

Headline: Contests help Lincoln come alive for Hoosier children

By Dr. Suellen Reed and Connie Nass

One of the great pleasures of being involved in the Indiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Celebration has been watching the faces of young people as they begin to see our nation's 16th president in a new light.



It's often a remarkable transformation. So many children think of Abraham Lincoln simply as an older, bearded man, always dressed in black and often looking kind of tired and sad. They know him best as a "great man," and, as a result, they have trouble relating to him.

But when we go into Indiana classrooms and tell the kids about the young Abe Lincoln, the one who, like them, was a spunky Hoosier kid, you see a change. When they can picture a spry, young Abe playing in the Indiana summer sun, kicking through autumn leaves, enduring cold Midwest winters and welcoming the first green of the Indiana spring, they begin to think less of a monumental president and more of a kid they'd like to know.

In that transformation lies opportunity. If children can see the things they have in common with one Indiana boy who became a great man, they can begin to see the potential for greatness in each of them.

That's why we're working to help children learn as much as possible about Abraham Lincoln during the celebration of the 200th anniversary of his birth. Working with educators from around the state, the Indiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission has developed Lincoln curriculum, put new Lincoln books in schools and encouraged teachers to make Lincoln a part of their classroom activities.

We know that children often learn best by doing, so we're asking them to get involved through a series of age-appropriate, Lincoln-focused competitions.

For the younger students, in grades kindergarten to 5, we're offering a commemorative stamp art contest, asking each entrant to design a stamp honoring the years Lincoln spent in Indiana. This will harness their creativity and help them connect with the 7-to-14-year-old who, in a sense, lived down the road. Twelve winners will receive \$200 each.

The older students are being asked to delve a little deeper, conducting research into how Indiana affected Lincoln and Lincoln affected Indiana. Middle school students in grades 6 to 8 are being challenged to create fact-based PowerPoint presentations titled, "Abraham Lincoln's Indiana Years (1816-1830): How They Influenced His Life." Three prizes will be awarded with the top level receiving \$900.

Finally, high school students in grades 9 to 12 are being charged with writing 600-word essays titled, "Abraham Lincoln's Legacy to Indiana." Three prizes will be awarded with the top level receiving \$5,000.

While we're hoping that the cash prizes for these contests will attract plenty of entries, we know that even the most industrious student occasionally needs a little nudge. So we're asking you – parents, teachers, mentors, friends and employers – to encourage the students you know to take advantage of this opportunity.

Go to the Web site, www.IndianasLincoln.org, and print out the contest details. Give them to a child you know, letting him or her know you'd like to see what comes of it. Then show it off to others. Post the stamp artwork on a bulletin board at work. Let a middle school student show his or her PowerPoint to your service club. Publish a high-schooler's essay where others can read it.

Trust us: We know from experience that your effort will be worth it. Regardless of whether he or she wins the contest, once that student sees the boy behind the man – the scrawny Indiana kid who became our nation's 16th president – he or she will see that nothing is impossible for someone who grows up in Indiana. And you'll see a new sparkle in that student's eyes.

The deadline for entries is Nov. 1, 2008. Further contest details are available at www.IndianasLincoln.org.

Dr. Reed is the Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction, and former State Auditor Nass is chair of the Indiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.