

MOVE OVER, BARNEY

Make Way for Some Real Heroes

BY DENNIS DENENBERG

WILLIAM PENN was an obsession for Elaine Peden, the *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* reported in 1991. Peden had devoted enormous time and energy to promoting recognition of Pennsylvania's founder. In 1984, she had persuaded Congress to extend honorary United States citizenship to both Penn and his wife, Hannah. But her successes in bringing Penn into the consciousness of Americans had been soured for her by disappointments. When she visited

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the restored William Penn statue on top of Philadelphia's City Hall, she expected to see again in the waiting area the seventy-five paintings of events in the life of the Penns done by high school students. Instead she found a blowup of the Phillie Phanatic, the cartoonish mascot of the city's professional baseball team. The city's founder was out: The city's newest fantasy figure was in.

The situation is not much better at our country's official museum. Recently, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History published a new brochure to guide kids through the museum. It is written around the Charles Schulz figures, with their pictures everywhere. So there's Snoopy leading our kids around our national history museum—instead of Sacagawea who led Lewis and Clark across our nation!

We continually think we have to "dumb down" things to amuse kids. Well, we don't have to. We can challenge them to think, and most of them will love it and rise to the occasion. Our national history museum



Orville Wright

Wilbur Wright

Clara Barton

Albert Einstein

Frederick Douglass

Mark Twain

John Glenn

exists to teach us about our history, and while pop culture is a part of it, it should not dominate the turf. Harriet Tubman risked her life to lead more than 300 slaves to freedom—imagine the exciting trail she could lead kids on through the museum. Instead, there's Lucy entertaining the kids, and probably boring them, too.

Classrooms and homes around the United States resemble that Smithsonian brochure and the Philadelphia City Hall waiting area. Pictures of great people have given way to fantasy creatures. At one time many—if not most—public school classrooms in America displayed portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Today, if such portraits appear at all, it is usually for a two-week period in February, during Presidents Day commemorations. In their place, Garfield (the cat, not the president), Michelangelo and Leonardo (the turtles, not the artists), and, of course, Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and his numerous compatriots hold prominent positions. They, not great

women and men, are the figures young people see repeatedly—and come to think of as “heroes.”

I have visited hundreds of classrooms over the past twenty years. I have talked with teachers, observed displays, and examined curriculum materials, and I have become aware of how fantasy figures compete with real-life heroes for students' attention. Often, the fantasy ones are winning.

Cartoon and other fantasy characters pervade children's lives. Little Mermaids and big Beasts adorn the clothing kids wear and the lunch pails they carry. Think of kids in the world today. A little girl gets up in the morning. Her head probably rested on an Aladdin pillowcase. She goes down to breakfast and eats cereal from a box with a cartoon character on it, then gets dressed in a T-shirt with Bugs Bunny on it, picks up her Garfield lunch pail, and heads off to school where there is a bulletin board with cartoon figures on it.

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ILLUSTRATED BY GUY SCHUM



Sacagawea

Teddy Roosevelt

Jackie Robinson

Martha Graham

Ben Franklin

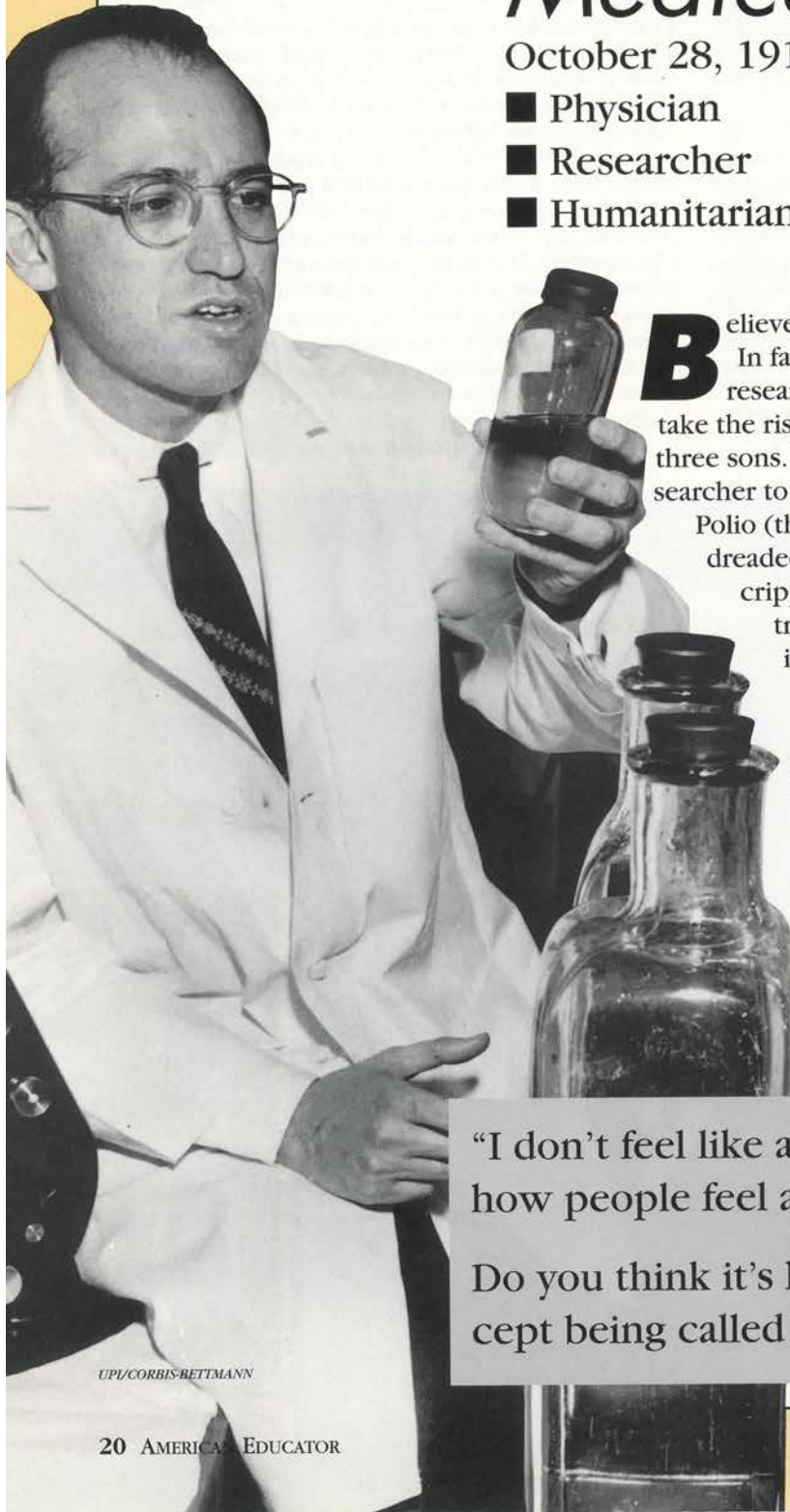
Schum

JONAS SALK

Medical Pioneer

October 28, 1914 - June 23, 1995

- Physician
- Researcher
- Humanitarian



Believe in what you do. Dr. Jonas Salk did. In fact, his belief in the quality of his medical research was so strong that he was willing to take the risk himself. So, too, did his wife and his three sons. It was not the usual practice for a researcher to test his own findings. Dr. Jonas Salk did. Polio (the short name for poliomyelitis) was a dreaded childhood disease. It left a young body crippled or it killed you. Most victims contracted the disease in infancy, which is why it was also known as infantile paralysis. But the most famous of all polio sufferers was struck by the disease when he was 39 years old—that was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Could a cure be found to stop this disease? Did people believe they would ever be free from the danger of

Dr. Salk checks samples of virus-laden fluid used in production of his vaccine as he returns to his University of Pittsburgh laboratory.

“I don’t feel like a hero, but I know that’s how people feel about me.”

Do you think it’s hard for real heroes to accept being called heroes? Dr. Jonas Salk did.

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POWER WORDS!

“I wasn’t going to inoculate anybody else without first inoculating myself and my own children.”

polio? Dr. Jonas Salk did.

He worked 16 hours a day, six days a week for years trying to find a way to prevent the disease from attacking kids. Finally, he created a vaccine to immunize people against polio. After successful tests on laboratory animals, it had to be tested on human beings. Who would be willing to take the risk? Dr. Jonas Salk did.

HERO HUNT

About a 100 years ago, a terrible disease called yellow fever killed many people. A famous medical researcher dedicated his life to finding a cure, and did so. A major research hospital in our nation’s capital is named in his honor.

He is _____ ?

Why did the tests involve a risk? Because the vaccine consisted of the actual polio virus. That’s right, to prevent the disease from occurring, you actually injected the disease into your body. Pretty scary thought. The vaccine consisted of killed polio virus cells, which then built up natural antibodies (fighting cells) in the body. Did people believe the new vaccine would work? Dr. Jonas Salk did.

Because they trusted him, Dr. Salk’s wife and children also volunteered to be “human

Franklin D. Roosevelt was 39 years old when he was struck by polio.

guinea pigs.” The tests were successful; none of the people

Dr. Salk, his wife, and three sons (left to right: Peter, 11; Jonathan, 5; and Darrell, 7) arrive in Ann Arbor, Michigan on April 11, 1955, to receive the report on the results of the Salk vaccine field trials.



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DIVE IN!

Jonas Salk, by Marjorie Curson (Silver Burdett, 1990), 144 pages. Illustrated. Part of the *Pioneers in Change* series.

who were injected with the vaccine got polio. It was the major breakthrough in the 1950s and was the beginning

of the end of polio's terrible effect. It was clear to everyone what Dr. Jonas Salk did.

A grateful nation and world applauded his achievement. He could have become a very wealthy man from his discovery, but he stated: "...[the vaccine] belongs to the people. Could you patent the sun?" No, such beneficial work should be freely shared—and that's what Dr. Jonas Salk did.



A nurse steadies the arm of Gail Rosenthal, age 8, as Dr. Jonas Salk injects the Salk polio vaccine during the 1954 field trials conducted in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, region. Gail was one of 1,830,000 children, ages five to nine, who with the consent of their parents participated in the field trials. Results were described the following year, April 12, 1955, in the Francis Report, which pronounced the vaccine "safe, effective, and potent."

EXPLORE!

Although Dr. Salk died recently, medical research continues at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies. To find out what their latest research efforts are, you can write the Institute at P.O. Box 85800, San Diego, California 92186-5800; or email at <http://www.salk.edu>

By doing so, you can discover some of the latest scientific research efforts on AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, birth defects, the brain, cancer, gene therapy, hormones, and plants.

Dr. Salk himself, even at the age of 80, was actively involved in research to find a cure for AIDS or a vaccine to prevent its spread.

What do you know about AIDS? What do you know about other infectious diseases, such as the flu, pneumonia, or even the common cold?

As an American, you have access to incredible medical services. Some people say we have the best doctors and health facilities in the world. The cost of all these services has become very high. You can be a part of the effort to keep our health system top rate by learning ways to stay healthy.

Do you know the right kinds of food to eat? Do you know the importance of daily exercise? Do you know how you can lower the chance of catching diseases like AIDS?

The work of Dr. Jonas Salk and other medical researchers is worthless if we don't do our share to take care of our bodies. Dr. Jonas Salk did.

Heroes

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Teachers and parents choose such materials so frequently, they tell me, because they believe these figures have motivational value. Cartoon mice and ducks are familiar. "They can be comforting to kids," parents and teachers say.

Perhaps fantasy characters motivate and comfort. But junk food motivates and comforts, too. Like junk food, popular fantasy and cartoon characters are sweet, enticing to the eye—and empty of real value. Like junk food, they displace what is more important. They fill kids up. The kids no longer hunger for the nourishment they need to become healthy, fully mature adults.

Is it any wonder that teenagers become hooked on the next level of fad fantasy figures—the super-rich athletes and popular culture rock and entertainment stars. Their presence in the media is everywhere, with entire cable channels devoted to the icons of music and athletics. So the Barney T-shirts eventually become Smashing Pumpkins shirts, Power Ranger backpacks become Dennis Rodman gym bags, and the very innocent Little Mermaid poster in a child's bedroom is replaced by a nearly life-sized one of Madonna (and not the religious one!). Think about it: It's an easy transition from the fantasy world of Spiderman for kids to the unreal world of Michael Jackson for teenagers.

The over-presence of fantasy characters in our culture and in our schools and homes contributes, I am convinced, to a confusion for our children and adolescents about the value of real-life human accomplishments. It is not surprising, I think, that when in 1991, a Harrisburg-area school district asked its fifth to twelfth graders to name people they most admired, the teenagers chose rock stars, athletes, and television personalities, people who often seem to be larger than life. Other than Nelson Mandela, no famous people from any other field of endeavor were mentioned. No great artists, inventors, humanitarians, political leaders, composers, scientists, doctors—none were mentioned by the 1,150 students.

Likewise, when the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain asked a representative sample of twenty-five- to forty-five-year-olds to write a two-page essay about their favorite hero, there were a lot of blank pages; 60 percent of the group said they have no personal heroes.

I frequently am asked to give presentations on why heroes are important for children. I sometimes begin by putting on the familiar Mickey Mouse ears, and I lead my adult audience in a rousing rendition of the "Mickey Mouse Club" song. Almost everyone knows the words. Then I switch to a colonial hat and recite a portion of the Patrick Henry speech that ends with a very famous line (or at least what once was a very famous line). I leave it to the audience to finish the speech, but few can. The comparison with the Mickey Mouse song leads to a spirited discussion of what has happened to real heroes in our culture.

"Look around," I say to my audiences. "You're surrounded by people. Count thirty people, yourself among them. One of that thirty would probably have

polio if it weren't for Jonas Salk. That's how prevalent polio was. But when Salk died two years ago, we as a nation hardly took notice. Certainly, few young people have any sense of how that great doctor saved their generation from a crippling disease."

Have we lost a generation of people who don't have heroes, who don't know what a hero is or don't understand what a positive influence a hero can be in a person's life?

A HERO IS an individual who can serve as an example. He or she has the ability to persevere, to overcome the hurdles that impede others' lives. While this intangible quality of greatness appears almost magical, it is indeed most human. And it is precisely because of that humanness that some individuals attain heroic stature. They are of us, but are clearly different.

We look to heroes and heroines for inspiration. Through their achievements, we see humankind more positively. They make us feel good. They make us feel proud. For some of us they become definite role models, and our lives follow a different direction because of their influence. For others, while the effect may be less dramatic, it is of no less import, for these heroes make us think in new ways. Their successes and failures lead us to ponder our own actions and inactions. By learning about *their* lives, *our* lives become enriched.

Molly Pitcher saw what had to be done and did it. Women had a defined role in the war; they were a vital support to the fighting colonials. But when her husband was wounded, and the cannon needed to be fired, she knew what she had to do. Molly Pitcher was, and is, a heroine, and her story deserves to be told and retold. Neither a great statesman or soldier, she was an ordinary person who performed an extraordinary deed.

Michelangelo spent a lifetime at his craft, leaving the world a legacy of magnificent paintings and sculptures. His hard work was a daily reaffirmation of his belief in a human's creative potential. Through toil, he produced artistic monuments that have continued to inspire generations.

This world has had (and still has) many Molly Pitchers and Michelangeloes, people who set examples that inspire others. Some had only a fleeting moment of glory in a rather normal life, but oh, what a moment. Others led a life of longer-lasting glory and had a more sustained impact on humankind. All were individuals who, through their achievements, made positive contributions.

Where are the heroines and heroes for children today? They are everywhere! They are the figures from our past, some in the historical limelight, others still in the shadows. They are the men and women of the present, struggling to overcome personal and societal problems to build a better world.

Indeed they are everywhere, but most children know so very few of them. Quite simply, in our schools and in our homes, we have removed these great people from our focus. They have become "persona non grata" instead of persons of importance. The

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