

'Applied Humanities'



It's not that eighth grade Humanities teacher Brian Hart sets out to ruin films for his students. It just happens. And when it does, don't expect any apologies.

After a unit about Africa, students in Hart's class are required to review American films with African settings and characters and search for unfair, inaccurate portrayals of the continent and its people. What they find is often unsettling.

Like how white people are often seen as saviors of black people.

"We're trying to get kids not be passive accepters of information," Hart said of his Humanities class and the eighth grade curriculum. "We're trying to get them to be engaged thinkers that always approach information with a critical eye."

So, if a student can't watch a movie or read an article without observing inherent biases, so be it. They will have learned Hart's lesson number one: issues are usually colored with gray.

Lesson Two? The world is just as complicated.

The latter of the two lessons is primarily what drives much of what students learn throughout the year. The eighth grade year at Hawken is already one that has students seeking answers to an "essential question" that challenges them to identify their responsibility to the global community. For the global context to address the question, the students deal with cultural identity, the African AIDS epidemic, colonization and the Middle Eastern conflict.

Such an international perspective is crucial to the student's future ability to succeed in the shrinking world, Hart, husband of 1983 Hawken graduate Jane Esselstyn, said.

"The students that we're teaching now are really the inheritors of the globalized world. It would be irresponsible for the School not to begin as early as possible to prepare kids for that..."

But for all the classroom instruction, those who drive the eighth grade experience take it even further.

"What we've moved toward is this idea that it's not just about learning," he said. "It's about action and it's about as much first-hand experience that we can give them."

In the spring, the students go on a weeklong urban expedition to New York, where they are immersed in what Hart, who has been at Hawken since 1999, called a true "international city," and sleep in hostels, team with the New York Outward Bound center for a day, serve the community for a day and get a United Nations briefing. Back home toward the end of the year, the students engage in three-day service internships with local organizations like Habitat for Humanity and the Soil and Water Conservation Organization of Cleveland.

"We like to think of it as applied Humanities," Hart said. "We work hard to make it [the curriculum] relevant."

Classroom Lessons Spur Students to Action

Aaron Kohn '10 and Madeleine Bruml '07 take the notion of "applied humanities" to heart.

Enlightened and inspired by Brian Hart's Humanities class, Aaron sprang into action and organized the largest-ever Kalahari Peoples forum that brought two members of the San People tribe of South Africa to

Hawken. The event was highly successful, raising a record amount of money for the Kalahari Peoples Fund, which aids the San People and others in the Kalahari Desert region of southern Africa.

Madeleine, a civic minded student whose focus is closer to home, was a sophomore

when she founded Cleveland Brain Gain, a non-profit organization that seeks to educate students about the exciting career opportunities Cleveland offers. Its goal is to encourage talented college graduates to return to Cleveland to begin their careers.