

# REGION/STATE

THE INDEPENDENT / THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

## Mark Twain fields modern questions

By **TIM PRESTON**  
*The Independent*

**RUSH** In his own time it is unlikely Mark Twain ever tried to answer questions about cloning, abortion, military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Wednesday afternoon at Ramey-Estep High School, however, students didn't spare the tough questions for a man portraying the author who would now be 174 years old.

Sawyers in this room. I just found it phenomenal."

As a "posthumous Twain," the actor said he "strives for a soul-level understanding of the man who penned "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and created characters including Huckleberry Finn.

As Twain, dressed in the iconic white suit and sporting a genuine mustache and snowy hair which one student compared to that of Albert Einstein, Kitty discussed the nature of storytelling, and offered bits of advice which might not be especially appreciated in modern society.

"Only smoke one cigar at a time," he said when asked for a secret to long life. Later, he offered the advice, "Always respect your superiors — if you have any."

The value of stories, however, was the focus of his presentation.

### Twain performance

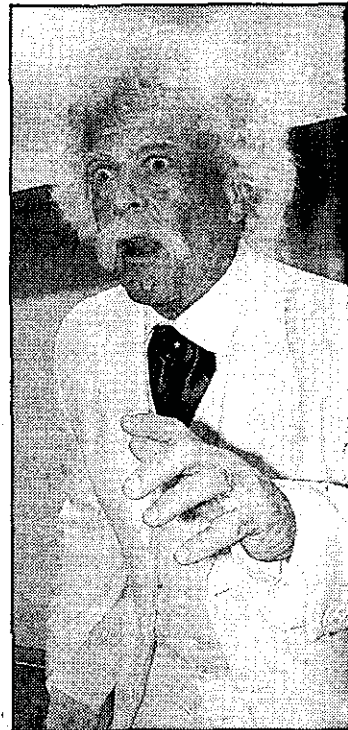
Alan Kitty will perform as Mark Twain tonight at 7 at the PAC.

"This is the best audience I've ever had. I'm very impressed by the intelligence of this audience," said Alan Kitty, a full-time

**Alan Kitty, a full-time, Mark Twain impersonator, answered questions ranging from abortion to Afghanistan as Twain at Ramey-Estep High School on Wednesday.** TIM PRESTON / THE INDEPENDENT

Twain impersonator whose goals include inspiring young people to read. Kitty said he always attempts to answer modern questions in a manner that would suit the man he has studied intensely since his own childhood.

With a knowing grin he added, "And, there were so many Tom



"The nature of storytelling has changed very little over the years," he said as he launched into a tale about a "cruel man" named Simon Wheeler, who battled a blizzard to unearth the remains of his deceased wife in order to recover her arm made of solid gold, only to be haunted by his actions.

He also spoke of a native American story about the origin of storytelling, which had practically every member of his auditorium sized audience hanging on his every word.

Oddly, it was during his reading from the second chapter of "Tom Sawyer" that relates the young schemer's scheme to get his aunt's fence whitewashed that a few in the audience got fidgety. While seeking follow-up answers to questions about the passage, he discovered the students

were certainly paying attention, and seemed surprised at the complexity and insight of their observations. Sawyer, they said, was not just a manipulator, but a "very good manipulator," one student observed, while others described the character as lazy and coniving, yet smart.

Nodding his approval of their observations, the modern-day Mark Twain challenged each in the audience to read the rest of the book to learn how the young man's character developed as he progressed from childhood to adolescence and adulthood.

The man at center stage also pointed out the similarities of the politicians of his time and those of today drawing comparisons to details of scandals which surrounded both Grover Cleveland and Bill Clinton.

When asked his opinion

about books being banned, he advised any publisher to tell people they can't have a copy of a new release because, "The more a thing is restricted, the more we desire it."

Despite the time gap, English teacher Paul McKenzie said his students have found many similarities between their own woes and those of Tom Sawyer.

"They've taken right to it," McKenzie said, citing familiar issues including bathing, going to church and sitting in a classroom when they would much rather be outdoors.

The "coming of age" aspect of Tom Sawyer's story and his relationship with Becky Thatcher was an easy point for each to identify with, he pointed out.