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Mike Ramsey is bringing History Alive in the Settlement at DPA

Mike Ramsey is the kind of teacher who sees things and asks “why?” and envisions what could be and asks “why not?” A bonus for his more than three decades of students was that his inquisitive mind and analytical nature came with the heart of a storyteller who understood learning can be an experience, not always a lecture. And now, guests at Discovery Park of America (DPA) will benefit from Ramsey’s many years of teaching and his incredible knowledge of the lives of West Tennessee pioneers.

After 36 years of teaching at first Dyer and then Gibson County High School, Ramsey retired and moved from the classroom to a docent position at DPA. But now, he has literally donned another hat, and this one is made of coonskin. On most Saturday’s Ramsey will be working as an historical interpreter bringing real life adventures to the park’s Settlement. Featuring nearly a dozen structures, the Settlement is a collection of hand-hewn log buildings that resemble what one might have found in a mid-19th century frontier settlement.

For an interpreter, “activity is key,” Ramsey explains.

In his new role, he may be found at a loom weaving with yarn he recently dyed or making lye soap with ash from a recent fire or cooking a meal with items he’s grown. The idea is that guests will truly be able to “discover” by watching and participating in hands-on activities built around daily life in an era that too often is relegated to pages in a textbook.

In his new role, Ramsey joins a group of craftspeople who activate DPA periodically throughout the week displaying skills like weaving, wood working and creating pottery. All part of DPA’s mission to inspire children and adults to “see beyond.”

Ramsey already looks at home in the area of the heritage park devoted to conveying life in the mid-1800s complete with log cabins, houses for smoking meat, raising chickens, and weaving cloth, a tool barn and a woodshed. He should. A class project, conceived by him to help students connect with one-time-rivals-turned-consolidated-school-classmates, became the source for more than 800 items now on display in the historic structures.

When Ramsey, a graduate of the University of Tennessee at Martin who had taken every history course the university offered at the time, returned from a stint in the military, he decided to pursue a teaching path. Intrigued by teachers he’d met in Germany, he came back to Tennessee, got his teaching certificate and a job at Dyer High School. After five years there, he and his colleagues shifted from teaching in a small community school to the newly-formed Gibson County High School.

During his long teaching career, he taught social studies, U.S. history, sociology, geography, U.S. government and even photography (having learned from his students after being assigned to the Dyer yearbook staff upon his arrival). After only two years in the consolidated school, he realized that kids who saw each other every day had no connections to each other, outside of those they brought with them from their home communities.

He also saw that the new high school came with a lot of land, some of it wooded. And, given that the mascot for the school was the Pioneers, he proposed creating a home place. And by “creating” he meant building from scratch and by “pioneer” he meant log cabins. The proposal was accepted. The one building eventually became eight. The bonding experience for students ultimately produced costumed interpreters who researched and then demonstrated life on the settlement to student groups and civic organizations who came from across the area.

Once the project began, local landowners would call offering materials from a teardown or families would donate items they thought might fit in with the history being explained. Faced with the rusted parts of what appeared to be a tub with handles and widgets, the research would unearth that this piece was a washing machine, or this was how brooms were made, and this helped create the handles needed on a particular tool.

As the project continued to evolve, Ramsey applied to the state and won approval for the work to be viewed as a special course in Interpretive History. And the interactive learning continued to transcend what could be found on pages within the confines of a classroom. For instance, the time five young men were given a few tools and told to dig a well 20 feet deep and 24 inches in diameter with no further instructions -- and they did it. Or the Sunday afternoon that was supposed to be about a teardown but became a history lesson as the girls discovered that beneath the wallpaper they were tearing away was a layer of newspaper from 1877, so they spent the day reading.

Unfortunately, as education became more focused on preparing for tests and accelerating opportunities for college with more advanced classes, students had less and less time to suit up and take on their interpretive roles. By the time Ramsey was preparing to retire fully in 2013, the once active home place had become much less so. Today, four structures remain on the campus, and Ramsey, a Dyer resident, is under contract to ensure that what remains is cared for.

Part of that care was the donation of the hundreds of items to DPA. On tours, Ramsey proudly points to tools in the Tool Barn to items in the kitchen and bedroom that were gifts from Pioneer Home Place.

“The work done by historic reenactors like Mike and our many craftspeople at DPA is not only fun, it’s incredibly educational for children and adults,” said Scott Williams, CEO and President of DPA. “Experiencing history like this is so much more meaningful than reading it in a book or hearing about it in a lecture.”

So for those who want to see and experience the origin of such phrases as “sleep tight,” “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater,” or “chew the fat,” or anyone who has wondered just how a “modern woman” of 1876 made sure her clothes were clean or why a three-legged stool is a lesson in geometry, or how exactly a smokehouse smokes, a visit with Mike Ramsey, master storyteller/historical interpreter/interactive teacher is must-do on Saturdays at Discovery Park.

Discovery Park of America is located at 830 Everett Blvd. in Union City, Tenn. and is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.

The mission of Discovery Park of America, a premier world-class museum and 50-acre attraction located in Union City, Tennessee, is to enhance the educational experience of children and adults and to inspire them to learn more about the region’s unique cultural heritage and natural history. Included is a 100,000-square-foot museum featuring 9 interactive exhibit galleries with additional space for temporary exhibits from around the world and a 50-acre heritage park.

Discovery Park of America is a 501(c)(3) public charity funded by generous individuals, corporations and foundations including its principal funder, the Robert E. and Jenny D. Kirkland Foundation. For more information, visit

DiscoveryParkofAmerica.com and DPA’s pages on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).