

## Zombies come alive at Eastlake Elementary

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“It’s close to midnight... something evil’s lurking from the dark under the moonlight. You see something that almost stops your heart. You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it.”

But there weren’t any screams as zombies danced down the stage stairs and into the multi-purpose room filled with elementary school students. Instead, there were smiles of delight as they saw sixth-grade student zombies dancing with their Beverley Taylor Sorenson arts specialist Jackie Webster, who appeared as Michael Jackson from his jacket to his red pants.

They danced through Jackson’s hit song, “Thriller” at a surprise Halloween assembly.

Sixth-grader Addie Noyce said that it was fun

to do.

“The little kids had the cutest faces,” she said. “Some were smiling, laughing and were surprised all at once when they first saw the zombies dancing.”

Addie invited her family, including her grandfather, Tim Noyce, to the assembly.

“She said, ‘Grandpa, we’re doing ‘Thriller.’ Come see me be a zombie,’” he said. “I like to support all my grandkids so I came. All the kids here really seem to enjoy it, and they’re putting Michael Jackson to shame. They’re really good and having fun.”

Addie said she learned how much Webster likes Michael Jackson, which when the teacher heard that, she laughed and admitted that it was true.



Eastlake sixth-grade zombies line the stage before they perform a thrilling assembly for their classmates. (Julie Slama/City Journals)

“I grew up with my three sisters loving his music and dancing, but it’s my cousin who was friends with him,” she said. “She would take her kids over to his house where they’d play and hang out. She said he was just kind of like a kid who wanted to have fun.”

The idea of dancing to “Thriller” came nine years ago, when Webster, her sister and friend performed it in Foothills Elementary’s library for fun and to demonstrate dancing. Later, she began teaching it to her third-grade class, and the tradition was born.

“Everyone just planned on us doing it, and we doubled the size with all the kids on the same track. Parents thanked me, saying that it gave their children a chance to do some arts that aren’t in the school very much,” Webster said.

Her last year at Foothills, she invited all the former students who had learned the dance to join her in an encore performance.

So when she came to Eastlake as the arts specialist, several teachers, Principal Kyle Hansen and families also came to Eastlake and were familiar with the production, and she was asked to continue the tradition at this school.

Webster is the visual arts specialist through the Beverley Taylor Sorenson Arts Learning Program, which is a teaching partnership between highly qualified arts specialists and classroom teachers in more than 100 Utah elementary schools. Working with the classroom specialist, Webster gives students arts instruction that ties into the state’s fine arts core curriculum.

“I want students to have the opportunity

to explore all arts or have a chance to dabble in dance, art, theater and music, and this is giving them exposure to dance,” she said. “So far, I’ve only done it with one class during their art rotation, but I may have to look to changing that next year.”

This year, sixth-graders in Elaine Cloward’s class learned the dance steps and overcame being “too cool” for it.

“They learned it step by step,” Webster said. “We used some of the steps Michael Jackson did, then I composed my own steps where others are too difficult.”

With the parents’ support to help provide costumes and makeup, the sixth-graders performed “Thriller” for younger students and then joined them in singing fun Halloween songs. For a second assembly with older students, they included reciting “The Raven.”

“Through doing this, the kids bonded and realized that they’re all included and getting to do something special,” Webster said. “They learned rhythm and movement and tied it into a special Halloween surprise for the school.”

However, when students filed in for the assembly, most of sixth-grade performers were backstage — apart from a few zombies stretched out on the stage stairs. The Eastlake students had no idea that what was in front of them — “You close your eyes and hope that this is just imagination, but all the while you hear... thriller, thriller night.” ✦