Student Essay Makes Real-World Connections for Florida Classroom

By Art Peterson

On December 17, 2001, a representative of The Oprah Winfrey Show called the Meadowlawn Middle School in St. Petersburg, Florida, wanting to talk with seventh-grader Audrey Clarkin. Television host Oprah wanted Audrey, a student of Tampa Bay Area Writing Project teacher-consultant Michael Taylor, to participate in an upcoming show segment entitled “Building Strong Family Connections.”

Audrey’s road to stardom had begun several weeks earlier when Taylor asked his students to write responses to the events of September 11. The school principal, Greg Cardone, impressed by Audrey’s piece, featured it on the school’s on-campus television news program. Later, he read the essay to several hundred adults at the school’s “Back to School Night.”

Audrey also submitted the piece to the local paper, St. Petersburg Times, which publishes student work on its weekly Xpressions pages, where nearly a quarter of a million people had a chance to read her work. That’s when a researcher for The Oprah Winfrey Show found the article.

An arrangement was made to record Audrey reading part of her essay in the form of a letter to Oprah and for her family to send family photos so that while the audio tape of Audrey’s reading was played, a montage of pictures of her family would appear on the television.

Audrey’s classmates were proud of her, of course, but understandably also a bit envious. “What I told them,” said Taylor, “was that any one or all of them might have been chosen to have an essay broadcast to millions of people across the world if they had had completed the assignment and followed through with the opportunity to submit their response to Xpressions. However, Audrey was the only one of my students who took this step.

“Of course not every student who completes every assignment to the best of his or her ability will end up on the Oprah show, but I do hope this experience helped students understand that they have a powerful public voice, and that people will respond to what they have to say. It’s possible to build real-world connections to an academic classroom.”