

# **In Defense of the Hat**

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I recently wrote a piece about the shortage of men in charity work. In that article, I mentioned that I had gotten deeply into the “mentoring” of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> grade children. While the sessions with them are devoted mainly to improving their reading and speaking skills, you do a bit of work on their “living skills” also.

Upon first entering this activity, I gave thought to how to best approach youngsters of that age. How could I get them to open up to me? How to put them at ease when they are one-on-one with me? What kind of personality should I project that would let them know I am a friend, not a foe?

Well, I was raised on a farm. My brother and I both had horses that were ours to ride, feed, love. I always wore a western straw hat back in those childhood days. When I moved to Houston, TX in the 70’s, one of the first things my crew manager did was take me downtown to the “home store” of Stetson Hat Corporation and I bought a very nice Stetson. My Houston crew told me I wouldn’t get to first base with Texas businessmen if I weren’t wearing a Stetson.

Several years later, when I first moved to Floyd County, I bought ten acres and, among other things, a quarter horse. With that, I soon became President of the Floyd County Sheriff’s Posse, going on trail rides and riding in parades around the area.

I grew to love that old Stetson and was always looking for an excuse to wear it. In recent years, I have not worn it much. (Then light bulb!) I decided to wear it to my mentoring jobs with school children. It seemed to go over well. Walking down the halls among the K – 3 ages, I get a lot of wide-eyed stares from the kids. (Especially if I leave my sunglasses on until I get to the classroom.) Walking down the hall, I say things like “The sheriff is here, guys – be sure to mind your teacher”. I get asked, “Hey mister, did you ride your horse here?” “Can you really ride a wild horse?”

While I thought the hat did set me apart from the other adults in the school, I wasn’t quite sure if I was projecting a positive image, a meaningless image or perhaps a scary image to a lot of the kids. There was no way to tell this, until yesterday.

Yesterday I showed up at a first grade classroom to pick up a young boy I got assigned to this school year. The teacher waved me into the room to tell me that my student had gone to the doctor this day and would not be able to meet with me until next week.

Then she said to her class, “Does anyone else want to go with the mentor for reading help?” I kid you not, every child in that class raised their hand! I was flabbergasted! Obviously, they looked upon me as a friendly figure and someone who is fun to be with. Now I am just an average guy, folks, so it’s obviously the hat that did it!