

# Russell's goal always to inspire his students

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Just as President John F. Kennedy inspired and motivated Stephen V. Russell in 1959, the long-time educator made it his life mission to inspire and motivate others – especially his students.

"I'm all about doing for others," Russell said. "The greatest joy I have in life is making people feel better about themselves, motivating them to go beyond and do great things.

"In some aspects, I think I've been somewhat successful in that."

On Dec. 19, Russell, 62, announced his retirement at a Belle Vernon Area School Board meeting.

"I thoroughly enjoyed being in this position. It's too bad it didn't come at a younger age," Russell said. "Now most CEOs are in their 40s and 50s.

"I have to face reality that I'm not a young man anymore. This is my seventh decade. I'm energizing my mind, but my body is saying to slow down."

Russell said he must reduce his stress level.

A 1970 California State College graduate, Russell immediately began teaching in the Ringgold School District.

But the bulk of his career has been spent at Belle Vernon Area, where he has spent the past year defending the district.

It has begun to take a toll on him.

"With all the budget talks over the past year, it was, by far, the most difficult of all my time here," the former social studies teacher said. "The job, trying to balance student achievement and the financial effort, is one that is very, very stressful.

"You take it home with you, and you're constantly thinking about it. Will this work? How can we balance this? You're concerned about the people that are involved."

Throughout all the number crunching, Russell's top priority remained student achievement.

"There has to be high expectations for all students," Russell said. "From when I was a teacher and principal, I've always looked at all my students as if they were my own children."

Russell's goal has always been to take extra steps – whether it was filling the hallways with historical memorabilia or giving a student confidence to deliver a great speech to classmates.

Russell said that across the decades, students generally remain unchanged.

"You always see a kid looking up to their parents," he said.

"The differences you do see in students today are created by what's around them.

"What concerns me about young people is that I don't think they have been able to grow up with a virtuous environment. Kids today are exposed to things that their minds aren't ready for."

Russell, who has won numerous awards for community service, grew up the son of a Major League Baseball player.

His father, James "Jim" Russell, played for the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1942 through 1947, the Boston Braves in 1948 and 1949, and the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1950 and 1951.

Stephen Russell has made it to the big leagues, in a way. He works in the Pirates` ticket sales office, a position he's held since 1970.

Jim Russell died in 1987. Stephen Russell's mother, Theresa, died in 1998.

"I consider myself an orphan now," Russell said.

He continues to reach for the high morals on which he was raised.

"I'd say the biggest thing was from my dad. He instilled in me to have dignity in whatever I do," Russell said.

"He was also one of the first that taught me that color of the skin, religion, nationality, were not things that you based how you feel about people."

Russell savors charisma, something he said both Kennedy and his father had.

"To me, having charisma means that you want to be a part of those people," Russell said. "You want to learn where they get all of their energy from, and you want to be like them."

Russell has assembled a comprehensive collection of historical facts, data and pictures of all things BVA; including pictures of old buildings, sports teams and students.

He has a collection of yearbooks he`s purchased through the years. He's still missing a few, though.

"I've tried to get others to see the benefit and have the enthusiasm for things historical," said Russell, the general chairman of the Mid-Mon Valley All Sports Hall of Fame.

"That includes preservation of items. These things are important to me and the school district."

Russell was named assistant principal of Belle Vernon Area High School in 1976. In 1978, he became principal of Bellmar Middle School.

Since being named as superintendent in November of 2008, Russell has changed the curriculum and culture at Belle Vernon Area.

"I'm a real believer that using the right strategies in the classrooms will bring all kids up," he said.

"I have really stressed a reading initiative. If you cannot read and have the ability to comprehend, then the educational pursuit cannot happen."

Beginning in 2010 with Al Joe Neupaver, Russell has invited a successful BVA alumnus to speak at commencement ceremonies.

He reads his "Superintendent's Watch" at all school board meetings, which highlights and recognizes scholastic and student achievement.

He's written a book on the history of Leopards football from 1965 to 2010, and has upgraded the process of selecting BVA Football Hall of Fame inductees.

"I'm still excited to come to work every day. I love doing what I do," Russell said.

When the time comes that Russell doesn't have to report for duty, he knows what to expect.

"It's going to be very hard, real difficult," he said. "But, I haven't been able to read all the books I've wanted to read. I love music, and I haven't been able to go see shows and movies that I've wanted to see.

"I'm going to keep myself occupied with American culture."

Until June 29, he still has a job to do.

"My job is to protect the integrity of this school district," Russell said. "I'm going to continue doing what I'm supposed to do. I'm here to help people."

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