

'Lincoln' tells students in Dubuque the honest truth about Abe

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Abraham Lincoln asked students at one of his namesake schools to count his failures.

On Friday at Lincoln Elementary School in Dubuque, actor Danny Russel listed all the ways the nation's 16th president had failed before making it to the White House.

"I was a fairly lazy farmer," he said. "I failed at my first attempt at business as a shopkeeper. I failed at my second attempt as a shopkeeper."

Lincoln students listened as the list continued to include miller, carpenter, blacksmith and postmaster.

"I don't care how many times you fail. You don't quit. You don't give up," Russel said.

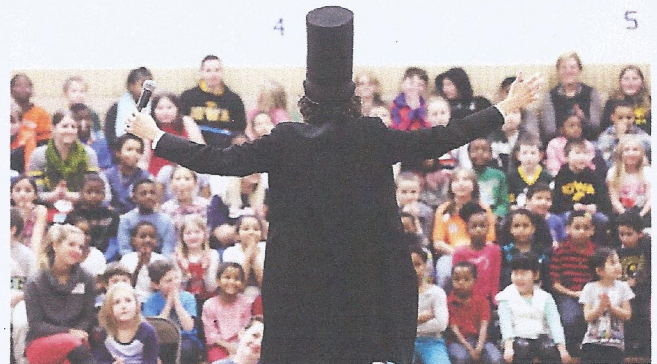
An Indianapolis native, Russel will visit multiple tri-state-area schools over two weeks with the Dubuque Arts Council's artist-in-residence series. Since 1975, the series has connected artists with elementary and middle school students through live performances.

"It's special because most of the artists we bring each year tend to be musicians," said Ted Blanchard, council president.

Lincoln Principal Donna Loewen said she was thrilled an Abraham Lincoln impersonator would present to the students.

"We're so proud of our namesake," she said. "It's my goal as a principal to make sure every child, when they leave, they know something about Abraham."

A lifetime member of the National Association of Lincoln Presenters, Russel transitioned from humor to heartache to teach students about the man known as Honest Abe. He discussed Lincoln's reaction to the loss of his mother and his view on slavery. Russel also recited parts of famous



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Danny Russel, a lifetime member of the Association of Lincoln Presenters, performs Friday at Lincoln Elementary School in Dubuque as part of the Dubuque Arts Council's artist-in-residence series. Video interview with Russel: THonline.com

speeches, including the Gettysburg Address.

He said he hoped students would realize the importance of reading and writing.

"Books got Lincoln off hardscrabble poverty, got him off the farm, got him to be a prairie lawyer, got him to the White House," Russel said.

Three years of research, along with some encouragement from his wife, got Russel into the impersonator business.

"My wife suggested that I take on Lincoln because I'm tall, and skinny and homely. And, you know what they say, listen to your wife," Russel said.

However, he needed a little help to measure up. The 6-foot-2 Russel wore platform shoes that added 2 inches to his stature.

First-grader Cherish Kaesbauer said that she was surprised by the Lincoln impersonator's height.

"He's really taller than my dad," Cherish said.

Russel ended his visit to Lincoln by greeting students with a high-five.

"What's more perfect than having Lincoln at Lincoln Elementary?" he said.