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Performer who portrays famous, beloved, Indiana poet visits Covington

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Acting has been Danny Russel's career of choice for most of his life. It wasn't until the late 90s, however, when he was cast in a play for the Indianapolis Children's Museum, which would portray the life and career of Hoosier Poet, James Whitcomb Riley, that Russel felt he discovered his passion within the performing arts arena.

"I was thrilled to join the cast as Dr. C.M. Townsend, nicknamed 'Doxy', a kind gentleman who employed Riley for the patented medicine show circuit in 1875 and exploited his talents as actor,

musician and illustrator," Russel said. "Our show then opened in October (1997) to wild applause, playing to thousands of children from across the state, and we ran for three solid months. In fact, the production was such an astonishing success that we revived it in 1998, 1999, and again in 2002. By then, I'd grown so attached to Riley, after hundreds of performances, and felt very protective of his legacy. That's what prompted me to create a one-man show for touring purposes, and I've been on the road ever since."

Russel now travels full-time, performing reenactments of scenes from Riley's life, reciting his well-known poetry, and inspiring interest

and laughter in the hearts of audiences young and old. In addition to his portrayal of Riley, Russel was also funded by the Indiana Arts Commission for research in the development of a similar performance, which details the Indiana heritage of President Abraham Lincoln, who resided in our state from the age of 7 to 21.

"Everyone is familiar with Illinois as the so-called 'Land of Lincoln', but he spent his entire boyhood here, and we should be fiercely proud to claim him," said Russel. "I knew I had my work cut out for me when I discovered that many people are sadly ignorant of Indiana's remarkable impact on Honest Abe's life and how his values were shaped by his time here."

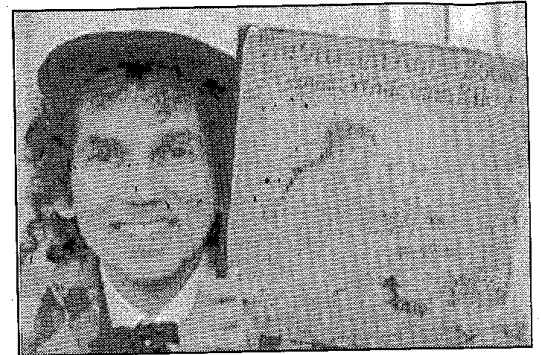
Russel performed a James Whitcomb Riley Reenactment at the old Clerk's building and Museum in Covington on Saturday afternoon. The event was sponsored by the Fountain County Art

Council.

Though he grew up in Maine, Russel relocated to Indiana for college. He earned a degree in theatre from Ball State University. He then attended Chicago Actors Studio for advanced study in his craft.

"Both of my parents were teachers and nearly died over my decision to become an actor. They knew the odds for failure were astronomically high, and that I'd probably wind up homeless, but they still encouraged me to follow my heart. I can't give them enough credit for teaching me that your desire to succeed is as important as any talent God's blessed you with. Let me also give credit to my lovely wife, Teresa, who became my financial manager when we met, even though, ironically, there were no finances to manage at that time. She also pestered me to become President Lincoln, since I've always been tall and skinny."

Believing in the relevance of Riley's life and career,



even in our modern age, Russel is truly passionate about preserving history through his portrayal of a beloved and honorable Hoosier Poet.

"James Whitcomb Riley has lasted because he often wrote in the language of his people, appealing to all ages. He took immense pride in composing humorous and nostalgic verses, calling them 'simple sentiments that come direct from the heart'. Most importantly, he gave Hoosiers a cultural identity," Russel said. "Why is he so interesting today? For one thing, he left school at 16, and his mother died at 20. He

was perpetually at odds with his father, a successful attorney and the very first mayor of Greenfield Indiana, and was not published until the age of 34. Only stubborn, unflagging persistence brought him fame and fortune. His understanding of human nature made him a national hero, produced dozens of best-selling books, and immortalized him as the finest dialect poet of all time. He's also buried at the highest natural point in Marion County and is the only poet in the world to have a hospital named in his honor."

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in the church's mailbox to help cover expenses. "This is a tangible way to meet a need," Day said. The church is hoping to give all the backpacks away at their event and it's not just limited to elementary school kids. They have backpacks

for high school and junior high students as well. The 100 backpacks will be given out first come, first served beginning at 11 a.m. at the Attica Elementary School parking lot on August 11.