

## An Extraordinary Educator

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### E. Yager Marks Honored For The Fun And Laughter He Brought To Learning

By [Jenny Jones](#)

**HARRISONBURG** - One day during his physical science class, teacher E. Yager Marks talked about how human physiology makes it difficult for people to do such things as simultaneously pat their heads and rub their stomachs.

Marks then challenged his students to try a few exercises, such as swinging their right foot in a clockwise circle and writing the number six with the right hand. "It cannot be done," he said.

Marks then asked the students to trace dimes with their pencils. He told them the theory that after drawing circles for a while it is impossible to hold the same dime between one's fingers and run it up and down one's nose.



**E. Yager Marks, who taught physical science in the Harrisonburg City Schools for 33½ years, recently received the division's 2009 Retired Outstanding Teacher of The Year Award. Marks is known as a "great prankster" who can really get a message across.**

Photo by Pete Marovich

By this point, the students were eager to prove the theory wrong. They enthusiastically placed the dimes between their fingers and rolled the coins up and down their noses with ease.

Of course, the joke was on them when the dimes left pencil lines down the middle of their faces. And Mr. Marks sat back and laughed.

"Some of them got mad, but you get over it," said Marks, as he paused a 1993 video recording of his students rolling the dimes down their faces. "I just never wanted to be that teacher that bored kids."

#### An 'Outstanding Teacher'

Ask most any of Marks' former students and they'll tell you they were anything but bored in his class.

"You could not wait to go to his class," said Charles Chenault, a former Harrisonburg councilman who was in Marks' team-taught science class in the 1960s. "They were the most entertaining, but yet 'get-the-teaching-done' group. For me, personally, it was a real shot in the arm."

Marks kept things interesting by putting on funny disguises, telling stories about growing up destitute as one of 10 children in the tiny community of Wloftown, and making up silly sayings that helped students remember their lessons.

In recognition of Marks' creative teaching style and his dedication to students, the Harrisonburg Education Foundation recently presented him with the 2009 Retired Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award, sponsored by Summit Community Bank.

Greg Corder, a computer teacher at Thomas Harrison Middle School who worked with Marks, and Michael Eye, a teacher at Harrisonburg High who was a student of Marks', nominated him for the award.

Marks is "just really good at what he does," Corder said. "Eighth-graders, [it's] tough to get their attention, [but] he had it. He formed relationships with every single student."

Marks, who retired in 1999 and returned mid-year in 2002 to take the place of a teacher who had died, taught eighth-grade physical science for 33½ years in Harrisonburg City Schools. He also coached high school baseball, golf and football.

For 22 of those years, Marks team-taught with fellow science teacher Ron Sours, whom Marks credits with helping make him a successful educator.

"Our personalities just seemed to mesh," Marks said of his partnership with Sours. "Our teaching philosophy just seemed to go hand in hand. ... We just clicked."

In a recent guest editorial in the Daily News-Record, Stephen Haynes, a former Harrisonburg resident who now lives in Richmond, wrote about his greatest teachers. He likened Marks and Sours to that of a famous comedy duo.

"Ron Sours and Yager Marks were like the Rowan and Martin of science class," Haynes wrote. "Thanks to Mr. Marks' humorous mnemonics, I still remember the metric system."

### **Teaching No. 1 Objective**

While Marks loved to joke and laugh with his students, his focus was always on teaching, he says.

"I know I am known as the great prankster, but that was all the sidebar," said Marks, 65. "My number one objective was to make sure that I covered the [goals] of my class to prepare every one of those students for his or her next level in high school."

Marks didn't think of himself as just a science teacher. He considered himself a teacher of all subjects, including, and perhaps most importantly, social skills.

"He would often say, 'I'm not a science teacher; I'm a teacher,'" Corder said. "That sums up why he's so darn good at what he does."

When it came to discipline in his class, Marks said he had very few rules. Respect for him and the other students was the most important thing, he said.

"If a student feels safe and respected and knows that you are in his corner, the discipline problems are minimal," Marks said. "Respect is something you've got to earn from students and vice versa."

Corder said Marks always had a high regard for his students and they responded positively to that.

"He always said, 'They may not remember what you taught them, but they'll remember how you treated them,'" Corder said. "If you can create a positive relationship, that's really important. And he can do that."

The stories, magic tricks and other silliness helped keep students engaged, Marks said.

"I found that you can't go at them for 50 minutes, 60 minutes in a row," Marks said. "I took the approach, 'If I were sitting in my own class, what would I like?' I just wanted to have some fun."

Marks said he is always humbled by the kind words of former students and colleagues and receiving the Outstanding Retired Teacher Award is no different.

"There are so many deserving teachers as qualified for this award," he said. "I was just a guy who went and did his job and tried to do a good job in the process."

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