

Learning Firsthand

BY JOANNE PILGRIM

A group of Hampton Day School students has learned firsthand about the Vietnam War and the turmoil, changing values, and culture of the 1960s and '70s by taking on reporters' roles and creating their own tabloid and video newsmagazine show.

Students in the upper-school class taught by Stephen Bennhoff and Mark Tompkins have spent the year studying the 20th century. When it came time to look at the '60s and '70s, the two teachers sought to design a different and dynamic curriculum in which students would be actively involved.

The students chose from among 80 topics in several broad categories of events: civil rights, women's rights, pop culture, pop music, and the cold war.

"It's Around Us"

With the goal of writing a news article about their topic, students embarked upon research, and were asked to find people in the community with personal knowledge to interview.

"That's one of the great things about studying the history of the 20th century," Mr. Bennhoff said. "It's alive, it's around us. That's one of the things we wanted to impress upon the students."

The cub reporters learned journalistic techniques during four two-and-a-half-hour sessions with Natalie Byfield and Clarence Sheppard, parents of a Hampton Day student who run the Black Media Foundation. The foundation sponsors workshops in which students write, design, and produce their own newspapers.

Life Experiences

A "press conference" with some of the interviewees — to provide students with the kind of "culminating experience a reporter would have," according to Mr. Bennhoff — was held on May 3. Ms. Byfield and two other panelists shared their 1960s and '70s life experiences and answered students' questions.

An African-American born in the

baby boomer years, she talked about the legacy of the civil rights movement and her work with Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition.

Marilyn Salenger, an upper-school parent, discussed her job as the only female TV news broadcaster on an all-male anchor team during the late '60s and early '70s, when women were hired to fill a quota system and the glass ceiling was firmly in place.

Newswoman Was There

A newswoman in Cincinnati, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Boston, she gave firsthand accounts of covering the riots that ensued after public school integration in Boston and events on the national beat.

Larry Green, also the parent of an upper schooler and the chair of the Hampton Day School board, got involved in the antiwar and civil rights movements when he was in high school. His comments, said Mr. Bennhoff, helped the students learn about the "sense of being hopeful that you could actually change something by marching and protesting."

A third upper-school parent visited the class separately. Dave Robertson enlisted in the Navy in 1966 and did a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam. A medical corpsman assigned to a Marine Corps unit, he weathered the front lines, including the attack by the North Vietnamese on Khe Sanh, was wounded, and received a Purple Heart.

"Poignant Reflections"

Mr. Robertson shared "very poignant, very frank reflections about the decision to go to war," Mr. Bennhoff said. He also discussed the complexities involved when he joined the antiwar movement after he returned and went to college in 1968.

Students pressed all the visitors with questions about '60s and '70s pop culture, and asked them to draw parallels between culture and events then and now.

"To have seventh and eighth graders ask their elders engaging, insightful questions for a good two hours was just amazing," Mr. Bennhoff said. The event was videotaped, and students will use clips to create a "60 Minutes"-like news show. Afterward, all repaired to the "green room" for refreshments.

The Best Part

The best part about the project, Mr. Bennhoff said, was the conversations. "To have these students hear these stories, to have them know that these stories carry great historical weight. . . . To have the parents looking at each other, realizing, wow, we did make a difference. . . ."

"It's just been fantastic to have the students learn a little bit more about their parents' generation. They gain a little bit more insight and they gain a little bit more respect."

The video and tabloid-style newspaper are expected to be shown at a Grandparents Day event at the school later this month, to which parents will also be invited.

When To Vote

g in Tuesday's school district elec-

in the school gym
at the school

East Hampton High School
at the school

m. Pierson High School gym
at the school

Wainscott Chapel