



Newton North math teacher Dennis Klem sings a rap song in the school's 'Chalk: The Musical.' Newton North math teacher Dennis Klem sings a rap song in the school's "Chalk: The Musical." (LAURA NICHOLS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

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NEWTON

Relating to teacher, the musical

By Peter DeMarco, Globe Correspondent | February 15, 2007

Singing onstage alongside a math teacher, a guidance counselor, and a special-education teacher's aide was odd enough for Newton North High School sophomore Casey Knotts.

But spotting their spouses and children in the audience, cheering them on as if they were, well, real people?

Yeah, that was a little freaky.

The applause didn't seem so strange, though, when Knotts considered the lyrics she was singing -- about a first-year teacher's laughable failures, his blown confidence, and the moment he finally

connects with his students -- and all she'd learned about her fellow cast members during rehearsals: Mr. Klem loves hot dogs, Mr. Snow juggles, Mr. Nocera has a baby boy.

Newton North High School last weekend produced its first original musical, "Chalk: The Musical." The story was as homegrown as you could get: All 11 songs were written and composed by a pair of Newton North staffers, biology teacher Zach Snow and physics teacher Todd Nocera. Five Newton North faculty members had starring roles as teachers. Their real-life students, of course, played their students.

In unison, adults and students belted out songs about test scores, cheating, cellular biology, and other mainstays of high school life. There was a smattering of references to Newton North, such as its falling ceiling tiles, and a cameo by Matt Anderson -- the school's funniest teacher by popular acclaim -- as a wisecracking janitor.

But "Chalk" seems to have done something that the average high school musical does not.

It has helped students see that teachers aren't just MCAS taskmasters, but have feelings and outside lives.

Teachers throughout the school feel affirmed: Students finally see the tribulations they go through!

And students and teachers alike have been able to get a good laugh at themselves.

"I had Mr. Klem in a study hall my freshman year, and I had some thoughts about him from that study hall," said student Ely Kuhlman, the production's choreographer who taught math teacher Dennis Klem how to perform a rap song. "They have changed a bit."

Meanwhile, chemistry teacher Peter Hamel, who was in the ensemble, found himself on the proverbial other side of the desk.

"In class, teachers are sort of the experts. Here we are open and sort of vulnerable. Especially me. I had no theater experience.

"I had to always ask a student, 'What goes on now? Where are we at?' It was probably a way for them to see that they are experts at a lot of things."

Principal Jennifer Price was so impressed with the musical's message that she has asked for excerpts to be performed at the school's next faculty meeting.

"All these kids got to see their teachers perform," she said. "Dennis Klem -- no one would have believed that Dennis Klem would have done a rap. He is Mr. Tie-man. All of his students were talking about it and making him do it in class.

"Then there's the fact that two teachers wrote this."

"It's not someone's perceived notion of what high school is like. It's not someone saying, 'I remember 20 years ago what high school was like.' It is teachers and students, in a high school, working together to create a musical that is incredibly relevant to the high school experience of the 21st century.

"It's also catchy. I mean, I've been singing the songs all week."

Senior David Sumberg, who played bass in the musical's band, agreed that the show's songs and themes would go over well no matter where it's performed.

"I think what's great about the script is it has something for everybody," he said.

"It had something for the students. You could tell who the teachers were in the audience during the show from where the laughter came during certain parts."

For Sumberg, the show's best moment occurred after Friday's performance, when teachers and students alike piled into the International House of Pancakes, pushing five tables together and reliving the performance.

Kuhlman couldn't recall how many hours she spent talking with the show's writer -- and her biology teacher -- Mr. Snow.

"Like, I cried to him once about a problem I was having in my personal life," she said.

"The most powerful moment of the play for me," said guidance counselor Matthew Ford, who played a jaded teacher, "has been coming back to school and seeing what it did to people.

"The reaction in the school, it's been unbelievable," he said. "The good mood that it has put the faculty in, and all the students that you don't know who are like, 'Great job.' "

Nocera and Snow, who have strong backgrounds in music and drama, respectively, received help on the script from student director Jeff Lebovici and a high school friend of Snow's, Elia Chesnoff.

The musical, which can be appreciated by current and former high school students everywhere, will be available to any school or theater company that wants to produce it.

Jeff Knoedler, director of theater at Newton South, said he would consider it.

"We'd probably wait a couple of years," Knoedler said, "so it wouldn't be on the heels of their performance."

For more on "Chalk," visit www.chalkthemusical.com.

Lyrics from the song, "Option Three," from "Chalk: The Musical," written by Newton North High School teachers Zach Snow and Todd Nocera. The number is a duet sung by a first-year teacher and his mentor about the magic key to motivating students.

You make it sound so simple, you make it seem so easy.

Please, please, tell me, this answer that you see.
What's this messiah that you're calling Option Three?
Extra Credit! The world's greatest teacher tool!
To not use it, you'd have to be a stubborn mule.

Extra Credit! It always comes to rescue me!
So that's why when there's no way out, I call on Option Three.

I need to challenge those students who think the work's too easy.
But too tough an assignment could cause insurgency.
You may think you're stuck, but there's always Option Three.

Just take that same hard homework and call it Extra Credit.
They'll work all night long, with no regrets, you'll see.
All for a simple name change to Option Three.

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