

PEOPLE OF NOTE | DR. SKATEBOARD

There are some people who just shine when they are doing what they love, and that light can fill a room, any room— even a small cafeteria like the one at Burnet Elementary, a small school in the Northeast filled with enthusiastic fourth- and fifth-graders whose eyes are pinned on William Robertson, aka Dr. Skateboard, as he seemingly defies the laws of physics, performing handstand fingerflips, ollies and spinning 360s.

Those terms may not be familiar to everyone, yet it appears almost all the shiny-eyed youths know exactly what Dr. Skateboard is saying. “Skateboarding is something we have in common. It’s part of who I am. It is fun,” he tells them as the majority of students raise their hands to indicate they too own a skateboard. He is there not to show off his impressive skills but to impart math and science to them in a way that unites instruction with “jaw-dropping” observation.

Bill Robertson has been skateboarding for 31 years. He began barefoot in the street and practiced relentlessly. His teenage dedication led him to win his very first contest in Virginia Beach. He then entered every contest he could along the East Coast, and at 15, he was given a box and sent into a Powerflex Skateboards warehouse. His instructions were to fill it up with all the skateboard merchandise he wanted. It was his first product sponsorship and a true measure of his success in the industry. “It blew my mind with how much I could carry out of there,” he happily reflects.

While skateboarding has had its cycles with popularity, Robertson has been faithful to the sport. When the scene died out, he continued to practice while he attended Duke University, where he earned a history degree. In the mid-1980s, the lure of competition drew him back, and he began to train fervently again, first as an amateur and then as a professional. By 1989, he had five sponsors and was enjoying performing demonstrations at schools, concerts, NBA halftimes and festivals with a group of alternative sports enthusiasts.

At one demonstration, someone made a passing comment to him about becoming a teacher. That comment took root, and Robertson began to envision that “skateboarding could be a tool for education,” he recalls. He pursued a master’s degree in education and then progressed to a doctorate in multicultural teaching and childhood education with a concentration in science and technology. In 1999, he received a Department of Education award as a top developer of online science education by developing a critical thinking curriculum model that helps teachers and students view science in real world applications.

Robertson may have been busy pursuing an education and establishing himself as “Dr. Skateboard,” but he still continued to practice and compete with earnest. In 2004, at the age of 38, he won the Masters title at the Casper Classic 2 World Flatland Championships. He performed for five years as a member of the Got Milk? Gravity Team and now performs with the Pro Impact Stunt Team while still giving demonstrations to area schools.

Three years ago, Robertson moved to El Paso to work as a professor at UTEP and has enjoyed the richness of the Border and the opportunities the college has allowed him to have in curriculum development, science education and technology integration. Perhaps even more exciting is his work with the El Paso Independent School District to create a video series called *Dr. Skateboard’s Action Science*, which addresses four different categories: forces, motion, Newton’s law and simple machines. Steve Putnicki, technical director/editor for the EPISD TV Studio, has been working closely with Robertson. “It’s been wonderful working with Bill. He is very professional, knows how to get the subject out there and how to get it done right,” he says. The goal is to raise science TAKS scores among middle school students and make it as interesting as possible. Beyond EPISD, the videos have the potential to be sold to educators throughout the United States.

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From videos to students in cafeterias, Dr. Skateboard encourages a new way of looking at the world. “To be successful at skateboarding,” he tells them, “you have to master and understand the center of gravity. There are always things to learn through problem solving and critical thinking.” After doing 20 360-spins on the skateboard, he ceremoniously stacks five skateboards on top of each other and precariously balances while moving forward. “No way!” students crow in response. “Things that made me successful in skateboarding have made me successful in my education— persistence, setting goals, self discipline, practice and creativity,” he says. He places a skateboard on a long table and retreats to the edge of the room on another skateboard. “You’re a brave man,” mutters a student. “Come on. Clap. Motivate me,” Dr. Skateboard says. “It helps to have friends motivate you.” He skates to the table, jumps up high, lands on the skateboard on the table and is rewarded with hoots and hollers.

Toward his finale, a little girl volunteers from the audience. She’s nervous, and he indicates he is going to jump over her while she is standing. Her fellow students shout words of encouragement, telling her to be brave and not to move. Dr. Skateboard catapults— he has an award-winning high jump of 4 feet, 2 inches— amid the shrieks of students and lands safely on his board on the other side of her. He turns to their admiring faces and tells them to set goals, to finish high school and go to college. “I would be honored to have you in my class at the university,” he says breathlessly after their rowdy applause. 



