

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

A magical visit to Mr. Faulkner's neighborhood

Leonard Pitts's March 3 column beautifully expressed how deeply Fred Rogers touched the lives of our children during his 33 years as their gentle television friend. Pitts evoked a vanished era.



I spent my childhood after the magical Salk-vaccine sugar cubes vanquished the phantom menace of polio

and before assassinations, riots and televised war took away our innocence. In Cleveland, we kids loved Captain Penny. I remember trying to copy, before I knew how to write, Captain Penny's address at WJW-TV off a small, round, black-and-white screen, one slow letter at a time, before it vanished. That pre-K experience of the magic and importance of writing may explain my research interests in the pre-alphabetic scripts of Greece.

Pitts lamented that there is no place left like Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, no place where real adults speak with care to children. But we have a place like that. It is overseen by University of Texas at Austin President Larry Faulkner.

Over the last long weekend, I got to understand better what a special place Mr. Faulkner's neighborhood is. It is an acclaimed research institution with 2,800 full-time faculty and more than 50,000 students. It works at its high level as a "public" institution of higher education because of the ingenuity of its administrators and the hard work of its faculty and staff in raising and wisely using funds. Less than a third of its \$1.3 billion yearly budget comes from state

general revenue appropriations, designated tuition and student fees.

On Feb. 28, I was privileged to welcome again about 25 fifth- and sixth-graders on the Longhorn School Bus to my research program. Most of the kids come from families where their parents have not finished high school. They come to be reassured that UT is there for them, to discover that education is hard work and that the hard work of education is fun. These kids are sharp and imaginative. They figure out why a griffin appears on a gold seal ring of a Mycenaean king from the 13th century BCE and they grasp that life 3,300 years ago was often no fun even for princes. They decide they would never trade our modern health and education systems, our houses and our food, our ease of communication and our personal freedom for life in a so-called heroic age when disease, starvation, slavery, ignorance and early death were commonplace.

On March 1, Explore UT brought nearly 30,000 kids of all ages to campus. In my three sessions "They Wrote on Clay and You Can, Too," more than 100 grown-up and real-time kids, including three fellow professors, made their own clay tablets and wrote their names in Linear B with Bronze-Age styluses. Four learned graduate students each generously volunteered five hours of their time. Calculate for nearly 1,100 hours of events: Shakespeare, Arabian Nights, Chopin, Tolkien, Multi-Media Funhouse, Toys in Space, Cell Research, Crushing Concrete Beams, Egyptian Crafts, Italian Opera. Thousands of hours of volunteer time, months of planning and the financial support of the UT Co-op made sure kids' faces would light up with the joy of

discovery and the realization that they can do what's done at the university.

On Sunday, along with about 30 other faculty members, I moderated Plan II honors thesis presentations. My six covered the causes of the French and other revolutions, the impact of '60s culture, what wilderness can teach us about civilization, the messages of Matisse's paintings, photo documentation of the Austin Mexican American community and why football is more popular than baseball. Seniors in many different disciplines delivered these with graceful intelligence, doing their mentors and families—and this state—proud.

All week, I had been reading award-deserving research by colleagues. Monday afternoon I got to discuss it with other faculty. UT professors and their students have discovered a better way to combat anthrax. They have developed viruses as medical agents, helped airplanes get back in the air after systems crises, explored the inner workings of empire, explained speech motor control deficits and captured vividly in novels what it is to be Latino in Texas.

From high-level research to undergraduate education to public outreach, Mr. Faulkner's neighborhood cares for its neighbors across our state and beyond, regardless of race, creed, color or income-level. Mr. Faulkner's neighborhood makes our lives safer and more rewarding and our children's future better. It's a beautiful place to visit and an important place to keep up and renew. If we care for it, it will continue to have a great impact on our lives.

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