

Enrichment program challenges Renaissance students

Volunteers offer class variety of experiences

By Richard A. Kiley

Enter the eighth-grade classroom at St. Mary's School in Waterloo after classes on some Monday afternoon and you'll see fourth- through eighth-grade students eagerly discussing a variety of topics. No, they're not talking about the latest episode of "Perfect Strangers" or the newest addition to the "Garbage Pail Kids" series. What they are discussing is the makeup of a newspaper, the first such publication for the gifted and talented students who constitute the school's Renaissance Program.

During one recent class, Kevin Linehan and Rick Cantanise were busily working on one of a handful of Apple IIe computers donated to the school by Sam Williams of the Finger Lakes Times. The two sixth-graders were preparing a "Believe It or Don't" column for publication in their next issue.

"We thought of it (the idea) after watching the other girls do trivia," Linehan said. "It's just like 'Ripley's Believe It or Not,'" Cantanise added. "This is one of my favorites," Cantanise said, pointing on his list to the fun fact that hippos "sweat blood" when they are excited or afraid. "We use the encyclopedia to get the information," said Linehan, as if he were trying to convince a disbeliever.

Before the edition goes to press, the two boys will draw illustrations to accompany the unusual trivia items they have compiled. Other budding journalists are gathering the facts for similar columns — a listing of favorite foods and people, and a tabulation of "What is hot, and what is not."

Meanwhile, one terminal over from Cantanise and Linehan, seventh-grader Sarah Peters and sixth-grader Rachel Poormon were quickly assembling honor-roll and high-honor-roll lists on their screen. They were quick to point out their names in the high-honor column.

"Us too," Cantanise broke in.

Later, Peters and Poormon pored over a column that offers advice to fellow students. Entitled "Gabby and Tabby," their project is a takeoff on the columns of Dear Abby and Ann Landers.

"We made up our own problems and signed them 'Curious' or whatever," Peters said. "We both thought up the idea."

In response to one fictitious letter, "Gabby and Tabby" tell a struggling would-be athlete that he should "keep trying and eventually your coach will see your talent."

Other make-believe letters address problems that are quite real for adolescents — getting picked on in school or being wrongly accused of cheating on a test.

Producing the newspaper is just the latest example of the creative projects taken on by the students in St. Mary's Renaissance Program, which is run by Kathy Peters and Libby Brennesholtz.

According to Peters, a kindergarten teacher, the program was established in September, 1986, in response to a lack of challenging opportunities for the school's advanced students.

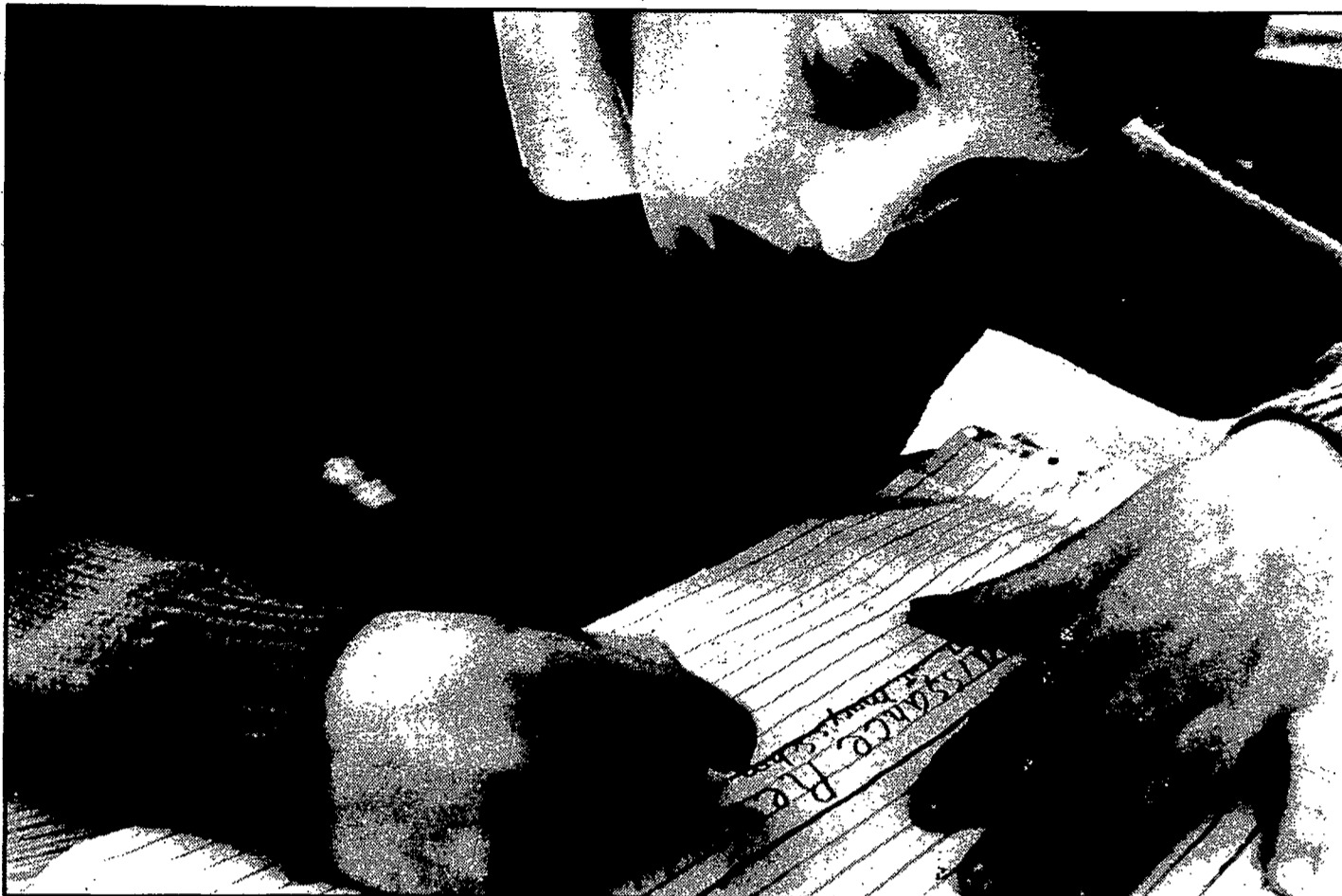
"We saw there was a lack of things available for both gifted and talented students here at St. Mary's," said Peters, who taught in the public school system for 14 years before coming to St. Mary's two years ago. "We were pushing the idea for months."

Peters and Brennesholtz discussed their proposal with Sister Catherine Judge, SSJ, principal of the school, and together the three women decided the program was a viable one.

Acting strictly as volunteers, Peters and Brennesholtz have been making up for lost time since the program's implementation. Through after-school meetings on Mondays and numerous field trips and presentations, the students have learned about subjects ranging from stock market bidding to playing the Suzuki violin.

"One of the goals of the program is to open up both their eyes and their interests," Peters said. "We want to expose them to things around them that kids and parents don't even know exist."

"We want to introduce them to many things," added Brennesholtz, who is an art teacher at the school. "We're showing them that there is more to life than



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Michael VanSickle works on hand-rendering the masthead of the 'Renaissance Review.' The newspaper is one of a number of student projects undertaken as part of the enrichment program at St. Mary's School, Waterloo.



Christine Smith, left, Kerry VanSickle, Rachael Brennesholtz and Francine Yancey work on ideas for a coloring contest to be featured by the school newspaper.



Joe DeMetro, right, collaborates on an article with Keith Schuster.

cartoons."

One of the recent highlights for the group, according to Peters and Brennesholtz, was a visit and tour of nearby Hobart College.

"I think they liked that the best," Peters said.

"Seeing (college) kids on their own is more immediate for them to identify with than archeology or the stock market," Brennesholtz agreed.

The two instructors have also used service projects to increase the students' awareness of the poor and homeless. Around Christmastime, the Renaissance students adopted a local family from the Red Cross and raised more than \$170 for footwear, clothing and other necessities.

The project also gave students an opportunity to cooperate with adults in the parish. "Parishioners helped us by giving money for toys and clothes," Peters said. "We wrapped them up and gave them to our family."

One of the more intriguing endeavors for Renaissance students in the sixth through eighth grades will be a railroad trip to the state legislature in Albany this spring.

"We're going to be introduced to the whole assembly," Peters noted.

A trip to the Smith Opera House is also planned. "You just have to look around and find things," she explained.

As a result of such trips, the students

"are seeing things that they probably wouldn't see on their own," Brennesholtz remarked.

It's clear that the students have much to gain from these experiences, but the two coordinators also find rewarding the time they donate to run the program.

"Sometimes their (students') eyes look kind of glazed, and they look bored when they're sitting there, but then they go home and tell their parents and friends all about what they learned," Brennesholtz explained.

Yet Peters admitted that being so closely involved with the program does have its drawbacks too.

"I have a lot of kids come up and ask me 'Why aren't I in the Renaissance Program?'" she explained. "That's when I'm thankful we do selecting in such an objective way. I can tell them exactly why they weren't selected (to be in) the program."

To qualify, students needed the recommendations of teachers or scores of at least 90 percent on standardized math or reading tests. A committee of teachers then scored the children on academic performance, creativity and leadership, as well as motivational and learning characteristics. When the scores were totaled, the committee settled on 22 students.

"The nice thing about it (the selection process) is that it seemed to balance out the students who were gifted and the ones

who were talented," Peters commented.

Although their many projects together might set the Renaissance students apart from other students in their grade levels, Peters and Brennesholtz have carefully managed to avoid distinctions that might alienate the Renaissance students from the rest of the school.

"We do include the whole school in some of the things we do," Peters said, citing a Christmas-caroling excursion last year as an example. "We met at the Episcopal school, had cookies and cocoa, and everybody had a great time."

Depending on the activity in progress, Renaissance program students meet after school on Mondays for one and a half to two hours. Sometimes students meet with Peters before classes begin in the morning. To offset costs, program participants are asked to pay \$1 a month in dues.

Long-term plans for the program are still up in the air. Peters said, however, that the efforts of students and their parents will keep the Renaissance program thriving.

"It's great to see the dedication among the students and the parents," Peters said. "There's a lot to be said about volunteerism; there is so much people can do. It gives you a wonderful edge. Once you go from public school to Catholic school, you see they're (Catholic school teachers) doing just as good a job ... with about a quarter of the money."