

REFRESHER COURSE BY JANET KLUG

Classroom presentations: share the hobby while having fun

One of my favorite stamp things to do is speaking to school groups. What I say depends upon the ages of the youngsters to whom I am speaking.

Children in junior high can grasp very abstract ideas, while primary school children require more concentration on basic subjects. I always learn far more than the children do when I give a classroom talk. Kids today are very bright about things that did not even exist when I was their age.

When I speak to first- and second-grade students, my initial warm up is to ask how many have ever paid a visit to a post office. It stuns me when very few hands shoot up in the air. Many 7-year-olds have never been to the post office and have never received a letter in the mail.

They send e-mail messages to their grandparents far away, or speak to them through their computer using Skype. It is becoming a challenge to talk about stamps to young people who might have never seen them.

And that is reason enough to give a presentation about the importance of postal communication, stamps and collecting.

There are some tricks to doing a one-time classroom visit, which is what I do the most. Keep the presentation short, keep the children engaged by asking questions for them to answer, and hand out packets of stamps to everyone, including the shy child in the back who doesn't volunteer any answers. Stamps are for everyone and for every interest.

For the youngest children, I show them the newest stamp that the United States Postal Service has issued. If it is a popular topical, that is even better. I tell them that if they like the stamp, they can go

to the post office and buy one — or order it online, which they are actually far more likely to do.

Then I ask them how much they think it would cost to buy that stamp at the post office. That is a fun question, because children like to talk about money, how much things are worth and how much things cost. The responses will likely be all over the place, from a few cents to several dollars. The "Forever" inscription on most recent U.S. stamps means the answer to this question is no longer a dead giveaway.

If the responses have a lot of energy and excitement going on, we turn it into a game of high-low, with the winner receiving the stamp I just showed. One student will say a dollar, and I respond with, "Too high." Another will say 3¢, and I reply, "Too low." Sooner or later, one of them will land on the proper answer, or I might give a clue to help move things along.

Young children also like shapes and colors. Asking a group of first-graders what shape a stamp is gets a variety of responses. "Square!" is gener-



Figure 1. A Tongan 1-seniti Banana stamp (Scott 297).

ally the first response. I was dumbfounded when a first-grader responded, "Rectangle!" I'm pretty sure I did not know what a rectangle was when I was in the first grade.

After they see a square stamp and a rectangular stamp, I ask them if stamps are round. The response is generally, "No." Then they are shown a round stamp, followed by a heart-shaped stamp, a triangle and a parallelogram, which

is probably a new word for most of them.

Enticing their imagination further, I show familiar, identifiable stamps that are shaped like the subject shown on the stamp, such as Tonga's always popular Banana stamps, and stamps shaped like butterflies or whales. Tonga's 1-seniti Banana stamp (Scott 297) is shown in Figure 1.

Colors are another good way to keep the youthful audience interested. Ask the group to name their favorite color and you will hear a cacophony of colorful responses. If you are well prepared, you can bring along packets of stamps separated by color.

Ask, "Who said red?" Those with the hands in the air get a red stamp. Continue on through the color wheel. Hopefully there won't be a child who says persimmon or puce, leaving you scratching your head and wondering what color that is.

The conclusion of the color discussion could end with you showing a British Penny Black stamp (Scott 1) and telling about the very first stamp issued in 1840. Depending on the ages of the children, you can ask how old that stamp was if it was born in 1840. Older children will do the math quickly, and then be impressed that a stamp that is 171 years old is still around.

If your audience is middle school age or older, you can move on to tell how the first stamp may have been born 171 years ago, but letters were being mailed long before there were stamps. If possible, bring an inexpensive stampless cover from the 1830s or earlier that you can pass around for each child to touch and hold. The children will be impressed. Some of them will want to know how much it is worth. Kids like talk-



Figure 2. The United States \$3 Mars Pathfinder souvenir sheet (Scott 3178) can help illustrate a discussion about space exploration.

ing about value, so don't shy away from saying that some stamps and covers can be very expensive, but most are not. This is why stamp collecting is a good hobby for everyone.

Find out ahead of time what the children are studying in class. With that knowledge, you can bring some stamps along that will make that lesson come to life for them.

Let them do the talking. You can begin by saying, "Your teacher says you have been learning about the solar system. I don't know anything about the solar system. What can you tell me?"

Call on children individually. If possible, try to get everyone to talk. When a child mentions the sun, show a stamp with the sun. If a child mentions Mars, show the U.S. \$3 Mars Pathfinder souvenir sheet (Scott 3178), shown here in Figure 2.

Time your presentation to be not more than 20 minutes. This allows time for questions. If the teacher will permit it and you have the necessary supplies, another 20 minutes can be spent allowing the children to select 10 or 15 stamps from a packet you brought and to put them on a page you have prepared for this exercise. Bring some hinges so that you can teach them to be good stewards of their new hobby.

When working with young children, be patient.

Some youngsters are more articulate than others — just like adults. And never talk down to kids. They are smart and will know when you are insincere.

Watch your vocabulary. Don't try to use current jargon that you don't understand and don't use technical stamp collecting terms unless you want to spend a lot of time explaining what they mean. Those explanations can get pretty boring.

Keep things moving. Do not spend a lot of time on any one subject. Remember, most children have a shorter attention span than adults. You are better off doing four 5-minute presentations in 20 minutes than one 20-minute presentation about selecting an album and proper hinging technique.

If you have a young child or grandchild in your life, ask if you can do a presentation at their school. You will be surprised at how this different perspective will make you appreciate your hobby even more.

For educators wishing to use stamps in their classrooms, lesson plans are available online from the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum at www.postalmuseum.si.edu/educators/4b_curriculum.html.

They are also available online from the American Philatelic Society at www.stamps.org/Stamps-Teach

www.linns.com