

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

For these Austinites, there's magic in giving

At Explore UT last weekend, four student volunteers and I helped children ages 5 to 18 and their parents, grandparents and family friends learn how to write on moist clay tablets with wooden styluses.

One mother proudly showed me a tablet she had just finished. It began "a-ri-so" and "a-re-ki-si" — Alison and



Alexis written correctly in the 3,000-year-old Linear B script. It ended "ma-ma." The other signs stumped me: "i-ro-we-yu." Soon, however, the rap-

port between this mother and her two daughters made its meaning clear: "I lo-ve you." Some inscriptions have to be read with the heart.

All the adults and university students among the 30,000 people at Explore UT were sending the same message to children: We love you enough to spend this magical time with you sharing in the joy of learning.

Fortunately for our society, many adults believe in the magic of giving back. Five of them here in Austin use magic year round to do this and to teach older children how to develop their talents to help younger ones.

Twelve years ago, at the age of 50, Kent Cummins looked back with understandable satisfaction on a life well led: wonderful wife, wonderful kids, nice house, nice way of making a living.

Born in Del Rio in 1943, Kent remembered performing his first "paid" magic show at age 9 at a studio where

his dad taught dancing. But life intervened: marriage, a son, a daughter, 11 years of military service, more than 10 years running a chain of sandwich shops. Still, there was magic. In 1985, Margot, his wife now of 40 years, helped him decide to do magic full-time for a living.

Kent remembers all the mentors and learning experiences he had along the way. Magicians who always had time to help him improve his performance skills. The first battalion commander he served as an adjutant who demanded precision and perfection until Kent nearly achieved both. The hard lesson of triage among 50 to 60 wounded when the hospital is two hours away. The law of sub-optimization: your excelling at one thing might not be best for the common good.

Yet Kent was shocked, at age 50, to realize he had just hung up the phone, putting off a young magician who was in town seeking his mentoring. Then, Kent decided to begin giving back.

Since 1993, he has blessed Austin with his renowned summer Magic Camp. Through its unique counselor and counselor-in-training programs, 13- to 17-year-olds help teach 6- to 12-year-old campers the learning and life skills associated with performing magic. The adult team is made up of five magic people with marvelously complementary talents. All believe that kids who truly love what they are doing can have their best instincts encouraged and developed.

In addition to Kent, the camp's director, there is Jason Caballero, a counselor himself at age 15 in 1993, who

now spends long hours training children to prioritize, organize, assume responsibility, give and accept criticism, all while having fun bringing magic into the lives of younger kids.

Peter Hinrichs, a self-described off-the-wall, irreverent magician, has a wonderful rapport with the counselors in training, who sense and respect his deep passion for the art of magic and the joys of learning and teaching. Kent says that "Peter the Adequate" can deal with true chaos and mold it into productivity.

Then there is Gus Davis, "Gusto the Great," a recent UT grad (an American Studies major) who coordinates curriculum (juggling, puppets, advanced magic). As a student in the magic camp years ago, Gus came earliest, stayed latest and came back week after week to learn from Kent's and Peter's 100 years of combined magic experience.

Magician Steve Farmer, a retired police officer, completes the quintet, bringing practical insights about good citizenship, community service and how the world works to the monthly counselor-in-training sessions.

I spent one Saturday watching a heterogeneous group of 13 girls and 32 boys learn honest lessons in how to do what needs to be done. This summer, they will teach more than 300 younger children the self-confidence, discipline and joy that comes from magic.

Although participants at Magic Camp are sworn to secrecy, I'll reveal one thing: The trick is in the giving back.

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