

Capitola Elementary School teacher Mike Jones doesn't think about being blind much anymore. 'I'm too busy,' he simply says.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

'JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE'

Mike Jones teaches his students how to multiply and divide, read and spell. He just happens to be blind.

By **TRACIE WHITE**
Sentinel staff writer

MR. JONES is busy. He's busy breaking up fights, keeping kids in straight lines, giving spelling tests and multiplication tests. Controlling the chatterboxes, encouraging the shy ones. And forever answering questions:

"Mr. Jones, what time is it?"

"Mr. Jones, can I hang up your cane?"

"Mr. Jones, Justin's team got the ball twice in a row."

"Mr. Jones, is school over yet?"

Under the fluorescent lights of his Capitola Elementary School classroom, 45-year-old Mike Jones is responsible for 31 second- and third-graders six hours a day. After years of practice, he's now got a bag of tricks that helps make up for the disadvantages of not being able to see his students or the chalkboard he writes on every day.

He recognizes students by their voices within two weeks of the first day of school. He knows the location of each piece of furniture in the classroom and keeps constantly on the move, never more than 10 feet away from any student. It helps keep them in line.

He's got a full-time assistant who grades papers and calls on the students with their hands up to answer Mr. Jones' questions. He's got a computer that reads books to him out loud, a watch that tells time in a computerized voice and a classroom full of students who know how to read braille. (He tells them it's a secret code.)

Mr. Jones is one of fewer than 1,000 blind teachers nationwide, one of the few who teach kids who are not blind, and the only legally blind teacher in Santa Cruz County public schools.

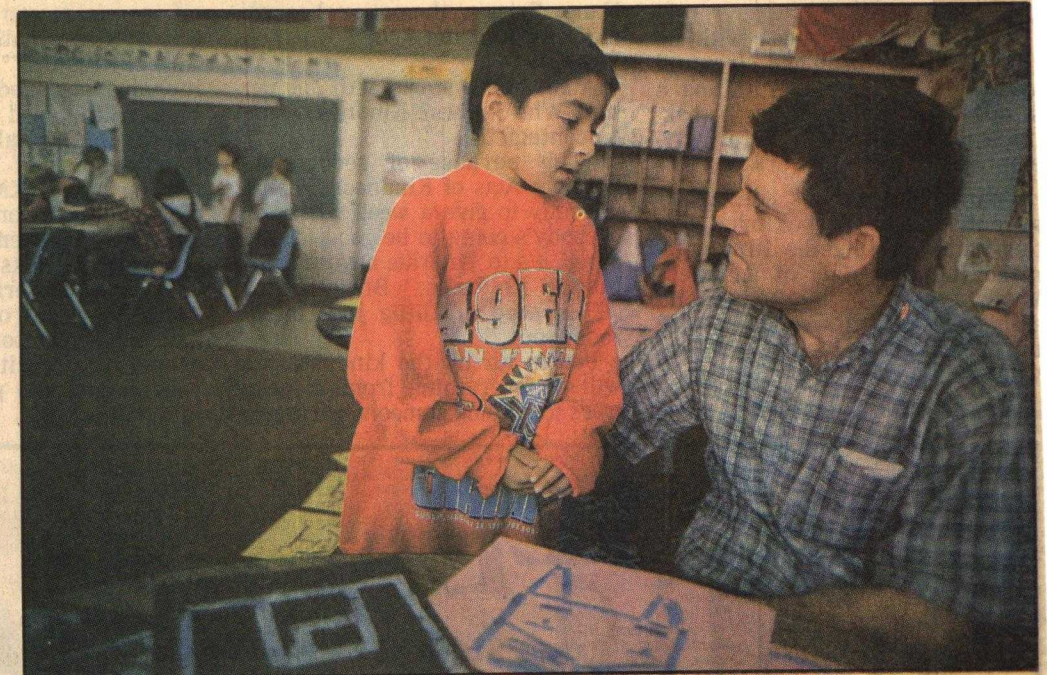
After 20 years he knows what to expect from kids. He's never been hit by a spitball and never had an 8-year-old creep out the back door unnoticed. (Kids are just too noisy, and they snitch on each other all the time.)

And he's never thought he couldn't teach just because he was blind.

"It's funny, sometimes he forgets he's blind," says his wife of 25 years, Hibbe Jones. "I do too. It's been so many years."

"IDON'T think about it much anymore. I'm too too busy,"

Please see TEACHER — C2



The novelty quickly wears off, and to students, Jones is just another teacher.

says Jones. He's sitting on a child's size chair in the back of his classroom during a break. The sounds of children's yells, bouncing balls, laughter, filters through the crack under the door from the playground outside. Sounds that are never far away.

"Most kids treat me like everybody else," he says. "It's the adults who have trouble dealing with people with disabilities. That's why it's so important to teach them while they're young, before it's too late."

Jones crouches low, used to bringing his face down next to the voices of his students. Tall and thin, Jones wears his brown hair cropped short, smiles often and is extraordinarily upbeat. He wears jeans and keeps his guitar close at hand. He's the father of two teen-age boys, runner of marathons and clay maker.

"Kids are watching us all the time," he says, his eyes gazing upwards just a little off center. "You're on stage. Kids are looking up to you whether you want them to or not."

On the first day of school, Jones tells his class the story of how he became blind, then opens the discussion up to their questions.

"They ask me things like, 'How do you tie your shoes?' or 'How do you go to the bathroom?' I tell them 'Just like everyone else.'"

The novelty wears off quickly. Pretty soon he's just another teacher — one they happen to like a lot. Ask the kids. They'll tell you the only thing really different about having a blind teacher is that he bumps into desks and they get to hold his hand when they go outside.

They like that part a lot.

"He's a good teacher because he teaches us clay," says 9½-year-old John Swint. "He goes on field trips."

"We get to hold his hand when he walks with his cane," says Heather Baldwin, 8.



Jones' assistant, Linda Moss, is always there, acting as Jones' eyes in the classroom.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

"My dad didn't believe I had a blind teacher," says 7-year-old Stephanie Green. "I thought it was pretty cool."

JONES WASN'T always blind. He lost his sight at the age of 21 from a disease that deteriorates the retina — Retinitis pigmentosa. In college at the time studying to become a teacher, he never considered changing his major. He always wanted to be a teacher. He graduated from Cal State Los Angeles and spent an undergraduate year at the University of Tubingen in Germany. Then he did his student teaching in Southern California along with his wife, who was also studying to become a teacher.

"I was pretty depressed at the time," says Jones. Probably one of the few times in his life, says his

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— Mike Jones

wife. "The hardest thing was getting that white cane."

But it never stopped him. Neither did his teachers who told him he'd probably never make it as a teacher.

"I wanted to get off aid to the blind," he says. "I wanted to be self sufficient. I'm very tenacious, very persistent. Maybe it's from my running background." Jones has completed 14 marathons, broken ribs from running into cars, and run a marathon in under three hours in 1981. Being blind hasn't stopped him from doing much.

It does stop him from driving and from reading to himself. His wife has spent hours reading to him, including the entire text of Michener's "Hawaii," but these are just minor inconveniences now. Just part of the daily routine.

One of the most impressive as-

pects of Jones' teaching ability is his willingness to break out of routine, says fellow teacher JoAnne Roster. He's not afraid to try new things. He's constantly challenging himself and his students.

"He builds an environment where kids can try new things, where they're not afraid to fail," says Gayle Fairbanks, principal at Capitola Elementary School. "He expects the best from kids in all areas. He's a wonderful role model."

JONES takes a break from chalkboard instruction and wanders slowly to the back of the room. It's after lunch and the background chatter has dulled to a low rumble. Students yawn, pick their noses, rest their heads in their hands.

He touches the shoulders of the students as he passes, ruffles the tops of their heads. (He can recognize a student by the bumps on their head.) He brings his face down close to theirs when they blurt out questions. Passes out hugs and handshakes freely.

"Lauren, what's the first thing you're going to do when you get your math paper? Put your name on it," he says to the class. The rumbling grows louder. "Hey guys you need to sit down. It's not visiting time right now. I shouldn't hear anybody visiting."

His assistant, Linda Moss, is always there behind him. Telling kids to get back in their seats, stop

talking. Taking time to look at their papers.

"I didn't know what to expect," she says, remembering back to the first day of class. "Except that I'd be his eyes."

Jones uses humor to smooth over the rough spots, like when he's talking to an empty space where a student used to be or

when he unintentionally walks over wet paintings laid out on the floor to dry.

"I can't look. It's too embarrassing," he says, covering his eyes when his students forget to put their names on their papers. He's quick to make fun of himself, his students say. Like when Mimi Spencer was complaining the other day that the kids were in front of her and she couldn't see.

"He said, 'Don't worry, I can't see either,'" says Mimi, grinning.

Still, it would be nice if he could see their faces, just once, says Mimi. Jones agrees. So he asks his assistant what they look like and he keeps the mental images alive, visions of red hair, toothless grins, freckles.

"I know it sounds like I've been in a commercial, but I want my kids to know life isn't forever," he says. "You want to make it count."

So he teaches them art, music, takes them running. Stresses academics. The day ends with a short game of kickball. Mr. Jones, white cane in one hand, a student's hand in the other, leads the way back to the classroom.

"Get in line Chris. Are you guys in line? It doesn't sound like it," he says. Then he tap tap taps back over the bumpy green grass to the sound of the endless questions of his students following along behind.