It was very difficult to describe your life’s work in three minutes! I was working on a song, sung to the tune of “Gilligan’s Island” that would be included in my speech to make it distinctive and emphasize “Sing-A-Long Science”. Also, I had the difficult task of picking only 6 pictures that reflected my teaching style to accompany my speech. Anyway, before I knew it, it was time to get ready to leave for California!

Plans had evolved so that we were able to invite Mildred, my mother-in-law to join us. Jeff’s medical school acceptance to UMASS also permitted him to attend because he didn’t start school until August 12<sup>th</sup>. I was really excited to be able to include Jeff and Mildred in this trip. It would probably be the last trip that we would take together as a family! Mildred had done little traveling in her lifetime. Jeff is 24 now, and while I am proud of his accomplishments, he has grown into a great *person*, fun to be around. I chose Kristin as my “primary guest” for the events, which meant that she would be meeting and hob-knobbing with many people—something that she *loves* to do. Everyone who meets her is impressed with her genuine excitement, enthusiasm, and politeness. Karen would take a back seat to her at the events, which is so considerate! She always looks out for everyone else’s interests...

Karen and I had reserved a limousine to bring us to the airport on the morning of July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004 to avoid the Democratic National Convention in Boston. Everyone was excited (Mildred’s first limo ride!) and we had a fun ride into Logan. We arrived early (Karen & Mildred love to be early!) and had a light breakfast at Burger King. While eating, Mildred was surprised to see that they had a



*whole plane* just for mail (a FedEx plane). We laughed and explained that they had *more than one* of these planes! There were no



problems boarding the plane for an 11:30 direct flight to LAX. Karen and Mildred were very nervous and were sitting together. (Because of our tentative plans, we had to book the flights separately.) Kristin and I sat together, and I wanted her to have the window seat to catch the interesting views. We arrived at Los Angeles International Airport at 2:20 (LA time). Disney had arranged for a concierge to greet us and get us to our awaiting Ford Expedition. The chauffeur was a woman named Michelle who

was telling us stories about the various celebrities and movie stars that she had driven. It was about a 45 minute drive to the Grand Californian Hotel. Along the way, we saw smoke from some of the wild fires that we had been reading about in the newspapers.

At the hotel, we were greeted at the main desk. Kristin and I were given personalized “primary guest” and “honoree” pins. Our luggage was whisked away and we were directed to the hospitality room (the Iris room) where we met Terry Wick, Laura Giron, and Liz Grissom. They gave us park passes, an itinerary, and about \$500 in Disney Dollars to use at our discretion. There was a large table of cookies, fruit, coffee and drinks in the reception area. We were



greeted by many strangers, who were to become close companions on this incredible adventure. Needing to get organized, we headed off to our hotel room #244 at around 5:00 PM. We unpacked and got ready (casual dress) for a 7:00 PM Evening Reception at the Hotel’s Brisa Courtyard. Kristin and I excitedly wore our new pins and we all headed downstairs.



The Brisa Courtyard was magical! It was a large patio set up with candles all around and a two piece instrumental group playing soft guitar music in the background. The round tables topped with large umbrellas were filled with hot buffet foods and hor d’oevres of all kinds. There was fresh fruit and an open bar off to one side. The still air was filled with the smell of delicious foods along with the laughter and chatter of excited conversations. People,

one after another, seemed to find their way to me to discuss with excited anticipation what was to come. Some of the people were judges. Others were primary guests and relatives of honorees. And, of course, there were the 38 other Disney Award winners. Each person had a unique and interesting story to tell. They talked about their school

system, their home states, and their accomplishments. I began to realize how talented this group of honorees really was!

Kristin was having a ball introducing herself to these strangers and bragging about her dad. Karen, Jeff, and Mildred were quietly mingling and enjoying this perfect evening. Karen had a lengthy conversation with Jack Joyce, a Disney Middle School winner from the past who worked on an Indian reservation. I had a great conversation with Chuck Boucher and his wife Mary Jean from Rhode Island, Claude Valle from Weston, MA, and Hector Ibarra, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher from Iowa. Also, it was exciting to finally meet some honorees who I had been e-mailing for several months: Cindy Rosser and Cindi Aillaud (both from Alaska), Brigitte Tennis from Washington, and Casey LaRosa from New Jersey. None of us could believe the accommodations, the respect, and the royal treatment we were receiving. We found a dessert area- an attached courtyard along a candle-lit path. Karen and I struck up a conversation with Darlene Martin and her husband. Their daughter, Faith, was Jeff's age. She, like Jeff, was looking for someone her own age to share some fun, so we arranged for her and Jeff to meet and enjoy California Adventure together. The evening was a "pinch me!" moment where everything was perfect – the conversations, the company, the temperature, the food, the lighting, the music.... Suddenly, overhead, a monorail glided quietly along a beam (which had gone unnoticed!) and disappeared into the hotel....Disney magic!



We headed back to our hotel room around 11:00. Kristin and Mildred shared one bed. Karen and I were in the other. The hotel had provided a sleeping bag for Jeff, who slept at the foot of our beds. The room was luxurious, but with five of us and all of our luggage, a little crowded. We laughed and reminisced about our

magical evening, joked about who would be snoring during the night, and reviewed the agenda with great anticipation of things to come.

Friday morning, we got up around 8:00, showered, and got dressed. All of us had gotten a good night's sleep. We headed downstairs to a hotel restaurant called Storybook Café.



Pluto, Chip, and Dale characters were there greeting us and we took some pictures with them. We noticed some of the other honorees and their families.



Kristin ordered a large waffle shaped like Mickey Mouse. There was fresh fruit, fresh squeezed orange juice, and warm muffins. The bagels, French toast, omelets, muffins, and pancakes were delicious and the atmosphere was great. We ended up returning to the Storybook Café each morning.

After breakfast, I needed to get a tux fitting (yes, they also provided tuxes!) in the Lily Room by the front lobby.

Ret Turner was the wardrobe specialist, who I later learned is famous and often requested by Hollywood celebrities. The women honorees were fitted for gowns, which they were later allowed to purchase if they liked. I checked back in with the family, who were planning to go to Disneyland for the afternoon. I was scheduled for professional development at 12:30.

The professional development was conducted by HelenAnn Civian and Meg Robbins from the Center for Collaborative Education. This provided some time to bond with other awardees and also set us up for an introduction to a book called Learning by Heart, by Roland Barth. We would be discussing this book at DisneyWorld in October. Karen, Jeff, Mildred, and Kristin spent the afternoon at Disneyland. Jeff bought Mildred a “Mickey ears” hat and they went on the rides while searching for Mickey Mouse. Mildred had told the church group that she would get a picture with Mickey Mouse. A small boy walked up to Mildred, mistaking her for Mickey Mouse and gave her a big hug!



At 4:00, when I was done with professional development, I tried to call the family to meet them at California Adventure. We had been given “Fast passes” to “Soarin’ over California” and “Tower of Terror” rides. I couldn’t get in touch with them, so I went on “Soarin’” and “A Bug’s Life” on my own. When finally I caught up with the family, I went back with them to “Soarin’”, where we ran into Chuck and Mary Jean Boucher.

Kristin and I were scheduled to attend a supper at “Hollywood and Dine”, a function facility in the park at 6:30. This was for honorees, primary guests, and judges only. Kristin was quite pleased to enter the party with me and leave



Karen, Mildred, and Jeff outside! Inside, a 5piece jazz band was playing and we found a seat with Chuck and Mary Jean. Also, John Passarini (The 2003 Disney Teacher of the Year) and his wife were there. The conversation was lively and the food (chicken) was delicious. A few people began to dance, and I had a dance with Kristin. She was thrilled with the whole experience and was glowing. After the meal, we were ushered out to a private viewing

area to see the Electrical Light Parade. The night air was perfect and the temperature ideal. It was surreal to be surrounded by these new close friends sharing a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We didn’t want anything to end, and yet we had so much to look forward to. When the parade finished, we called Karen, Jeff, and Mildred to arrange for a place to meet and head home. As we walked out of California Adventure, fireworks began to go off over Disneyland. We paused and took in the moment.



Jeff and I then decided to continue on to Disneyland while Karen, Mildred, and Kristin headed home exhausted. At Disneyland, Jeff and I walked quickly over to Adventureland where a light show called Fantasmic was starting. Fantasmic is an outdoor multimedia show involving water fountains with images projected on them, lasers, Disney Characters, music, lighting and fireworks. Truly Amazing! We were so

impressed; we agreed to come back again another night to see it again. On the trip home, we stopped and shared a beer at ESPN. We went back to the hotel where everyone was sleeping.



In the morning, Karen told me that there were gifts left on the bed the night before: A Mickey Mouse stuffed animal (with a DisneyHand logo), a book entitled Thank You, Teacher, and milk and cookies! Looking around, we found more gifts from the night before that we had missed: a leather portfolio with “The Walt Disney Company” embossed on it, and a book

entitled Teaching with Fire! What great surprises! Each night, we were to get another gift surprise in our room!

This was Saturday, the day of the long-awaited speeches. We ate our usual outstanding breakfast at StoryBook Café. Karen, Jeff, and Mildred discussed plans to return to Disneyland, California Adventure, and Downtown Disney. Jeff talked them into seeing a movie called “Anchorman” playing at Downtown Disney. Kristin and I rushed off to the Sequoia Ballroom. We were dressed up- her in a grey blazer, and me in my suit sporting a Mickey Mouse tie.

The speeches were very formal, with a group of about 100 judges sitting in front of the 39 honorees and their primary guests. The atmosphere was tense, but excited. They began by randomly selecting categories to determine who would go first. My group, “Middle School Science”, was selected 7<sup>th</sup>, which meant that my speech would take place about in the middle. Whew! A good placing! Each honoree was given a note sheet to help with voting selections. This was important because honorees would be voting for overall winners at the Gala. The winners would get an additional \$15,000. Serious business! None of us was really comfortable with the “voting for each other” requirement. As the nervous honorees made their speeches, six pictures placed on a PowerPoint presentation would be shown to the audience. As we spoke we could click the mouse to change slides.

When it got close to my turn, I could no longer focus and concentrate on the other speeches. The note-taking stopped. Later, I would feel bad that I couldn’t remember their speeches because I was thinking about my own upcoming speech. Finally, my time had arrived. I was wired with a wireless microphone. I was most nervous about finishing within the short 3-minute time frame. John Passarini (past winner) started the stopwatch and I began with a song. I had hoped to have people join in on the chorus (Sing-A-Long Science!), but looking around the room, I found out quickly that *it was not going to happen!* Here’s the song sung to Gilligan’s Island



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**Element Song \*1<sup>st</sup> slide**

**Well Disney called with the news one day  
An award for how I teach  
As part of the require-ment  
A three-minute speech (a three-minute speech!)**

**When the kids come to class, there's  
science toys  
They rush into class to play  
With hands-on fun experiments  
They start their science day! (They start  
their science day!)**

**Then we scramble letters of an animal  
As we learn with a classroom game  
We look up facts on the Internet  
And the Scientific Name! (the Scientific  
Name!)**



**The lessons that I like to teach  
Are authentic with a theme  
The students do important things  
It helps their self-esteem (It helps their self-esteem!)**

**While teaching it's important  
To address all students' needs  
With many types of learning styles  
To help them to succeed (to help them to succeed!)**

**Now I don't sing to students all day long  
But music is one tool  
For helping students learn some facts  
And then succeed in school (and then succeed in school!)**

*Now for the rest of my speech.....*

So, we sing in class to help reinforce ideas and involve students. I've written a song for every topic and produced 3 CD's of "Sing-A-Long Science".



### Bob Ballard Titanic article\* 2<sup>nd</sup> slide

Authentic lessons give students a purpose for their learning. I'm involved in the JASON Project, a live expedition led by Titanic discoverer Bob Ballard. Our team of teachers uses JASON as a theme for the year and this year's expedition was to the Panama rainforest. So, we compared our environmental data with theirs, we built a rainforest, I wrote a rainforest song, we visited the science museum, saw an omnitheater movie on Jane Goodall, and visited the Cape Cod Canal, comparing it to the Panama Canal. Each student produced a web page for our field guide and we published a poster. Then we had a live teleconference with Bob Ballard at the Titanic Site.



### Wright Brothers Plane\* 3<sup>rd</sup> slide

This year was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of flight. I collaborated with colleagues to bring a life-size replica of The Wright Flyer to our gymnasium. Students created interactive displays to teach more than 2000 people about flight. We also produced a television show for the local cable audience.



### Beatrice\* Read to Feed – Heifer Project 4<sup>th</sup> slide

Each year, students read books and get sponsors for the Heifer Project. Then, we have a “BookFest”, complete with a DJ and interactive displays under canopies outside of the school. The whole school is invited and I impersonate Neil Diamond, Elvis, and Einstein. This picture shows Beatrice Bira’s visit to our school to do a TV interview. We were featured in the Heifer Project’s promotional brochures this year.



### Web page \* 5<sup>th</sup> slide

Parent and community involvement are so important in the development of an adolescent. My web page provides families with lessons, curriculum, student’s work, enrichment, grades, and communication with my classroom.

Add in a three-day overnight trip and you get the best type of learning – emotional learning. Red Team students help produce a Multi-media video presentation and memory book at the end



of the year – No one misses the last day of school and many students are in tears.

### Family \* 6<sup>th</sup> slide

My family is my driving force of inspiration. My wife Karen is totally supportive and just the best! My son, Jeff, has aspired to be a doctor and will enter medical school next week. And my primary guest, my daughter Kristin, has overcome many disabilities. A dad could not be prouder.

I thank you and thank GOD for this wonderful opportunity!



I received a warm applause at the end and felt good about it (I was really glad that it was over!) All of the speeches were impressive, but a few really hit home: Joe Underwood’s TV productions; Chuck Boucher’s yacht designs, designs for Foxwood casino, and adaptive devices; Brian Freeman’s crazy costumes “The School Daddy” and happy teaching; Hector Ibarra’s community involvement; Jason Larison’s technology through agricultural education. My favorite, though, was Claude Valle’s He had assembled his favorite teachers and described how they affected his life. Claude had pictures from when he had invited all of them to a cookout at his house – all older and retired. It brought me to tears...very emotional! We broke for lunch and went to the Brisa Courtyard. Once again, the food was magnificent as was the comradery. Many of us exchanged congratulations on having completed the speech, while others were anxiously awaiting their upcoming speech with nervous anticipation. The speeches seemed to bring a strong bond between the 39 participants, as if we were weathering a storm together on a boat.

Then the speeches continued in the Sequoia Ballroom. Five hours of speeches in all! Kristin was surprisingly very interested in all of them and was really enjoying being a “primary guest”. The honorees were really enjoying her, too. She is always so happy and enthusiastic. (Her favorite quote – “You’re never fully dressed without a smile” – from Annie). She never got tired of bragging about her Dad! Karen really missed being able to see the speeches!

When the speeches were done, the judges presented each honoree with a tote bag full of inspirational books on the way out the door. Everyone was relieved and glad to be done with speeches! After many congratulations to each other, we headed back to our rooms and changed clothes. Next on the agenda: a trip to Walt Disney Studios! Busses were waiting. As people met in the lobby, the atmosphere was euphoric. People were hugging and congratulations were exchanging everywhere. Kristin and I got on the front of the bus with Chuck and Mary Jean. We “high-fived” everyone as they boarded and traveled through the bus to their seats. It was rowdy. There’s nothing like a group of *teachers* misbehaving on a field trip! The whole ride was buzzing with excited passengers and periodic outbursts from the “party bus” Liz Pumila was videotaping with

Brian Freeman, interviewing each of the honorees. After about an hour, we arrived at Walt Disney Studios.

It was about 6 PM. Greeting us as we unloaded off the bus were Donald Duck and Goofy! They led us to a backstage lot, where an all American full blown cookout was waiting for us. A four-piece band was playing all-American music and the atmosphere was festive. The air was, once again, perfect, and the smells of burgers and hotdogs surrounded us. An open bar was set up along with large grills featuring chicken, potato salad, fresh fruit,



and of course, cheeseburgers and hotdogs. The lemonade was delicious and after supper, they brought out home-baked blueberry and apple pies with ice cream! People began to dance, and soon almost everyone was dancing in the street. Some stopped to have their pictures taken – polaroids were given out to anyone who wanted one. After a couple of hours, the band stopped and we were ushered (reluctantly – we were having fun dancing) to an adjacent back lot where we were

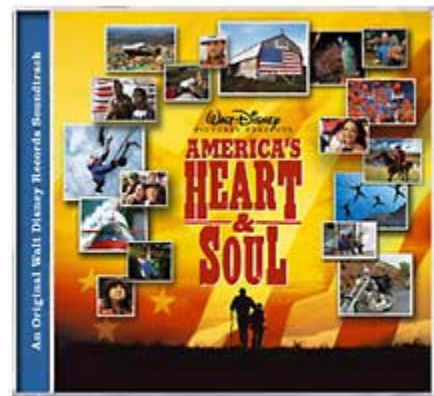
given candy as we entered a private movie screening for “Heart and Soul”. Along the cement pavement, there were hand prints and autographs of movie stars. Kristin was excited to see Julie Andrews among the stars.



We entered into the theater and filled in the front. Our group of almost 100 seemed small in the large theater. The film’s director, Louis Schwartzberg, was introduced and came to the microphone at the front of the theater. After some introductory remarks, the curtain opened and we saw the movie entitled “Heart and Soul”. The movie features many 10-15 minute vignettes of extraordinary and sometimes



eccentric Americans. All of them had certain admirable qualities, and their lifestyles were different than most people. It was an excellent movie, especially for public school teachers who must educate and find the potential in a diverse group of students. Before we left, Kristin had her picture taken with Louis Schwartzberg. We left very tired after a long day. On the way out, we were



given Ben and Jerry’s ice cream (they were featured in the movie) for the ride home. When we got on the bus, our seats were cushioned with a fleece pillow and

blanket...another gift from Disney! The bus ride home was a little quieter, but most people were too excited to sleep. When we arrived back at the hotel room, Kristin and I were surprised to learn that Disney had placed a wicker basket with a red checkered cloth full of surprises: a patriotic Winnie-the-Pooh, the sound track from “Heart and Soul”, a book entitled Across America, a CD entitled “Country Music & America”, a refrigerator magnet, a Mickey Mouse antenna cover, and a patriotic bracelet. Just Incredible!! I’m definitely loving being a Disney teacher!!



We had been anticipating Sunday since our arrival. The DisneyHand Teacher’s Award Gala Ceremony! We got a late start and went downstairs for another delicious breakfast at the Storybook Café. Afterwards, Karen, Mildred and Kristin went off to Disneyland in search of Mickey Mouse and the Disneyland rides. Jeff and I went to California Adventure. We went on the roller coaster, California Screamin’, a movie about California’s history, and “Who wants to be a Millionaire”. I had to return to the hotel for a 2:00 PM rehearsal. The Sequoia ballroom had been amazingly transformed into an Academy-Awards looking set! We were assigned seats and practiced the musical finale with the children’s chorus. After rehearsal, Jeff and I went back to California Adventure for one more ride on the roller coaster. We returned around 5 PM to get ready for the gala.



I got dressed in my tux, and Kristin and I were instructed to come into the Grand Californian Hotel via the “Red Carpet” set up outside the main entrance. Greeting us on the Red Carpet were TV cameras, Disney Characters Snow White, Belle, Sleeping Beauty, Prince Charming, etc. We were ushered inside to a cocktail reception in the Sequoia Ballroom Foyer and extending into the Brisa Courtyard. Everyone was formally dressed, looking

good, and in top spirits. The Disney honorees were greeting each other like old friends, not acquaintances from the past 48 hours. The camaraderie was evident! After a half hour or so, we were assembled for an official group photograph.

At 7:00 Pm, the DisneyHand Teacher Awards Gala Ceremony began in the Sequoia Ballroom. The Ballroom had been transformed into an “Academy Awards” environment. Large cameras on long booms glided over us. A big screen, projected from behind, showed off highlights of each honoree’s accomplishments. We were all so excited to see our completed videos! Before I could settle in, I was whisked off and brought behind stage. Our group of Middle School Teachers was being announced early, so we were placed in a corridor awaiting our





entrance on-stage. Unfortunately, we could not see some of the program as a result. When Clay Aiken took the stage, we could only see him from behind as he sang “Bridge Over Troubled Water”. At the same time, it was really exciting being backstage and knowing we would be called on-stage soon! By the time they were introducing Middle School Teachers, we had worked our way to a place where we could see and hear the teacher bios on the large screen. Very

exciting!! When my video was playing, they called us to a backstage position. I went reluctantly because I wanted to see my school kids and the footage Disney had used for my one-minute video biography. I wasn’t nervous when they called us on stage; only excited. We just waved, shook hands, and accepted a trophy from two adorable children – a beautiful Mickey Mouse “Mousecar” (a play on words for “Oscar”). Then, we were ushered backstage where they took our trophy away. (We would later receive a personalized one in the mail). We were led to a small room, where our picture was taken with Mickey Mouse and the trophy. I went back to the ballroom to join the other teachers in the audience. I wasn’t there for long, though, because William L. Petersen of Crime Scene Investigations (CSI) announced the winner of the Middle School Teacher of the



**Mickey Mouse**



Year... Me! I jumped up to the stage. A few moments later Kristin joined me. I had not worked on an acceptance speech – now I wish I had! I thanked the other teachers and my administration, but I left the stage without thanking my wife Karen, acknowledging my son’s recent acceptance into medical school, my parents, or Mildred.! Hindsight is 20-



20! After winning, they again took the trophy away (a beautiful sculpture by Favilli) and brought me to a small room for more pictures, this time William L. Petersen was there as well! I went back to the audience and was congratulated by everyone at my table.

There was still the High School winner, announced by Courtney Peldon of Boston Public. The winner: Glenn Lid. Now, an overall “Teacher of the Year” would be announced by Clay Aiken. The winner: Jeffrey Thompson. The finale followed with all of the kids singing “Raise Your Hand!” It was fun and we were scheduled to join them on the stage in a final chorus. What a production! When the music stopped Jeff ran up on stage to congratulate me. Later, he would give me a picture of this as a present. A very proud moment!!



When the music stopped, I was quickly brought into a private room by Terry Wick. Out of the back room came Clay Aiken. He seemed taller and lankier than I expected, and his complexion was fair with a lot of freckles. I had brought a baseball for him to sign, but Karen was holding it for me. With no opportunity for an autograph, I had my picture taken with him and Mickey Mouse. He congratulated me



personally and cordially. Then, other winning teachers joined me, Clay and Mickey in pictures. He told us about his teachers and the impact that they had on his life. He also told us about his experiences as a special needs teacher himself, and his beliefs about the importance of education. Clay was brought into another room and I did not see him again for the rest of the evening. But the evening was far from over...



Awaiting us at the front lobby was another bus, this time headed for the Disneyland Resort, about 10 minutes away. When we arrived, another red carpet led to a beautifully decorated hall where a DJ was playing music from his apple laptop. There were large tables with buffet-style casseroles, hor d'oeuvres, and an open bar. On the far end, there were full roasts and turkeys being carved by a waiter. The music was exciting and

the crowd was psyched. People began to dance immediately and it was a blast. Karen and Mildred left around 11 PM, exhausted. Kristin and Jeff really had a good time with the dancing, and it continued until 1:00 AM. On the way out the door, I noticed that they had placed a "memory book", where you could write reflections. Kristin talked me into writing something – I was exhausted by then.



Evidently, that memory book had followed us on all of our adventures. Disney captured what people had wrote, and gave us a picture memory

book when we got home with those same comments scattered throughout. I'm so glad that Kristin and I wrote something, although I wish I had written more! We went home on the last bus, exhausted and excited about tomorrow's trip to Disneyland



The next morning, we slept until around 7:00, showered and ate a quick breakfast at the StoryBook Café. I was scheduled for a rehearsal ceremony at 9:00. There, we went through a complicated graduation-like line-up. While we did not know where we were going, we knew that this was going to take place at the beginning of the ceremony to insure that we were acknowledged in the correct order. Anyway, everyone was very excited and rather giddy at the rehearsal. Then, we were whisked off in a bus (another party bus!) to the back of Disneyland where we got on a train. This train was below ground level and we could see where all of the workers got on and off to go to their part of the Magic Kingdom. I was sitting with Claude and Chuck, and while we were very excited, there was a sense of sadness that this experience was coming to an end. We had become very close in our sharing of these experiences! It was a family atmosphere, everyone was very comfortable with each other, and you could feel the love. The train took us through several exhibits that looked like they were part of the train tour. Eventually, we arrived at the train station... Yes, the train station at the front of Disneyland! We were sneaked into the station and were brought to the platform approaching the Disneyland Main Street. There, we had to wait for about 15 minutes. While there, I had a chance to meet and exchange ideas with Danny Magrans, a DisneyHand honoree with whom I had only had casual conversations with from past experiences. He began to tell me about his commitment to his family and how he missed his kids. He was young, handsome religious man and his young children were not with him for the trip. As one of the oldest teachers, I tried to emphasize how much he should treasure the moments spent with his family, and he seemed to understand. Later, I would give him a Red Sox shirt to give to his “die-hard” Red Sox fan – his son. Anyway, it was a very emotional time – the excitement of waiting, the crowd gathering outside, the anticipation of more “Disney Magic”, the realization it was almost over. Teachers were hugging and congratulating each other.



continued blaring and the crowd gathered closer. After a brief speech by a Disney Representative, Mickey made his appearance and the crowd roared. Each teacher was personally congratulated, brought to the front of the ceremony with Mickey, and given a gold medallion to wear around their neck. It was great to see them acknowledge each teacher, who by now was a personal friend, and to cheer them on as they received their award. Kristin was so

Suddenly, at 10:30, the trumpets sounded, and we were ushered out to the front of the Main Gate Train Station, looking out on Town Square and Main Street. Thousands of people had gathered there, waiting for the daily parade. The families of the honorees had been given a front row position to view the ceremonies. As we entered, the fanfare



excited, she took a picture of each one as they received their award. They called my name around the middle of the pack, and I was so excited to be received by my fellow teachers and the crowd with such a positive response.



I shook Mickey's hand and returned to my position with the medallion around my neck. I could not have been prouder. This was a special moment in my life! To see my family – Karen, Mildred, Jeff, and Kristin in the front of the crowd taking pictures is a memory that I will always treasure! I did not have a camera because I had given it to Karen, but I did take a moment to visualize and remember. After each teacher received their award a cannon sounded, startling everyone and spraying confetti down on the whole

group. Looking at the confetti, we noticed that it consisted of white paper "Mickey Ears"- I reached down and grabbed some as a souvenir and stuffed it into my pocket as we were escorted to the parade. While walking to the parade bus, Terry Wick grabbed me and brought me over to Mickey's Car – a 1902 Roadster – along with Jeff Thompson (Elementary Teacher of the Year) Glenn Lid (high School Teacher of the Year), and Hector Ibarra (Public Service Award). We got into the car and I was seated next to Mickey!



We had our pictures taken...and we were off! The trip down Main Street was unreal. I mean truly unreal! I thought about the teachers back home and the great work that they do. I thought about others – my family in Florida, my brother Paul, John Friberg, Jimmy Vaille, Pete Bennett, Mike Fournier, Chris Cowles, my nieces and nephews...I wish they could experience this, or share the experience with me! Mickey Mouse was **right next** to

me! In *The Parade*! Going down Main Street! People were cheering wildly, applauding and waving. Of course, they were most excited to see Mickey Mouse! But we were all there, too—Glenn Lid, Jeff Thompson, and Hector Ibarra – another indescribable bonding Disney experience! Behind us, we could see all of the other Disney Teachers, having a ball, waving and congratulating each other. I turned to see my good friends, Chuck, Claude, and Cindy Aillaud in the open-aired bus behind us.

I remember thinking and hoping that someone was getting a picture of this. I couldn't believe the excited looks on peoples' faces as they watched the





parade go by. This was a highlight of their hard-earned, long-awaited vacation and their children were getting to see *Mickey*. Maybe they were telling them, too, about the importance of teachers and school. One large group of particularly excited people were Japanese. They must have come from Japan to see Disneyland. Some Japanese teenagers were jumping up and down and yelling to Mickey Mouse. I noticed Mickey tattoos on some of the teenagers along with many clothing souvenirs. I thought of my friend from Japan, Kobi. He is a teacher who visited me in Halifax and visited my classroom. He is hard working and an excellent role model. He deserved a parade and would love to take his family here.

The parade continued all the way down Main Street, with people pointing, cheering, and taking pictures. I wanted it to continue for an hour, but the car took a right into a “hidden” area where suddenly there were no people and we could see the backs of the buildings again.



We were let out and the whole group of Disney teachers, Terry Wick and Laura Giron gathered together for one last time. Most were in tears – our parade was over! We hugged and gathered to make a presentation to our fantastic hosts. Chuck Boucher had collected money and we all presented a card with “Disney Dollars” to Terry, Laura, and Liz.



By 11:30, the parade was over and we were led back into Disneyland. We had been given the afternoon with free time in the park with family. The families had been instructed where to meet us after the parade and I had no problem finding them. It was so exciting to have them there to share this experience with us! Minnie Mouse was there as we were gathering and she graciously agreed to take several pictures with the Disney families. We spent the rest of the day relaxing and enjoying Disneyland. Everyone was

really tired and we went back to the hotel exhausted. All of us fell asleep! We returned later that night for one more viewing of “Fantasmic!”

The next morning, Disney had scheduled one last “continental” breakfast for the Honorees and their guests. As usual, it was lavish with a buffet of delicious breakfast foods. It was sad to see that some teachers had already left and others had to hurry along. Kristin and I enjoyed the company and reminisced about our incredible adventures. We also had to hurry along because we had a flight to catch back to Boston. The trip in the van



headed for LAX airport was subdued. We were still exhausted. When we arrived at LAX, Jeff got a USA Today and was surprised to see an article about the Disney Awards ceremony with a mention about the three “teachers of the year”. I think that it was then that he realized how incredible this whole thing was! We called home to Karen’s brother, John, and he told us about an article in the Boston Globe about my award. Very Exciting!

When we arrived at Logan airport, our limo driver brought us safely back to Mildred’s house, where we had left our car. After saying goodbye to an exhausted Mildred, we went to the 7-Eleven at Queen Ann’s Corner, bought 5 Boston Globe newspapers, milk, and headed home. Awaiting us at the door was tomorrow morning’s breakfast (muffins, OJ and milk) provided by our wonderful neighbor Leslie Hickey, and lots of hugs and kisses from Kiwi, our Cocker Spaniel. It was a great reminder --- ***There’s no place like home!***

Many more exciting things have happened since that trip-the arrival of the Favilli statue in the mail, an invitation to appear on the Tony Danza Show in New York, articles in NSTA, MTA Today and The Nucleus, a trip to Fenway Park with John Passarini (last year’s winner) and a week-long workshop and vacation with the Disney teachers in DisneyWorld Florida. I also won a trip for two to St Lucia! Enough to write a journal...another day!

I can’t thank Disney enough for this opportunity and I have a newfound respect for their commitment to education. As part of the award, I have been asked to judge future honorees and I’m on the selection committee for the DisneyHand Awards in 2005. This means another trip to Florida in March and a final reunion of the 2004 Disney teachers in April in California. Also, I’ve been invited back to the Gala Awards ceremony in July for the 2005 winners. This will be a special treat, even though I will be on the outside, looking in at the new group of outstanding teachers. Most importantly, I have become a member of the Disney ‘Family’ of outstanding educators from all across the USA. These teachers are so talented, so positive, so enthusiastic, and so determined. It is a privilege to be counted among them.

Warren Phillips



If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember that this whole thing was started with a dream and a mouse.

All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.

Don't forget  
to smile