

LOCAL LIFE: PUT IT TO MUSIC

Grand Forks Herald

By Kris Jensen
Herald Staff Writer
Grand Forks, ND
September 28, 2000

“Singing is one of the most beautiful things we do. It keeps us healthy.”

You might think it was his vibrant tie-dyed socks sticking out from his sandals that kept the children’s eyes on Jim Valley this week. But spend just moments watching this one-time member of Paul Revere and the Raiders, and there’s no mistaking it: Children love this man. He sings for them, he sings with them, and he tells them they are special. But he tells them from his heart, and children, wise in ways we are not, know beyond a doubt he is sincere.

Valley’s also a great big good time ---he’s here in Grand Forks this week for a series of workshops with students at Eielson and Twining schools at Grand Forks Air Force Base as well as a show tonight for base students and children bused in from Emerado. Eielson music teacher Ali Parkinson and former Eielson teacher Mary Kay Tezel brought the whole thing together with grants from Target, the Heartland Foundation and the Back-to-School contest sponsored by Columbia Mall.

Tuesday morning, Valley was a visual magnet for some 40 secondgraders at Eielson---a superstar of sorts to children who saw him last year and have been singing his songs since then. Granted, Parkinson also has been teaching them the tunes this fall, along with Valley’s hybridized sign language---a mishmash of American Sign Language and stuff he and his young audiences have made up along the way.

It’s a mix that works, to say the least, because Valley held the attention of scores of children for an hour at a time---no small feat, as any grown-up knows. Ten minutes into the first session Tuesday morning, Valley had all but one---all but *one*---of these 40 secondgraders engaged and singing.

It’s a gift he has, says Parkinson. “Last year, even kids who never sing---they did everything with him. And all the songs have motions,” she said. Between lively tunes about friendship and the environment and even a few golden oldies, the 57-year-old grandfather of six infused the children with the message he lives to promote: You are special. “It’s sacred work that I do,” he said between hourlong miniconcerts with the children. “Helping kids feel good about themselves. They’re all little lighthouses, part of this circle.”

Valley spends about two weeks a month traveling the world, a sort of musical ambassador between children. They make up songs with him as he travels, and he brings the creations with him on his journeys. “The lyrics are the children’s

lyrics," he said. Among the most moving experiences he's had were those in Katmandu and Nepal, he said, because of the cultural cooperation and spirit of peace he found there.

Tuesday, against a backdrop of a paper rainforest made by Parkinson, Tezel, Eielson paraprofessional Jennie Quanrud and parent volunteers, Valley sat with his guitar and right on the spot, put to music a poem written by the second graders, as he does with each school workshop. He stopped just a verse into it to make sure the kids approved---and they did.

Then he had them up on their feet in a big circle, singing at the top of their lungs songs some of their parents may even be too young to know---"Rockin'Robin" and Splish Splash"---with unbridled voices. He was careful to slip in reminders here and there that every one of these children is special. "You make my heart laugh," he told them after a song. "Singing is one of the most beautiful things we do," he said. "It keeps us healthy."