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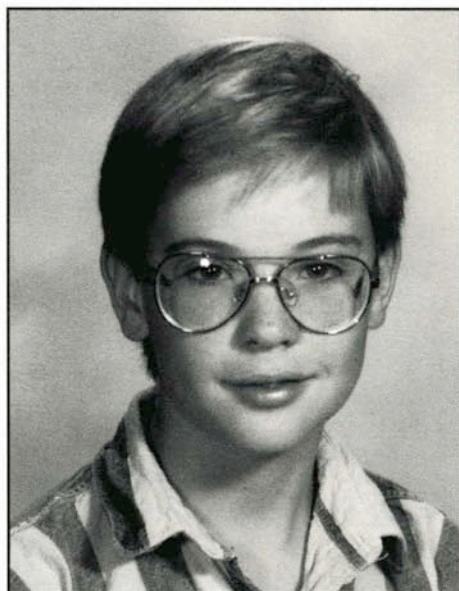
Introductory Note: The following article was given as a presentation to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Delegate Assembly at the 1998 ACTFL Convention in Chicago. The Assembly consists of representatives from all state and regional foreign language organizations as well as language-specific organizations. The subject of the meeting was "Advocacy for Foreign Languages." The author was given the assignment of exemplifying a presentation to a board of education (not her own) to promote the continuation of the district's elementary school foreign language program.
—The Editor.

Advocacy for Early Language Education: A School Board Presentation

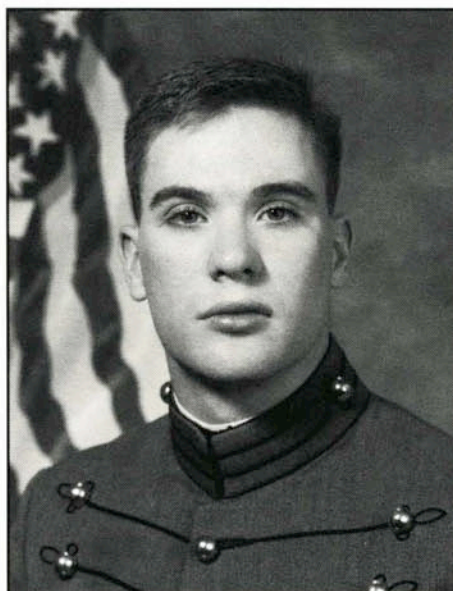
*Virginia Gramer
Foreign Language Facilitator
Hinsdale Elementary School District 181
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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the board of education. Thank you for inviting me here. I know that you have a big issue before you—the future of your elementary school foreign language program. First of all, I would like to show you some pictures.

Because of his language skills, Jeff Means was able to spend a very rewarding term at St. Cyr, the French Military Academy. Jeff returned last year to finish his junior year at West Point. One of his current assignments is to write the curriculum, based on his experiences, for a semester French course for the United States Military Academy.

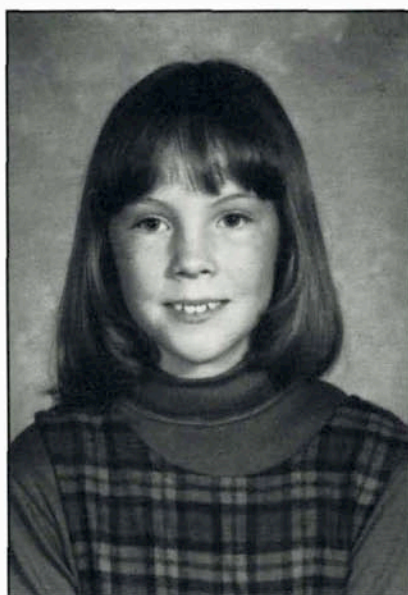


Jeff Means



Katherine Remus is now a junior at Georgetown University, majoring in political science. Katherine had a job last summer, as did many of her classmates, but Katherine was paid considerably more than her friends and had a wonderful trip in the bargain. She worked for Coca-Cola in France, using her computer skills in marketing the World Cup Soccer Games, Tour de France, and Wimbledon. She got the job after a half-hour interview in French, on the phone.

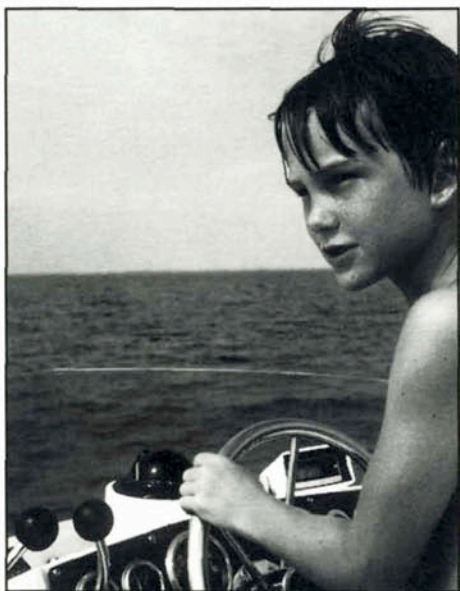
Stuart Moffett, unlike Katherine and Jeff, was not a quick starter. He did not get down to serious business right away. Just out of school, he had a few positions, which no parent would think would bode well for his future economic well-being. One of them was with Club-Med. Stuart's French was good enough to get him the job and by the time he moved on he was assumed to be a native speaker. Because of his dual-language ability he was hired by a German bank, and during his tenure there he has become proficient in German. As you are probably aware, second and third foreign languages become successively easier to learn after one has mastered the first. That certainly was



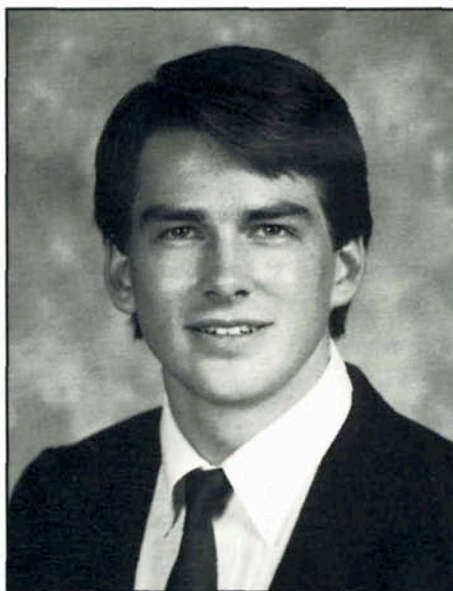
Katherine Remus

true for Stuart. He now deals in commodity trading, much of it on the phone in French and German and, occasionally, even English. However, Stuart is again moving on. He has decided that he has finally found his niche in high finance and he is coming back to the United States to get his MBA.

Richard Acker turned out to be someone to reckon with as a legal

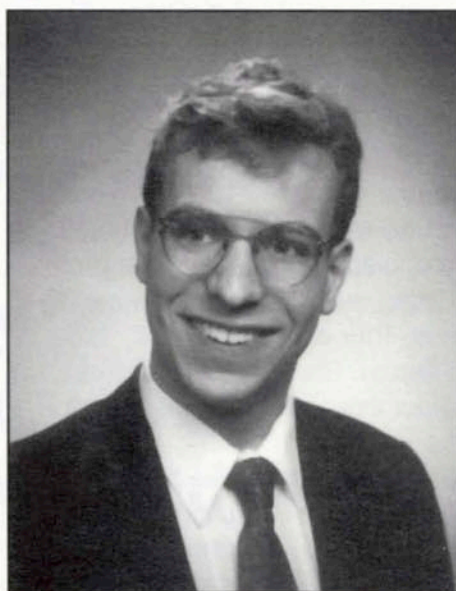


Stuart Moffett





Richard Acker



eagle. The foreign language requirement for an MA at Princeton in international relations and public policy posed no problem for Richard. He had entered graduate school with proficiency such that he was able to write his master's thesis in French. His language skills opened up opportunities for him in international law. He worked on a research project on solar energy in French Africa, and he is now with a law firm in California dealing with global environmental legal issues. A year ago former students of various ages were asked to reflect on their experiences in elementary school. Richard credited the "seeds that were planted" when he was in his elementary foreign language program with his fascination with the language and the culture of so many areas of the world. He expressed gratitude to "the administrators who had the foresight to bring children to new languages when they were still young enough to absorb them."

Christina Martonffy, who has a teaching fellowship at Indiana University and is now working on her Ph.D. in French, like Richard, was asked to remember her school years in the district. "It was at Oak School, too, that I was first exposed to French, and I

would so look forward to the times when our French teacher would come into our classroom and open the doors of a language and a culture that continue to hold me in thrall! I could not be more grateful to the district for giving me the opportunity to begin the study of a foreign language at an early age, for (as has been proven time and again) the younger one starts, the better."

Not all of those who have utilized



Christina Martonffy

foreign language training have been college bound. Lizzie B. started as a clerk in hospital admitting and, because of her innate talents in dealing with people and the fact that she could do so in several languages, she is now a department head dealing with patient and personnel issues.

Our district and those with programs like ours could each have dossiers several inches thick chronicling stories like these about students for whom languages opened up opportunities that they would not have had without their linguistic skills. It would be logical to ask about the students who did not polish their language skills or those who did not use them in a career. I would suspect that there are just as many of those as there are those of us who study math for 10 to 12 years, or in my case 16 years, and utilize it mainly to balance our checkbooks or to reduce a recipe by half; or those of us who come the closest to putting our 12 to 14 years of science education to the test by reading the nutritional labels on cereal boxes.

But I would suggest that foreign language instruction has numerous positive outcomes and long-lasting fringe benefits if one starts in the elementary school. There are certain skills that are better learned at an early age. Research into the development of the brain and the ways in which children learn now confirms that which was only confirmed by observation before—young children *do* possess unique language-learning abilities. Children store a second language in the same part of the brain in which they store their first language, giving their command of the second language a naturalness difficult to achieve later in life. When students begin language learning as they approach adolescence, the second language is stored in a different area of the brain and is learned in a different way.

Research studies also tell us that children who have studied another

language show greater cognitive development in the highest levels of thinking skills and are more proficient in tasks requiring divergent thinking and figural creativity. They score higher on standardized tests in reading and math than non-foreign-language students and are more open to cultural diversity.

Our own language takes on an added dimension when we compare it with another. Just as we never saw the world on which we live until we left it and viewed it from our foothold in space, we do not understand our own language until we view it from the perspective of another.

Language instruction at an early age keeps the door open to the skills of learning by listening. The minute children enter school, reading becomes the first priority and, throughout their school years, the printed word gradually replaces listening as the main conduit to new learning. Critical listening is a skill which atrophies if not used, so that most adults no longer trust their auditory memories and become compulsive note takers. Foreign language is one of the few instructional areas in which listening is the road to knowledge and skill, in which the medium *is* the message.

Barbara Walters interviewed Prince Charles shortly after the birth of his second child. When asked what he would wish for his children, he said, "The gift of languages." This princely gift has been bestowed on the children of many nations around the world—even those in third-world countries. Elementary school foreign language programs are proliferating in many school districts in our own country but we are only beginning to see this as a national priority. Terrill Bell said, "No nation has a separate future anymore." Are our children, who are the future of our nation, being as well prepared as their counterparts in other areas of the world, their future competitors, customers, allies, or even enemies, in that basis of almost all human endeavor—communication?

. . . foreign language instruction has numerous positive outcomes and long-lasting fringe benefits. . .

Nelson Brooks, a noted linguistic professor at Harvard, said, "Foreign language in the elementary school is quite literally the chance of a lifetime." Once passed by it does not come our way again.

I hope, members of the board, that foreign language will emerge as one of your priorities and that the children of your district can experience—as the children in many districts in this country have—the satisfaction, the fun, and the rewards of learning another language at a time when such learning is the easiest to initiate, incredibly effective, and results in a priceless life skill.

The elementary school foreign language program in Hinsdale, Illinois (a K–8 district) started in 1960 with a pilot group of half of the district's fourth graders. All fifth graders have 30-minute sessions in either French or Spanish four times per week. In the middle school, French and Spanish are core subjects, meeting every day for 45 minutes.

Author's note: In any kind of advocacy situation, it is advantageous to know the disposition of the audience—parent group, board of education, or administrators and teachers. I have always attended school board meetings in my own district, not all, but enough so that I am familiar with each board member's mode of operation and their relationships with the superintendent and with one another. It is much easier to make an effective "pitch" if one knows who is catching. In addition, when making a case for elementary school foreign language programs to any group, I try to leave with them the essence of what I have presented, in printed form, something, that they can take with them and digest, or refer to, later. I recommend the brochure, "Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?", which may be downloaded from the ERIC Document Reproduction Website at www.accesseric.org.
