

Don't Embarrass Me, Dad!

By Mike Dinelli, N9BOR
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"Don't embarrass me, Dad!" Those were the instructions I received from my 11-year-old son, Steven. He asked me to speak to his fifth-grade class at Highland School in Skokie, Illinois about Amateur Radio. He had to read three books written by the same author and write a biography on that author. To my surprise, he chose three ham radio novels written by Cynthia Wall, KA7ITT.

I was concerned that a class of 11-year olds wouldn't find ham radio interesting. After all, these kids were raised with cell phones and the Internet. I wondered what I was getting myself into. Steven's warning not to embarrass him echoed through my mind.

I arrived at the school early with a box full of goodies. The classroom was hot and as I stepped to the front of the class it felt a little warmer with each step. I unpacked as the kids watched intently. My son shot me a look as if to remind me of his previous warning, and the room temperature shot up a few more degrees.

I started by telling them that I was here to talk about Amateur Radio. I asked if they had ever heard of Amateur Radio. Two kids raised their hands, but none actually knew a ham.



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Me and my QSL collection, one of my "visual aids" for my classroom presentation.

I pulled out two plastic sleeves, each filled with twenty colorful QSL cards. I have talked with ham radio operators in over 100 different countries and even with some in Skokie. I told them that in a little while we would be talking to a ham radio operator on my H-T.

I explained that when I said I *talked* to hams in over 100 countries, I should have said that I used my voice to talk to some and I used Morse code to communicate with many more. I then asked if anyone would like to learn how to send their name in Morse code. All 28 kids raised their hands. One by one they came up and sent their name on my old Speed-X straight key and two-tube Bud Codemaster code practice oscillator. Some, without prompting, after learning each letter would send their name in its entirety.

I'm sure that besides never seeing a code key before, none of them (except my son) had ever seen a vacuum tube! Later, I demonstrated a keyer and paddle and many of them wanted to give that a whirl too. If only I had brought along my bug!

I asked the kids if they wanted to test *me* on Morse code. I gave one of them my MFJ code tutor with LED display (set to QSOs). I started the code and wrote the copy on the board in front of them. I set

the speed to 10 WPM and told them this was twice the speed required to earn a ham ticket. After I copied the QSO, they wondered what the heck I had just written. I explained the abbreviations and they thought it was *COOL!*

After the code practice, I called Bill, W9BB, on my 2-meter H-T. Several of the kids had a chance to talk with Bill and tell him about themselves. Bill could coax some conversation out of even the most shy kids. Their teacher, Mrs Stofelmeyer, even had a chance to thank Bill for speaking to her class.

I finished up by giving each of the students an *Archie's Ham Radio Adventure* comic book and an ARRL brochure. I attached a label to the brochure with contact information for Metro Amateur Radio Club. I also invited the kids to come out to see ham radio in action on Field Day.



Bill Simons, W9BB, helped in my classroom presentation by being on the other end of a QSO for the students. Bill is an avid DXer and DXCC Honor Roll member. He's been a ham for more than 50 years and is my good friend and Elmer. [All photos courtesy of the author]

Before I left, several kids had questions. Mr Dinelli, can you talk to someone in Morse code now? How old do you have to be to get a ham license? Where can I get books so that I can study to get my license? Can I send my name again? Why is it called *ham* radio?

This was a very important day for me as a ham. I learned that kids can be excited about radio and Morse code even in a world filled with cell phones and high-speed Internet connections. All you have to do is show it to them. Once I settled down and knew that I was speaking to a receptive audience, my enthusiasm for the ham radio that I love made a positive impression on them. I was asked to speak for 30 minutes, and I ended up going for an hour.

After it was all over and I was packing up, I quietly asked my son if I did okay. He said, "You were great!"

Woo Hoo! I hit a home run.

Editor's note: Mike Dinelli, N9BOR, of Skokie, Illinois has been a ham since 1980. He is an ARRL life member, member of FISTS CW Club and President of Metro Amateur Radio Club (MAC). His interests include boatanchors, contesting, DXing and CW ragchewing. His son, Steven, is starting to get the ham radio bug too.