

## VOLUME 15, NO. 2 Summer 1997

Members In Action: David Palmer  
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*By Nancy O'Malley*

Each October, fourth-grade teacher David Palmer transforms his classroom into a bat cave. He blocks the windows with black posterboard, covers the walls with brown paper, and tapes dozens of handmade stalagmites and stalactites to the floor and ceiling. Students cover the room with paper bats, and Palmer adds the sounds of wind, dripping water, and flapping wings to make the cave feel like the real thing. For an entire month, the students are immersed in the bats' environment, learning about bat habitat and behaviors.

Palmer's hands-on teaching methods at Valley Creek Elementary School in McKinney, Texas, have made him popular with students and fellow teachers alike. In 1989, his school district named him Teacher of the Year, and in March of 1996 he was recognized as Best Elementary Science Teacher by the Texas Medical Association.

When Palmer's class finishes its bat study unit, the students can join the McKinney Society of Bat Protectors, a club Palmer founded in 1992. The students are already quite knowledgeable about bats, and with the help of about 40 other club members, they prepare to educate others, organizing public presentations and perfecting their speaking skills.

In the last three years, the Bat Protectors have taught almost 2,000 children and adults at schools, scout meetings, women's clubs, and PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meetings. To help illustrate their message, they show videos, perform skits, and play games.

"It all began about five years ago," said Palmer, "when I took my class to the Heard Museum in McKinney to put up a bat house." The Heard Natural Science Museum and Wildlife Sanctuary is a 270-acre wildlife preserve north of Dallas. Bats are frequent residents on the property, along with birds, butterflies, and small mammals. As part of BCI's North American Bat House Research Project, Palmer's Bat Protectors club is conducting bat house research on the museum property. To determine which habitat the bats prefer, the students placed eight houses in varied terrain and checked the houses weekly to record their findings. Letting students do the research fits perfectly with Palmer's approach to teaching. "If my students think my class is fun, they're going to remember what I teach," he said. "They'll want to keep learning about science the rest of their lives."

Palmer originally planned his curriculum with materials from BCI, then gradually adapted them to his own style. His efforts have paid off with enthusiastic, well-educated students who want to teach others. He plans several field trips each year for students and their parents. Last summer, they explored Texas's Whirlpool Cave (which is not currently home to any bats) with guides from the Texas Speleological Society. Although beginners at cave exploration, the entire group crawled on their stomachs or hands and knees for three hours, holding flashlights to light the way. Later, the club had a more comfortable outing to Austin to watch the Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) emerge from under the Congress Avenue bridge.

The students' parents are thrilled about how much science their children are learning with Palmer. Many of these adults have become bat students, too. "Being part of this bat club has dispelled all the myths and spooky ideas we had about bats," says Kevyn Robertson, whose 11 year-old son, Travis, is a member. "Travis can talk to anyone about bats now. Last spring break, we were at Big Bend National Park, and the rangers were talking about bats. Travis was wearing his bat club T-shirt, and he joined right in the conversation!"

Next year, Palmer's fourth-graders will have a new bat lesson: studying the migration of lesser long-nosed bats (*Leptonycteris curasoae*) in the Sonoran Desert. They will track the bats' progress on computer as part of the "Journey North" program, a nationwide math and science project. Even though the Texas students are not in the migratory path of these bats, they can follow along on the Internet with students who are, and there's no doubt David Palmer will find ways to make the experience even more interesting. As club member Nikki Davenport summarized: "Mr. Palmer was the best teacher I ever had. I learned more in fourth grade than in any other year. I was learning and having fun. How much better can it get?"

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Above: David Palmer's club, The McKinney Society of Bat Protectors, enjoys a visit to a cave that may once have housed bats.

Left: Palmer discusses the motion of bat flight with students.

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