

METROPOLITAN

Pen pals improve reading skills

by Robert Lothian

The pen pals in Faye Lewison's reading and writing improvement class at Woodlawn School can hardly wait for their mail to come.

They receive up to five letters a week each from adults who write to them about their jobs and the community. The pen pals program is a window on the world for the children: some have gotten letters from as far away as England and India.

Lewison says reading skills improve because the children are motivated to read their letters. "They work hard to sound out the words and are quickly adding to the ones they already know," she said. Because they answer each letter, the students' writing is also improving.

They learn about the community by asking questions of the adults — a lawyer, a computer operator, executives, a landscaper, an Olympic wrestling coach, a photographer and others. The students also take field trips to visit the adults at work, and the adults visit the school.

"It's really a good program because it's bringing a lot of people from the community into the schools," said Lesley Unthank director of the Peninsula Park Community Center. She visited her pen pal at Woodlawn recently. "It lets the kids know what kind of jobs are out there, and it helps their writing, too," she added.

Roy Pittman, recreation director at Peninsula Park, wrote to his pen pal, nine-year-old Mark Laupe, about how he coached an Olympic wrestling team. "Mark explains to me what he likes, when he's having a good day, and when he's progressing," said Pittman. "Getting a letter from Mark really makes my day because it brings me back to reality. It's amazing what a nine-year-old can do in a letter." They have lunch together at the school and Pittman helps Mark with his grammar.

"For some of these kids, it's their first positive base with an adult," said Lewison.

The pen pal idea came to her while sitting around the breakfast table with friends. She wanted to try a new approach to teaching reading and writing to children having trouble, something that would get them excited and motivated. "We really need to find some innovative ways to learn," she said.

Now, some of the children don't want to leave when it's time to go to another class, and other students who had poked fun now want to be pen pals. The program is taking over the school, said Lewison.



Youngsters in Fay Lewison's class get help with their letters to their pen pals from Woodlawn teachers (l-r) Judith Lilly, Faye Lewison and Lesley Unthank, a pen pal. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

"I never realized all the things we would learn through this," she said. "These kids and adults have just been sharing life."

One of the adults wrote to her pen pal, Heidi Long, a fifth grader, using Chinese characters to explain her dog's name.

"Dear Marcia," begins Heidi's return letter. "Your Chinese writing was nice. I am barely over my cold. How is your dog? What is the name of your company? When you get to San Francisco, please write to me. My favorite pet is a rabbit. When will I get to see you?"

A young boy was actually motivated to learn to read and write because he was so excited about getting letters from California, said Lewison. "They want to read other kids' letters, too," she said.

Adults have sent pictures and postcards. Another took the class to the Christmas Day Trail Blazer game with promotional tickets. The children are learning to type with a typewriter donated by an executive, and when they found out that one of the adult pen pals worked for McDonald's, "there was dead silence" for a moment, said Lewison. A package of cookies and balloons resulted.

One student called the postmaster to ask a question about the mail, and the children are learning to compute simple math problems as they figure postage, said Lewison.

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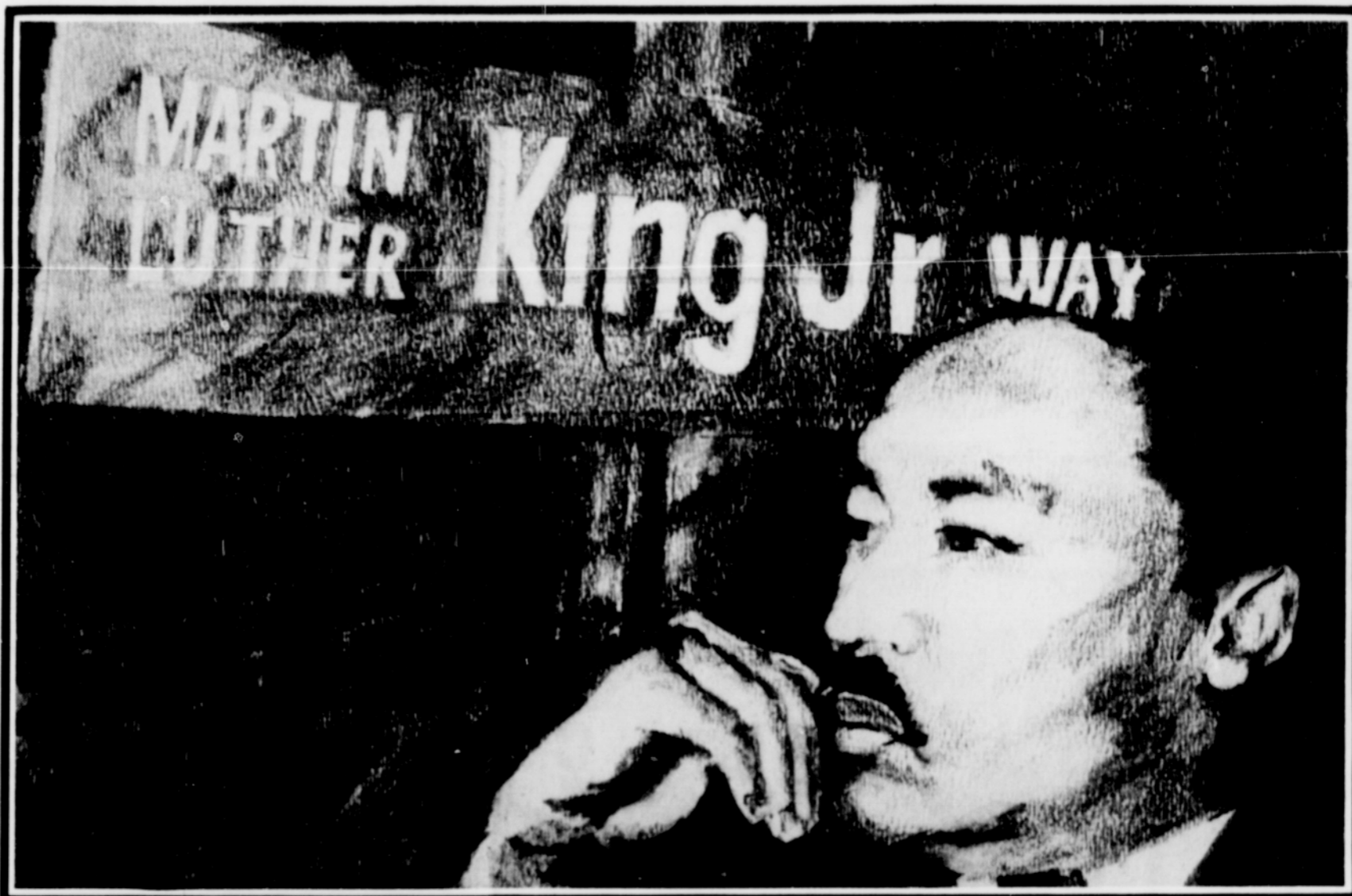


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Youth week

Portland's Pioneer Square is the setting for the second annual Youth Week "Kick-Off," Friday, March 1 from 4-9 p.m.

Mayor Bud Clark, Portland School District superintendent Matthew Prophet, City Commissioner Margaret Strachan and other officials join local DJs and five music groups in this event, said Ken Adair, Youth Week Kick-Off chairperson.

Youth Week highlights the contributions of young people to the community.

Music groups set for the Kick-Off include Electric Strawberries, Shock, Pocket Doll, Street Corner Singers and the Cleveland Jazz Band.



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