

BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY HEATHER ROBINSON

I TRY TO wear a suit most days," says Frank Jump, explaining why he looks dapper. It's not the uniform you'd expect for a teacher at an elementary school in a gritty section of Flatlands, Brooklyn.

For Jump, 46, who teaches science and technology at the Amersfort School (Public School 119), the suit serves to inspire. "The kids deserve to see their teacher dressed well. I'll walk into the classroom in the morning and the kids will say, 'What's the special occasion?' I'll say, 'You. You're the special occasion.'"

Jump has more cause than many to find the blessings in everyday life. In 1986, he was diagnosed as HIV-positive and told he had five years to live. Instead, he beat the odds, living with the AIDS virus for over 20 years so far, and teaching for the past five.

Around the time he turned 40, he began yearning to have a child. "I knew I was not going to adopt a child or have a child of my own," he said. "But I wanted to be around kids in a way that I was contributing to their upbringing. So I started to think about teaching."

He was also inspired by the example of the instructors at Empire State College in Manhattan, where he received his B.A. in musical theater and film.

Formerly the office manager of a dental practice, Jump had just begun work as a part-time teacher at PS 198 in East Flatbush when he was diagnosed with rectal cancer in September 2000. Fortunately, doctors caught it early. Jump took a short time off for radiation and chemotherapy, and then returned to the classroom as a New York City Teaching Fellow.

"I felt that getting up on my feet and teaching again would probably cure me," he says — and it did.

He took his first full-time teaching position in September 2001 at Abraham Lincoln Middle School in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn. Only a few days later, he and his students witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center from their classroom. He turned on the radio and told them to document what they saw and heard, and to save their notebooks.

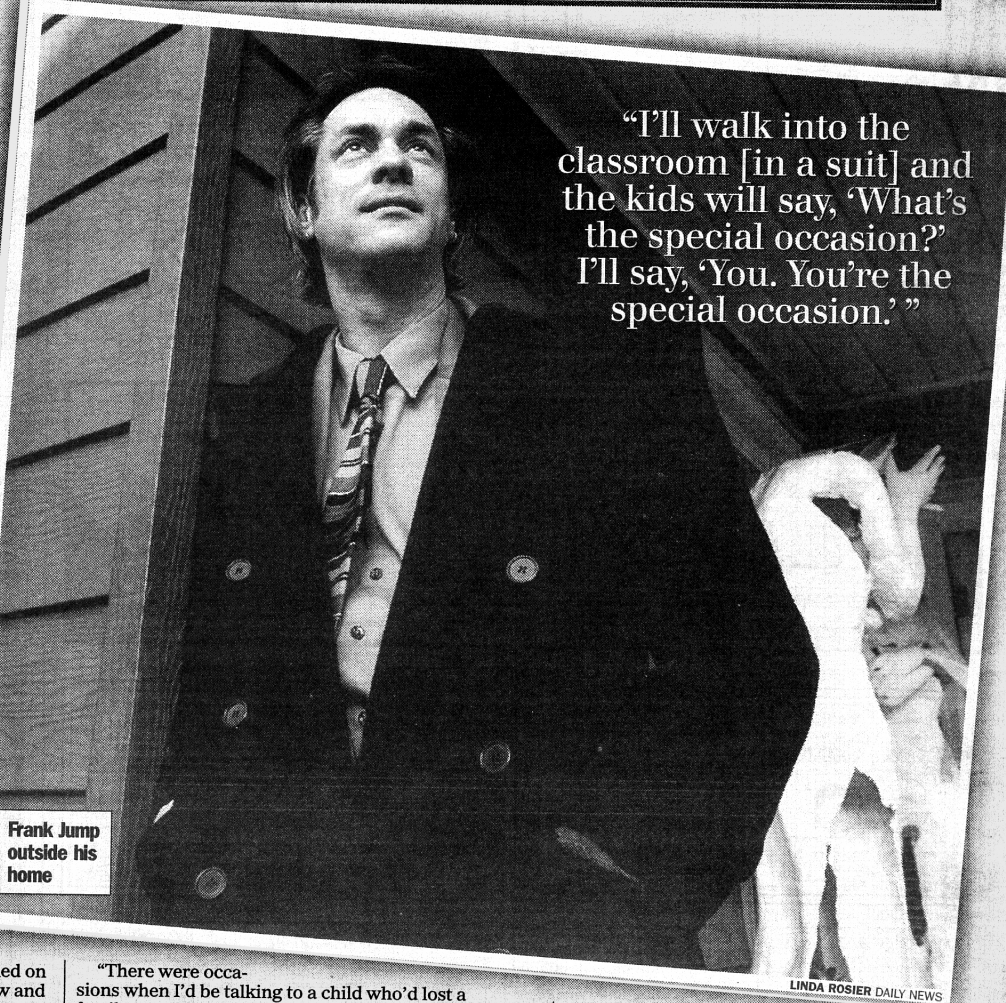
"By the end of the year, it had sunk in that this didn't just happen to them, but that the entire world had changed," he says. "Many of them had that notebook and they said, 'Thank you for reminding us to keep this book.'"

Jump now teaches 300 students in second through fourth grade and tries to get to know each one.

"When you say, 'How are things going with your brother? Are you still getting in trouble for hitting him back?' — they get amazed you remember. It's reinforcement that, yes, somebody listens to me," Jump says.

His aim is to help kids recognize their uniqueness and value — and he often achieves it through creative techniques. "We need to recognize those things that will make kids life-long learners. If it's rap music, maybe it's, 'If you got to write your own rap, what would your name be? What would you represent?'"

Jump says that when he taught middle school, he occasionally discussed his health status and was able to provide some inspiration and hope to kids whose families had been affected by AIDS.



Frank Jump outside his home

LINDA ROSIER DAILY NEWS

"I'll walk into the classroom [in a suit] and the kids will say, 'What's the special occasion?' I'll say, 'You. You're the special occasion.'"

"There were occasions when I'd be talking to a child who'd lost a family member to HIV-AIDS, and talking to me, hearing I had it, they'd be amazed," he says. "They had thought of HIV-AIDS as a death sentence."

His homosexuality and HIV-positive status generally do not come up in teaching elementary school students, he says — "and I'm not going to bring it up."

"If they ask me, 'Are you married?' I tell them, 'Yes.' If they ask me what my wife's name is, I tell them, 'Never you mind about my wife. I don't say, 'No, I'm married to a man.'"

"I don't have an agenda, other than to be honest. When my middle school kids asked me, 'Mr. Jump, are you gay?' I would ask them,

"Does it really matter to you if I was or I wasn't?"

In his spare time, he operates the online Fading Ad Gallery (fadingad.com), which features his photographs of "ghost signs" — painted ads on buildings for businesses that have long disappeared. He loves the signs because although they are "transient," and won't be around forever, they also — like him — have outlasted people's expectations.

One of Jump's biggest fans outside the Amersfort School is actress Rosario Dawson ("Rent"), who calls herself his

adopted niece. Next month, she will be featured alongside him in a publicity campaign for PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Dawson says she volunteered her time with the campaign to raise awareness about AIDS and to support her "Uncle Frank," with whom she lived for several months during high school.

"One of the better parts of my teen years was staying with him for those months," she says. "I thought it was important to come from a place of love, to say I love this man and am grateful to have him in my life."

On a recent Saturday afternoon, winter light filtered through the stained-glass windows of the home Jump shares with his partner, Vincenzo Aiosa, just a few blocks from school. Jump leafed through compositions his students had written about him.

"Having Mr. Jump as a teacher is terrific," wrote one of his students, an 8-year-old boy. "He is a science man just like me."

According to an 8-year-old girl, "Mr. Jump takes his job seriously. Sometimes he brings his computer. And we go on the Internet." Another paper, written by a 7-year-old boy, said, "Mr. Jump is my idol. Mr. Jump is really[sic] my idol."

Jump straightened the papers carefully and replaced them on the coffee table.

"This is my reward," he said.

From the Editor: This marks the debut of the Daily News' new feature spotlighting the city's everyday heroes. We are looking for people of every age and every background who go the extra mile to make a positive difference in others' lives. If you know a big-hearted New Yorker, e-mail me, Dawn Eden: bigtown@nydailynews.com.

LESSONS IN LIFE

Frank Jump's a teacher, a mentor — and a survivor

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NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

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DAILY NEWS

SPORTS ★ FINAL

Monday, February 27, 2006

Weather: Partly cloudy, 32/24