

Author's rapid-fire style engages creative writing students at TCHS

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How can an author from New York City reach teenagers in Lexington? How about through good-natured humor, fast-paced exchanges, and fun team activities in which they can see themselves succeeding as creative writers.

Paul Volponi, who was a classroom teacher in a previous life, opened a week's tour of FCPS high schools at Tates Creek. (He was supposed to visit in mid-March 2020, but we all know why it took two years to get him here.) As each class filed into the library, he studied them quickly to decide how to proceed. "I watch them and see what they bring to the table," he said, adding, "I like story and most of them do, too."

With one group of freshmen and sophomores taking a Creative Writing elective, Volponi bounced from celebrities and former presidents to sports mascots. After sharing the alliterative line "Titanic turtles thwarting thugs" – an easy-to-guess reference to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles – he tapped four students to look up the Renaissance artists for whom the characters are named and to bring one fact back to the class the following day. Later, Volponi picked three volunteers to compete in a mini tournament to crown an onomatopoeia champion. (If you have forgotten from English class, onomatopoeia is a word spelled like it sounds, such as brrrrrr.) In yet another exercise during the hour-long workshop, the students worked in small teams and took turns writing sentences to build a short story about a random photo.

One thing that struck ninth grader Deon Caudill was how you can look deeper into things that might not seem special at first. For instance, his group chose a picture of a dog named Bonkers that appeared to be jumping toward the camera. Deon noticed red splotches on the dog's stomach and incorporated that detail into their story. He enjoys creative writing, which is why he signed up for the class this semester. "I'm trying to get over writer's block and I thought this would be good motivation, and it has helped," he said.

The guest author impressed Deon, who said he respects someone like Volponi who knows his stuff and is a cool guy, too.

Jennifer Prall, a library media specialist at Tates Creek, set up the visit. "Mr. Volponi has written many books for young adults appealing especially to our reluctant readers. In fact, we teach one of his novels at the 10th grade level, and it is always well-received by students," she said. That book, "Black and White" – which touches on social justice themes -- is sports fiction about two best friends on a high school basketball team.

Prall said the faculty was excited to host Volponi and hoped their students would enjoy his sessions, saying, "It's an enrichment experience and it gets them excited about reading."