

Minnesauke students get down to business

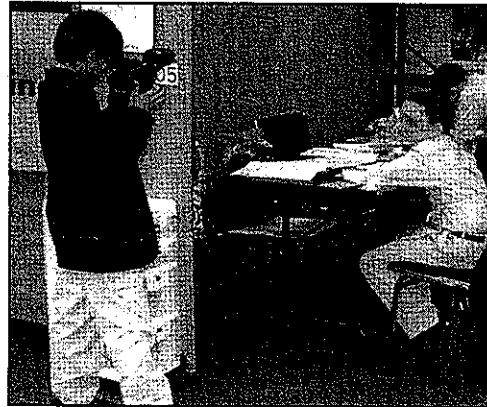
Fifth graders experience the job market through role playing at Commerce Plaza

BY FRAN HARRISON

"Guys, our balance is \$55.25," William Murtagh announced to his co-workers as he poured over his balance sheet. As a bookkeeper at Xerox, one of the imaginary businesses at Commerce Plaza, William, who in real life is a fifth-grader at Minnesauke Elementary School, was responsible for keeping track of income and expenses.

Located in a 2,500-square-foot facility on the grounds of the Plainedge school district in Massapequa, Commerce Plaza is a hands-on simulated business community for children that promotes an understanding of the world of business and economics. During a six-week prep course conducted by the classroom teacher at Minnesauke, the Commerce Plaza curriculum is introduced to the students who learn the basic principles of economics. A full-day field trip to the site follows. Classroom lessons are integrated with actual work experience in an environment where students act as retail operators, service providers and consumers.

David Schwartz dashed in and out of cubicles, (office buildings to him) with a cup that held the donations he had collected. As director of the Neighborhood Way, a public service department of town hall, he explained that he was busy collecting money for the American Lung



Photos by Fran Harrison

Tommy Harrison photographs Brandon Murtagh for an article to be published in the local paper.

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— MARIE HANSEN

Cancer Association, "to help people not get cancer."

At the same time, reporter Torri Kurtz was interviewing Mayor Dane LaFemina, who opined that the job posed an awesome responsibility. "You have to give out a lot of money and checks to different places."

Darting around town with his camera at the ready was photographer Tommy Harrison, who worked for the local paper. "I have to take pictures of each business and anyone in it" for Torri's story about the day at Commerce Plaza.

"Tommy knows how to handle a camera, and he wrote that on his application," said Marie Hansen, a fifth grade teacher at Minnesauke. Prior to the outing, students filled out an interest survey and gave a list of their job choices. They filled out job applications explaining why they thought they would be good for particular jobs. Hansen and Frank Russo, another Minnesauke fifth grade teacher who brought his class to Commerce Plaza, used the information on the inter-

est surveys to pick the jobs best suited for each child.

"This was not an easy task," Hansen said. "Believe it or not there are certain jobs that are very popular" like working at McDonald's or as an attorney. "In order for the whole experience to work out, they all have to do their job well."

Matthew Edelstein was the lucky guy who got to work as a counter clerk at McDonald's, the most coveted job in town. "I think it's pretty cool because I get to work with food and stuff," he said before turning to a customer. "Thanks for coming to McDonald's. What do you fancy? I was told to say something nice to the customers," he said, looking back at a real-life reporter.

At the Wellness Center, Oliver Post gave \$5 check-ups and made appointments. Asked if he were a general practitioner, he replied, "Yeah, I guess." Ann LaFemina, a Minnesauke mother who went to help out, said the pretend medical clinic had been very busy all day since the students were encouraged to get physicals during their breaks. "They're taking their health very seriously."

At the newspaper office, David Lord, the art layout editor, said he was behind schedule because "I was helping everyone else before." Asked when his deadline was, he replied, "I have no idea."

Initially funded by the New York State Department of Education through its School to Work Initiative, Commerce Plaza has hosted over 3,000 students from over 15 school districts across Long Island since opening



Some of the proud Commerce Plaza participants: back row (l-r) Shannon Murphy, Torri Kurtz and Janine Capuccio; front row, Brandon Murtagh, Tommy Harrison and David Lord

almost exactly three years ago. It is now maintained through corporate sponsorship and school districts.

In a public announcement, Mayor LaFemina reminded his constituents to carry out their civic duty and vote in a survey on how they would rate Commerce Plaza.

Danny Schaeffer, the general manager of LIPA, admonished ratepayers to turn off their lights when they weren't using them, adding, "If we're already working with someone when you're paying your bills, don't just stand around because it's annoying."

Melanie Gonzalez, the bookkeeper for the Yellow Book, announced, "We're having some problems. We don't have all the checks or we lost them or Kathy did."

"They're working so well together," said Russo. "It's great. They're actually doing it on their own, and it's given them a chance to be self-starters and task oriented. They're doing things they've never done before. They've set goals and accomplished them. And the best thing is that they want to do well. It's a great chance for them to show they can do it and get the job done."