

BUSINESS

Educator merges entrepreneurship and teaching Assembling learning tours for schools keeps him running

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STAFF WRITER

Schoolteachers traditionally are among the lowest-paid of professionals, but one local educator has found a way to combine his teaching experience and his entrepreneurial spirit to form a healthy business enterprise.

Rick Klimek, a sixth-grade teacher at St. Felicitas Parish School in Euclid, two years ago hatched the idea of offering educational tours to schools lacking the resources to put them together. Since he incorporated Recreational & Educational Tours in June 1983, he has taken groups from 16 schools to Philadelphia, Toronto and Washington D.C.

"Our purpose is to offer a trip to a school that would never have the staff or the time to put something together like this alone," Klimek said. "We do everything, and that's our purpose."

The trips cost \$118 to \$128 per student, depending on the city. The fee covers charter bus transportation, meals, lodging, sight-seeing and a T-shirt. The buses leave after school on Friday and return on Sunday night. Saturday nights include a pizza party and swimming fest for the students, who range from sixth-graders to seniors in high school.

Klimek said his marketing strategy right now is low-key.

"We contact schools and, with their approval, provide literature about our trips that the schools distribute for us," he said. "Everything else, including the tour staffing, is done through us."

"Right now, we're relying mostly on word of mouth for two reasons. One is that you can't ask for a more genuine source. And two, it allows you to build up gradually and to provide quality in what you do."

Klimek's business, however, has not exactly been building up gradually.

Before becoming a teacher, Klimek organized contests and trips for newspaper carriers in Lake County. He spent several years as a part-time bus driver for Trailways Lakefront Bus Line, where he says he learned the basics of the tourism industry.

"I started doing this because it combined everything I had learned," he said. "I had experience organizing trips. I knew kids through teaching and I had learned the touring business from driving, so I organized a company to do that. Now, I'm trying to offer that to as many schools as possible."

He said he enjoys seeing the reactions of students visiting cities for the first time.

"We're very commonly asked if we don't get bored, but with each group seeing the reaction of the students when they see the changing of the guard at the the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or when they first see the Capitol, never allows me to get bored," he said.

Mickey Hubeny, a counselor at Willowick Middle School who serves as a chaperone and tour guide on most R&E trips, said she enjoys the weekends largely because her charges always behave well.

"I get so touched every time the kids see the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier --- they're good as gold. Not a pin drops. There has never been a time when they haven't shown perfect respect. We've seen other groups that don't know how to behave, but I've always been proud of the groups we've taken."

This respectful behavior does not come automatically, though. Klimek and his staff, all educators, carefully instruct the students

in the background and significance of each place to be visited. Parents are required to attend an orientation meeting where the activities of the trip are explained.

Although the trips are educational in nature, the students say they have a great time.

"It was a real blast," said Jeff Radachy, who will be a sophomore at Benedictine High School in the fall. "It was especially fun when we left a wake-up call for Rick for 4 a.m."

Mark Bouffard, who will be an eighth-grader at St. Felicitas in the fall, also said he enjoyed the trip.

"You learn a lot of stuff about the nation's history and about the presidents," he said. "You also get to do a lot of things with your friends. We went swimming and had a fun time in our room, and we found a new way to call from room to room. We did lots of things together; it was different from being with your parents."

Klimek has signed a contract with the city of Willowick to sponsor tours to Toronto and Washington for residents, and he said he plans to let parents take part in a tour to New York City next summer.

"Parents are always saying, 'When are we going to get to go? So next year, they'll be able to go,'" he said.

Klimek said he constantly looks for ways to improve and expand the business. While he has dealt with public schools in the city's east and west suburbs, he said he plans to concentrate on expanding within the nearly 175 schools of Cleveland's Catholic Diocese.