

A tip of the tricorner hat to living history

OUR POSITION: County officials and volunteers go above, beyond and back in time to relay the basics of citizenship to another generation.

Every wonder what Elections Office workers do outside of the election-season rush?

Among other routine business, like verifying voter checklists, the Charlotte County Office of Elections has been taking its show on the road during the past year with a small-scale production aimed at entertaining and educating schoolchildren about the roots of American citizenship

The idea came to first-term Elections Supervisor Paul Stamoulis when he first noticed less-than-enthusiastic student response to his visits to classrooms.

"I started out by lecturing the kids on American history and saw that wasn't the best way to present our history to them," Stamoulis told us this week.

In other words, a generation weened on Xbox was tuning out, nodding off. OMG! Booooooring!

So Stamoulis tried another angle. He brought along George Washington, Betsy Ross, Ben Franklin, Tom Jefferson and Abe Lincoln. A gal with a spikey hat and torch came too: Lady Liberty.

And a funny thing happened on the way to the auditorium. The kids perked up. They listened and asked questions. Thus began what's officially called the Great American Comeback Tour.

The supervisor's creative approach to his mission — citizen participation — demonstrates the little things elected officials and government employees do beyond the basic outlines of the job description. These events don't always make headlines, but they count because they connect what Jefferson would call "the people" with their government. It's an example of government involvement that is local and personal, just what the men from Monticello and Mount Vernon had in mind 234 years ago.

We get a taste of the involvement when we see county and city commissioners and officials showing up at homeowners meetings and Rotary Club breakfasts. For instance, just last Wednesday morning, Charlotte County Administrator Ray Sandrock discussed the county budget and community projects with members of the West Charlotte County Civic Association.

In the case of the Comeback Tour, Stamoulis said the elementary and middle school students respond because the characters from the past "have names and faces and come to life."

As much as possible. The actors research their roles, dress the parts and stay in character throughout. Some work in the supervisor's office: Diane Verdon (Betsy Ross), Randy Ann Bechtel (Lady Liberty) and Lou Spacco (Ben Franklin). Some are volunteers: Frank Stuges and Peter Bechtel (Washington), Stan Kubick and Ron Wosniak (Lincoln). Donna Dunakey coordinates the programs for the school system.

"We know we're doing some good. We can see it in their eyes," Stamoulis said. "But the bigger secret is we're having more fun than the kids are."

The show just may help spark some interest in young minds, and it may inspire more-engaged and knowledgeable citizens in the future.

"If we don't keep the spirit going in young people, nothing else will matter," Stamoulis said. "You can't lose a generation of kids who don't understand where we came from and what we are."

A tip of the tricorner hat to all those keeping the torch burning.