

Chapter 15
Thomas A. Stokoe, Drama and Speech Teacher
at Mountain Ridge Jr. High School 2001 - 2010



“CASH ON DELIVERY,” a British comedy by Ray Cooney. Cast L-R: Top – Ryan Roper, Michael Hoggard, Jeffrey J. Davis; Director, Mr. Tom Stokoe. Middle Row - Julie Green, Chelsea Thomas, Aurie Wiseman. Bottom Row - Sam Smalley, Tyler Otteson. (missing Chase Kaylor, Katie Casper).

HIRING: I was interviewed by a committee of three: Vice Principal, Donna Hill; Vocal Music teacher, Cathy Jolley ; Orchestra director, Kathy Wilson. My final interview was with Principal, Terry Hill. I was hired and became the Drama teacher at Mountain Ridge Jr. High School, Alpine School District commencing August, 2001. Thus began a very enjoyable nine-year period of teaching.

STUDENTS: Having taught in high school for 31 years the first thing I noticed was how tiny the kids were in junior high school. They were all over the place, small kids. They were well dressed, smiley and bubbly, enthusiastic and friendly. Every day I would walk through the halls and students would say “Hello,” even if I didn’t have them in the classroom. Some kids would

say “Hello, Mr. Stokoe” and I knew I did not have them in my classes yet they knew my name. This was a very friendly school of good students.



FACULTY: The majority of the faculty were young, most seemingly in their twenties and thirties, then forties and fifties. The principal believed in having a variety of teachers on the faculty – some young and some old. I was blessed to be hired as an “oldie.” I quickly found out that this was a very friendly and happy faculty, pro BYU, committed, dedicated and fun. What surprised me was how “candy” oriented was the school. The kids loved candy, ate candy constantly and it was placed regularly in our faculty boxes along with thank you notes. What a joy it was to be on this faculty, in this school among good kids.

SCHOOL ORGANIZATION: The school was very well organized, student oriented, and smoothly run – a tribute to the administration, teachers, counselors, and the Alpine School District. Certainly the caliber of students was a tribute to responsible and caring parents. Highland was a neat community and Alpine a neat area to live in and raise families.

SCHOOL LUNCHES: The next intriguing thing that caught my attention was the wonderful school lunches. Having just worked for Salt Lake Community College for one year assisting their

program at Draper prison and eating prison lunch daily, school lunch was simply amazing. Wow! I couldn't get over how good the school lunches were. Every day, fabulous lunches were served.

(Now, April 2014, writing this history and having just returned from an LDS mission in South Africa and witnessed first-hand what school students in public schools eat for school lunch there, the students in the U.S. are so fortunate, lucky and blessed beyond measure to have the nutritious and healthy lunches they have and the amount on their plates)

DRAMA ROOM: When I was shown the drama room I couldn't help but beam from ear to ear. What a nice large, spacious room with windows! My room never had windows at Skyline. What a joy to have a big drama room, with ample bulletin boards, an extensive white board to write on with markers, an entire wall of shelves topped with a counter, a large cupboard, a table, desk, and three tall metal chest of drawers, a clock and mounted television set on the wall and a small U.S. flag. What an ideal environment for teaching. All the school classrooms were this way. The choir room was extra-large; so was the band room and orchestra room. This was one classy school.

Each Monday morning, 1st period, we would stand as the national anthem was played, then recite the Pledge of Allegiance. News of the day followed plus schedule of events for the week and anything special beyond.

DRAMA DEPARTMENT: At Skyline I had the benefit of immense backstage storage space and a wind up metal door where trucks could pull up and unload directly onto the stage. At Skyline I had the challenges of a 3,000 seat auditorium with its leaking roof and poor acoustics and the need to build large sets to fill a large stage. However, at Mountain Ridge it was refreshing to have a small auditorium with a little over 600 seats and with excellent acoustics. The drawback was lack of direct access from stage to outside the school. Anything brought in had to come through a small door and down hallways to the auditorium.

One of the first things I had to do was ascertain needs of the Drama Department, what existed, what was lacking and how improvements could be made. There were certain deficiencies that needed attention: lack of stage lights, crooked curtains hanging on PVC pipe (never saw a stage before that had some curtains hanging on PVC pipe; quite the novelty. Mickey Mouse was my first impression); electric floor pockets on stage improperly placed by the construction company that built the auditorium. Instead of embedding them off stage into the stage floor behind the legs (vertical masking curtains) they placed them beyond the legs 1/3rd into the actual stage performance area. Thus if the floor pockets were to be used, the electric cords protruding from the outlets would knock out 40% of the entire stage performance space. Hence, only 60% of the stage would be available for performance.

A construction company that designed and built a stage furnished with PVC pipe to hang curtains, and erroneously placed electric floor pockets that could knock out 40% of the acting space, incredulously lacked knowledge of theatre and a stage.

Minimal wing space necessitated reorganization of platforms and scenic elements stored on stage. There was a small backstage shop. It lacked tools, saws, electric cords, benches, stools, and certain basic units of scenery. Above the shop was a costume room – no shelves, no cupboards just heaps of costumes strewn on the floor and scattered boxes and black garbage bags containing costumes. A couple of racks existed.

On stage there was no true hanging cyclorama with a row of bottom cyclorama lights on the stage floor, just a large stretch of muslin hanging on PVC pipe. Only three downstage microphone inputs existed, a few microphone cords and microphones some non-functional. There was a prop room upstairs above the auditorium. Overall, I perceived what was needed to improve and upgrade .

DRAMA CLASSROOM: The Drama classroom lacked an ample supply of theatrical material for students: humorous and dramatic scenes both contemporary and classical for combinations of actors and actresses, humorous and dramatic monoacts, and humorous and dramatic plays. Also lacking were theatrical posters, pictures, programs, photos, paraphernalia suitable for bulletin boards and walls, and ample resource materials. All this would change once I got going.

IMPROVEMENTS: As I commenced my nine-year Mountain Ridge career, with the availability of Theater Department funds and Administrative support, I was able to upgrade all theatrical areas: classroom material, stage lighting, costume room, backstage shop, prop room, scenery, props, furniture, classroom appearance, tools, supplies and anything needing upgrading. An excellent new sound board and computerized light board was purchased which upgraded immensely the theatrical technical capability in the auditorium. With the purchase of 8 new additional wireless microphones we now had 16 total for the school musical.

Alpine school district provided several dozen brand new light instruments for the stage and beams for front lighting, a cyclorama and row of bottom lights (upper existed). Also, the district built light racks on the left and right walls of the auditorium for additional lighting. The stagecrew and I built shelves in the costume room and filled them with boxes of costumes, labeled and organized. The stagecrew built benches, stools and collapsible small tables beneficial for productions plus standard walls, some with windows, that could be re-used and re-painted for shows. The University of Utah Theater Department gave me a beautiful set of columns and brick walls that I used yearly in my Shakespeare productions and parts in our musicals. More columns I obtained at an auction. (See below in the “Joseph” photo).



Set for my last musical - "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat". Set unfinished. The 4 brown stairs would be gold with a bottom masking board in gold at base of brick work.

INCREDIBLE BARGAINS: It's amazing what you can do with connections, knowing people in key places, and where to obtain great bargains. Thirty one years as Drama teacher at Skyline gave me connections throughout the state of Utah and various organizations around the country. I purchased 8 metal costume racks at \$7 each (gave 2 to Pleasant Grove High School Drama Department). At an auction I got 40 bolts of muslin of varying sizes for \$35 total, an absolute incredible bargain. I would have bid over \$300 to get them. Other than a couple of women no one at the auction was interested in them. I shared them with other Junior High Schools in the district.

At other auctions I got seventy-five band uniforms for \$225, and 200 military uniforms for \$275 plus shipping, plus 50 dresses, 30 period costumes, and men's coats at bargain prices, and 40 gallons of paint at \$5 per gallon another terrific bargain. When you have connections and know where to look, a drama teacher can save the school a few thousand dollars. I found the school Administration and Alpine School District to be most supportive. Anything I needed for

the Theater Department that would upgrade, improve and promote the theatrical well-being of students and the school, I was granted.

HELP: When I arrived at Mountain Ridge, the Fine Arts Department had an excellent reputation. As Drama teacher, I would be a cog in the wheel to keep it going. It was a joy to work with fellow teachers in the Fine Arts Department and teachers from other departments who were so helpful. Beth Chynoweth in the English Department became our costumer. She was fabulous, absolutely wonderful. Jeff Hinton of the CTE/Business Department recorded all the sound effects, music bridges and anything sound wise I needed. Jeff was great to work with, so professional with a great feel for music and variety of sound effects. Ryan Anderson of the CTE/Technology Department contributed to show recording. The Art Department teachers helped paint segments of sets – Randy Marsh and Steve Stradley.

Most helpful was M'Liss Tolman, who ran rehearsals when I attended meetings. She was a neat lady who helped all the teachers in the Fine Arts Department. She was indeed a blessing to all of us. Holly Broadhead in the Copy Room was another one who was a great help. Not only was she helpful to teachers in the Fine Arts Department but to all teachers throughout the school. She was indeed, another wonderful lady. Marla Campbell, Head of the Cafeteria, always provided me with boxes whenever I needed them. She was so accommodating, and Susan in the cafeteria when we had our traditional Musical Gala celebration after the Friday night performance of the musical. Also secretaries Judy Clayton, Donna Harris and Shelly May.

Of tremendous help was Gary Walker who gave me unlimited access to his Industrial Arts shop with all its saws, tools and equipment. The shop was conveniently close just 25 yards from backstage and the stagecrew and I could go down and cut lumber practically any time of day and after school. This more than compensated for the lack of saws in the backstage drama shop. Gary was a great person to work with and so accommodating. Likewise was Ryan Anderson who would later be a teacher in the shop. Having access to the Industrial Arts shop made a big difference in cutting lumber, accuracy, convenience, and scenery construction.

Other teachers supportive behind the scenes were Heather Ostler of the Home Economics Department who would sew torn stage curtains, muslin for scenic flats, and repair costumes. She was wonderful. Also the multi-talented Boyd Luke, Head custodian, and custodians Kameron Kiggins and Justin Parkes the night custodian, plus teachers and staff who would man the box office for performances. As for setting up my computer for classes each quarter, Sharon Christiansen of the Math Department was fantastic. As a teacher of the 1960's typewriter age and the handle turning duplicating machine, computer technology was my nemesis and Sharon my rescuer. Also, the counselors were most accommodating allowing me to select my own stagecrew. I really appreciated the support within the school. It was outstanding.

The Dance teachers choreographed our musicals until the Dance Department was eliminated at Mountain Ridge which was a disappointment. I had to go outside the school to get choreographers. It was reinstated the year after I retired. The local newspaper was most supportive. A newspaper writer and photographer would come to rehearsal and interview cast members and myself and take a photo of the cast for the newspaper. This was good publicity.

HIGHLAND CITY COUNCIL: Observing book boards advertising school plays by American Fork High School strategically placed on street corners in American Fork, I opted for the same on Highland city corners. What a wonderful advertising idea. However, they were confiscated by Highland city. That happened for three of my plays. Checking with Highland city I was informed such was against city regulations. So ended my placing such on street corners.

MOUNTAIN RIDGE THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS: I enjoyed directing 27 major theatrical productions at Mountain Ridge, 3 per year and enjoyed the students, faculty and staff. It was a neat experience working at Mountain Ridge and a nice place to conclude my teaching career. Our shows included:

2001-02 – A Midsummer Night’s Dream, See How They Run, Brigadoon.

2002-03 – The Taming of the Shrew, Don’t Drink the Water, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

2003-04 – The Merchant of Venice, You Can’t Take It With You, Oliver.



Cameron Leavitt as Joseph in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat."

Also double cast as Joseph in this 2010 production was Blaze Call.

2004-05 – As You Like It, The Crucible, Grease.

2005-06 – Much Ado About Nothing, The Foreigner, South Pacific.

2006-07 – The Comedy of Errors, Cash On Delivery, Beauty and the Beast.

2007-08 – The Merry Wives of Windsor; Tom, Dick and Harry, Seussical.

2008-09 – Romeo and Juliet, It Run's In The Family, Guys & Dolls.

2009-10 – One For The Pot, Don't Drink the Water, Joseph & The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. I held auditions for "Hamlet" but didn't have enough males try out so I did "One for the Pot" instead. Lead, Jared Monson, portraying 4 different roles was outstanding.

NEW PROGRAM: I was approached by new principal, Paula Fugal, if I would teach 7th grade Speech and Drama, that I would have 3 classes per quarter, 12 for the year and the entire 7th grade would rotate through my program. The remaining 3 quarters they would experience Spanish, French and German per quarter. If I would consent then this combined 7th grade curriculum would be possible. To that point I had taught only 8th and 9th graders in my Drama program. I was state certified in Speech, Drama and History. I consented.

So I structured my 7th grade curriculum: 5 weeks of Speech and 5 weeks of Drama per class. It would be the same for all twelve 7th grade classes. I enjoyed the 7th graders immensely. They were so talented, intelligent and creative. These 12 year old students were a living testament of a scripture that states "Special spirits have been reserved for these last days..." My remaining 3 classes per quarter were for 8th & 9th graders - 2 Drama and a Speech.

SPEECHES THE 7TH GRADE GAVE: (1) **How To Remember My Name.**

(2) **Eulogy Speech** – where each was to imagine he/she was dead and was speaking at his/her own funeral. Hence, they had to compose their entire lifetime and determine their goals and achievements. They also had to write their own obituary.

(3) **Graduation Speech** – each student was to be the Valedictorian of his/her high school graduating class. Hence, create a graduation theme and accomplishments of the entire school. They also had to write a graduation poem according to a specific rhyming scheme.

(4) **Commemoration Speech** – Example: opening of a new bridge, freeway, stadium, park, unveiling of a statue etc. The students gave excellent speeches.

(5) **30 second Impromptu Speeches on a topic I gave them.** They had to speak non-stop on the topic. They enjoyed this speech. It was a good exercise on quick thinking and sustaining speech.

(6) **The How To Speech** – how to make something, or do something, or explain how something works.

The students gave outstanding "How To" speeches. The allotted time was 3-5 minutes but everyone went over; they were so enthusiastic about their topics. I was proud of these students. These 12 year olds were some of the neatest students I ever taught. Here are a few examples of their outstanding presentations per category:

Musical instruments (A) How to play the trumpet, drums, guitar, violin, piccolo, flute, trombone, viola, clarinet. Students brought their instrument to class, gave the history of the instrument, and described its physical features and functions, then played the instrument. A dad would bring a full set of drums in his vehicle. I would send 5 or 6 boys outside to help bring them in.

Explain a sport (B) Tennis, baseball, basketball, football, lacrosse, golf, ski, snowboarding, skateboarding, soccer, water skiing, karate, wrestling, gymnastics. They explained the historical beginning of the sport, rules of the game, and how it was played. Students brought their props to school, even uniforms. Their presentations were outstanding.

(C) The history of an animal and how to care for it. The parents brought the animal to school so their son or daughter could give their speech then took it home when the speech was over: (1) groom, bridle, saddle and ride a horse (2) raise, tend, and groom a llama (3) How to teach a dog tricks (2) snakes (3) rats (4) chinchillas (5) pigeons (6) lizards (7) cat (8) parrots (9) canaries (10) rabbit (11) gerbils (12) hamsters. These were fun speeches for the students.

(D) Machines & Mechanical devices. How they work. Father's brought these: (1) racing car (2) motor cycles (3) semi-tractor trailer pulling a load (4) Building and firing a rocket. The class went outside to view them and hear the speech. Inside the classroom: (5) bicycle (6) unicycle (7) cell phone (8) computer.

(E) Food: How to (a) bake a cake (2) cook spaghetti (3) make pancakes: (4) prepare a toss green salad (5) smoothie (6) orange-Julius (7) home-made ice cream (8) cookies (9) hamburger (10) fudge and a lot more food items. Students and mothers would arrive with the ingredients, bowls, silverware, electric pots and pans, paper plates, cups and napkins. Also, they always brought the finished product so the class could taste and eat. The students were wonderful and the parents most supportive.

(F) Dance: (1) ballet (2) modern (3) tap (4) Irish (6) Scottish (7) Hawaiian hula (8) clogging (9) gymnastics. I was amazed at how talented and knowledgeable these 7th graders were. They were neat kids, truly outstanding.

(G) Professions: (1)cutting hair (2) makeup (3) manicure and pedicure (4) nursing (5) calligraphy (6) origami (7) life-saving: CPR, wounds, bones, punctures (8) coaching (9) housing construction.

7TH GRADE HIGHLIGHTS THAT STAND OUT IN MY MIND: There were so many good things that the 7th graders did for this “How To Speech” assignment that could fill pages. Some that stand out in my mind are: # A girl who demonstrated 12 different kinds of dances. # A girl gymnast who did forward and backward hand springs back and forth across the room. # A karate girl smashing boards # A girl who cut her 4 year old brother’s hair. The mother watched from the back of the room smiling. # A boy talking about computers explaining access, excel, spreadsheets, power point, word perfect and other programs demonstrating on his computer screen. He was like a college professor with a PhD yet he was only 12 years old.

A boy who spoke on Lacrosse for 45 minutes. He was amazing like a college coach. # A boy who spoke on baseball for 20 minutes, also like a college coach. # The boy whose family owned a huge, new semi-tractor trailer pulling a revolving machine that parked in front of the school. The boy explained the functions of the truck and its knobs and gadgets in the cab. # The girl who was demonstrating how to make home-made ice cream when her mother arrived with a toddler under one arm, and a barrel of ice cream under the other. There is so much more. Needless to say, the students were brilliant.

The Drama section of the curriculum was also fun for the students. They got to be creative, work as a collaborative group, and perform their original work as an ensemble of players. As in all venues there were those who were leaders, extraverts and creative, others followers, and a few reticent and inhibited. Regardless, they all experienced theatrical activities through creativity and performance, getting along and working together.

7th GRADE QUESTIONNAIRE

The entire 7th grade rotated through my Speech/Drama classes each year (three classes per quarter, twelve classes per year with a class average of approximately thirty two students). Impressed with their abilities as observed through their speeches, I decided to conduct a poll in six classes:

QUESTION: How many of you are taking lessons on how to play a musical instrument?

RESULT: 65% of students polled said yes.

INSTRUMENTS: Included wind, string, percussion – saxophone, trumpet, trombone, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horn, tuba, piccolo, violin, viola, cello, guitar, bass guitar, banjo, piano, drums.

QUESTION: How many of you have played or are participating in a particular sport in which you received coaching, instruction and training either as an individual or team member?

RESULT: 90% of students polled said yes.

SPORT: Soccer, football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, lacrosse, tennis, golf, dance, cheer leading, martial arts, gymnastics, hockey, swimming, wrestling, and skiing.

QUESTION FOR BOYS: How many of you boys can make, cook, boil, fry or bake at least three different kinds of dishes or meals to eat?

RESULT: An average of 13 boys per class indicated they could.

DISHES/MEALS THEY LISTED: Included boiled eggs, fried eggs, scrambled eggs, porridge, French toast, pancakes, crepes, boiled potatoes, baked potatoes, French fries, hamburgers, hot dogs, steak, roast beef, meatballs, spaghetti, stew, soup, macaroni and cheese, a variety of sandwiches, tossed green salad, jello, pudding, cake, cookies, orange Julius, and smoothies.

CONCLUSION: The parents of students in the Highland/Alpine area are generally in an income bracket financially capable of supporting their children's talent development. This, coupled with parental desire for such, has led to their children's enrollment in music/sports lessons and training and their participation in music and sports programs. Hence, the high involvement of students in music and sports as indicated by the poll results. Also, Mountain Ridge Jr. High School had an orchestra teacher and a band teacher providing classes for 7th, 8th and 9th graders.

CURRICULUM CHANGE: When principal Paula Fugal came to my classroom and said that things were going to change for the next year, that I would be teaching life skills and keyboarding to the 7th graders, I knew it was time to hang it up. It is interesting how lack of state certification by someone in a team program can impact another's curriculum in the team program. Mine was impacted. I had been an educator for 42 years and losing my curriculum as it was currently structured for 12 classes of 7th grade Speech and Drama, would result in my decision to exit the teaching ranks. "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" would be my grand finale and the closing curtain the symbolic ending to my teaching career.

And so it was on a day in June 2010 on the mountain top of Machu Pichu in Peru, I reaffirmed in my mind I would permanently retire and upon return to Utah, I submitted my letter of retirement to new principal, Mark Whittaker.

I will always cherish my days at Mountain Ridge even though the stagecrew and I were prohibited the use of a tall ladder, the only drama teacher and stagecrew in the state of Utah so prohibited. This provided a challenge to hanging lights, aiming, changing bulbs and gels, building upper levels of scenery, painting, hanging scenic units, lighting stage performances, plus the striking of sets. The fear of someone falling prompted Mrs. Fugal's prohibiting action and hiding of the ladder. Regardless, she was a nice lady and a good principal.

I will always have fond memories of Mountain Ridge Junior High School, the students, classroom, faculty and staff, my talented fellow colleagues of the Fine Arts Department that were a joy to work with, (Kathy Bird, Vicki McMurray, Richard Bateman and predecessors), the supporting help, and the 27 theatrical productions and their casts.



We presented "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat" - April 27, 28, 29,30 and May 1, 2010 with a matinee for elementary school students on the 27th. First dress rehearsal photo.

We had 86 in the cast for "Joseph." It was an outstanding show with the leads double cast alternating for six performances. Likewise, the alternating of some orchestra musicians nightly to give more an opportunity. Principal Paula Fugal favored the production and was interested in seeing it presented. It had been seven years since last we did the show and I thought it was time to repeat it again. It was a show that students enjoyed as cast members, and one that audiences both young and old enjoyed. Choreographer, Whitney DeGroot, was superb, absolutely marvelous; likewise outstanding were Vicki McMurray, vocal music; Kathy Bird and Richard Bateman, orchestra; Beth Chynoweth, costumer; and supporting production team members. The show was fantastic, the talented cast absolutely wonderful and the show would be one remembered for years to come.

The biblical story of Jacob and his twelve sons, Joseph being sold and taken to Egypt, sold into the house of Potiphar, eluding Potiphar's seductive wife, falsely accused and imprisoned, interpreting dreams, being elevated to second in command of all Egypt by Pharaoh, the seven

years of plenty and seven of famine, and the eventual migration of the household of Jacob to Egypt, has been an excellent basis for the plot of “Joseph” engendering its world-wide popularity. Four hundred years later Moses would liberate the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery.

