

Dear Sir or Madam:

It gives me great pleasure to recommend Jill Jones for the OCTA Outstanding Educator Award. I have known Jill Jones in a variety of capacities for over twenty years. In addition to her volunteer week in our community, she is a co-teacher along with me in the Oconomowoc Area School District. Jill is also a collegial partner in staff development coursework to strengthen student through experiential learning. And this is where I get stuck...

As I ponder this letter, I think you will receive hundreds of letters that describe hundreds of teachers who support the beauty of the educating and inspiring youth. Great educators will do it with grace and passion. And I would agree that Jill does just that ...but the reality is... Jill does it better than most. So how do I **make** Jill stand out? How do I represent the joy, hope, and learning she gives every day to any student willing to take a chance-willing to set out on a trail of learning?

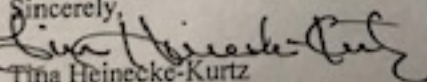
How do I adequately explain, that when the tortures of teaching in an environment demanding data to demonstrate student success becomes so overwhelming, I sneak a look into her room. There is Jill-smiling, teaching, communicating, and inspiring. She is dressed as Jim Bridger talking with a drawl leading kids in gaining understanding of the American Spirit. Kids are gathered in teams discussing what to take in their wagons. Their voices convey those are THEIR WAGONS. THEIR DECISIONS matter. The students know they are on a quest to live the American experience. No standardized test required here! These young Americans are engaged in high level thought and inquiry guided by a master teacher.

How do I share with you the moment when the 8th grade boy who really does not fit in gets a "Hey Kyle" from the Uber Popular 8th grade girl that just happened to be in the same wagon? How do I convey the moment that he turns to the gawking group of jocks, smiles, and says "Yeah, we are on the trail together and she is pretty cool?" I think the Pretty Cool One is Jill! She creates a group where everyone is expected to work hard and be kind while celebrating the beauty of our countries history.

Jill exhibits an amazing ability to consistently stay on schedule and at the same time is flexible, which benefits the entire classroom. She achieves this balance by setting learning goals that are relevant, meet the needs of all students, and aligned with rigorous state standards for student learning. Which is important, but I want to tell you the stories of the former students that come back. They "sneak" onto the high school bus to get to our intermediate school to "say Hi to Mrs. Jones" after school. They quietly thank her for the homework and rigorous expectations that prepared them so well for the demands of Advanced Placement classes. These young adults bear witness to how she influenced the lives of the children and enhanced their educational performance.

She has the ability to use innovative teaching methods for the educational progress of all types of students, and recognizes the individual learning needs of students. Throughout her classroom, you will find various teaching stations to promote knowledge acquisition for all students that align with their individual learning styles. *But how do I help you see the joy? How do I help you see her dedication? How do I introduce you to the thousands of students who are better because Jill Jones helped scared middle school kids find their greatest learning abilities and in turn discover their true selves? How do I take you on the trail with her?* I can't. So I ask to do this...close your eyes, remember in your heart that teacher who changed your entire perception of learning. The teacher who opened new worlds to you. That is Jill.

Sincerely,



Tina Heinecke-Kurtz

National Board Certified Teacher

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Teacher Fellow

"The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future". These words by President Theodore Roosevelt are the words that guide my teaching of U.S. History. My name is Jill Jones and I have the opportunity to teach U.S. History to 8th graders in Oconomowoc, a small town in the southeastern part of Wisconsin. The U.S. History that I teach throughout the year begins with a quick review of the American Revolution and takes us through about 100 years of American History through the Reconstruction Era.

My personal favorite topic is teaching the about the western expansion in a three week mini unit. In this unit, I create a simulation where the students will role play pioneers traveling on the Oregon/Hacker trail. The Hacker trail is a simulated trail that mimics the landmarks, river crossings, trail decisions, etc. that the pioneers traveled and made decisions about. This simulation really allows students to walk in the footsteps of the pioneers, to assume a pioneer identity, along with an occupation and family, create a backstory which includes the reason(s) for traveling west, and select a mode of travel for how they get to Independence, MO, (the jumping off city where the trail begins).

Purpose: In the trails west unit, students simulate situations and events similar to those experienced by pioneers headed west in early wagon trains. As settlers headed west during the mid-1800's (1840-1870) the students face challenges such as floods, droughts, blocked trails, snakes, Native Americans, and lack of food. The would-be homesteaders must make numerous individual and small group decisions (e.g., what to do about a lack of water, how to cross a flooded river, how to deal with others along the trail, and which trail to take). These decisions and other events provide the students with a realistic view of what pioneer life was like, why people went west, and what happened to them en route. While learning about the wagon trains, campfire chats are given, where students learn how to take and structure their notes to create a realistic short story about their journeys along the Oregon Trail.

How does the simulation begin? It begins when students walk into my door, I greet them as Jim Bridger, the trail boss. I am usually dressed up in my duster and cowboy hat, and I welcome everyone to the trails west (generally I throw a little southern accent into by dialogue because Bridger came from Virginia and I imagine that he had one). After a friendly greeting, I announce that they will belong to one of the wagon trains heading west on the Oregon Trail. Students get assigned into one of four wagon trains. Each train has roughly seven members. Each wagon train gets to select a wagon master to help guide the team west and with the help of their team, they make decisions that play out in this simulation. Students in each wagon train, select a journal writer, materials manager, and an assistant wagon master to help out each team. These roles help teams to be organized, responsible and keep things rolling literally along the trails west.

Students in each team will select from a list of pioneer identities. The list is authentic with names of people, occupations, typical families,

who lived in the 1840's. Students are then asked to create a name badge for themselves. On this badge students must show a symbol for their occupation, a place of origin, select one item from home they can't leave without, and a dream they have for traveling west to Oregon Territory. Each pioneer must also develop a push and pull factor for what is pushing them out of their homeland back east and what is pulling them to the west. This information will then become part of their backstory when creating the short story that most students will write as an assessment for this unit.

After selecting their pioneer identity, students must stop in Independence and visit the court house and buy their supplies. They are directed to several general stores in town for purchases. While shopping, students are working with both a budget of \$500.00 and also a 1,000 lb. weight limit for the Prairie Schooner or the Conestoga wagon choice they made.

Jim Bridger (a.k.a. myself) acts as the trail boss of all wagons traveling west. I let pioneers know that when the grass is green we will be rolling out. Pioneers quickly make their purchases, filling out a supply list and making sure they have stayed under their weight limit, etc. At this point, I introduce pioneers to the movie "In Pursuit of A Dream" Part One: kids are learning about each other and the rules of the trail. In addition, they make decisions about the supplies they select and why they are necessary for life on the trail. My students grow in their understanding of practicality i.e. taking a Dutch oven instead of a Franklin stove. Students get their supply lists approved by Bridger and then it's time to start our journey west. I give them some background by showing them a slideshow on the Oregon Trail (on your jump drive along with all the other power points used in this simulation this past year).

Before we can roll out of Independence, group chores must be done, this involves creating a team name and a team motto which are put onto the wagon train cover. Students also create a small wagon to act as a game piece for the trails west that can move along the trail on the game map. Finally, students create a team journal, where all their journal entries, trail decisions and outcomes can be written. The first journal entry will be to talk about the wagon train coming together and forming a team. In this entry they discuss how they met, who they selected as the wagon master and why. Each team then introduces themselves to the class ending with a statement on their hopes and dreams for living in the west.

Students must work together and complete chores every night. Completed work moves their team on the game board and also effects the energy factor of each team or how fast each team moves along the trail. As pioneers begin to move along there are fates that play out. These fates or scenarios are real life situations that pioneers would have experienced while traveling along the trail. Students cross rivers, where scouting reports predict the river conditions. They give suggestions on how to cross the particular river. While crossing the river pioneers also have fates play out which might result in wagons tipping and deaths occurring.

As these real life scenarios come up along the trail, our pioneers are working together to solve problems or deciding the best way to handle the situation. They are forced to rely on each other, to work together, and build team cooperation. It is not always about "myself", but what is best for our team. An important concept back then, but equally important in today's world too.

Throughout this simulation, many activities and scenarios are being played out. Students are growing in their understanding of pioneer life by individual researching, as well as campfire chats done by Mr. Bridger (myself).

In June of 2017, my father and I decided to travel the first 1,000 miles of the Oregon Trail. We began in Independence, Missouri, and saw all the wonderful sites, took the historical tour with mule driven covered wagon. We picked up trail books from the National Park Service and mapped out our day-to-day plan for the sights that we wanted to see. The experience was something that I will always treasure: to be able to see the places, look at wagon swales and see this great land as the pioneers must have seen it. It is a history's teachers dream! I took many pictures and tried to make this journey come alive from behind the lens of my camera. I used these pictures in my campfire chats with students to help them see the sights and sounds of life along the trail. I was trying to recreate the experience for my students through these pictures and stories that I personally shared with them. I hoped to make this as real as possible for my students. Dad and I are planning on taking the next 1,000 miles of the trip this summer, traveling from Fort Bridger to Oregon City. I can't wait to experience it, the final leg of the Oregon Trail!



Just like the real pioneers who went west, teams experience hardships, "people die in river crossing or in accidents along the trail, but ultimately most will survive and make it to Oregon Country. Our simulation ends with most teams getting to the Promised Land. Each pioneer chooses to create a presentation, a video, or a short story about their experiences traveling west. They must make this time period come alive with facts and figures that are authentic to this era. (I will have some photos of the latest work done by my 8th grade students this year. I began this unit on March 4th and just finished on March 22, 2019. I include the most recent work done by students and myself. Hope you enjoy it).