



Author slated to talk to students at middle school

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By **LAURIE LUCAS**
The Press-Enterprise

Autumn Earle-Rodriguez has pulled off a bit of magic again. She persuaded the writer of a best-selling epic fantasy trilogy to speak at Vista Heights Middle School in Moreno Valley. That would be the very hot Frank Beddor, whose third "Looking Glass Wars" novel, "ArchEnemy," just hit stores last month, as did another of his tie-in-graphic works, called "Hatter M: Mad with Wonder."



Kurt Miller / The Press-Enterprise

Autumn Earle-Rodriguez directs students in her advanced choir class at Vista Heights Middle School in Moreno Valley. She recently coaxed a best-selling author to address three school assemblies. Earle-Rodriguez also helps her drama students prepare for history day presentations.

After meeting him in San Diego at a comic book convention two years ago, the choir and drama teacher buttonholed Beddor to speak at her school.

"I'm not shy," she said.

On Dec. 1, at no charge, he will address three assemblies. That will include a history lesson on Lewis Carroll and his "Alice" and a screening of "The Looking Glass Wars" novel trailer.

For Earle-Rodriguez, this coup isn't just about catching a celebrity.

"I want to encourage and excite kids about reading," she said.



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"I'm not shy," says Autumn Earle-Rodriguez. She sang, danced and acted at Valley View High School, performed at Disneyland and co-founded the Performance Loft in Redlands.

She succeeded so well in 2008 that Beddor sold \$1,600 worth of books to the students, and this year's pre-order sales at Vista Heights have topped \$560.

But then, Earle-Rodriguez is hugely successful in immersing her students in all types of cultural experiences. In 2007, the district honored her as one of its middle school teachers of the year.

"I think our performing arts would easily rival many of the middle school programs in the county," said the school's principal, Mark Hasson. "Autumn's worked very hard to create rich experiences around the arts. Many students wouldn't have those opportunities if it weren't for her passion."

Earle-Rodriguez, 32, also has booked a medieval instrumentalist, Indian musicians from the Andes and a graphic artist/story teller through the outreach Gluck program at UC Riverside.



Autumn Earle-Rodriguez has her choir students' attention. In 2007, the Moreno Valley Unified School District honored her as one of its middle school teachers of the year. "Anything to get them exposed to the arts," she said.

During the past five years, several of her advanced drama students have competed nationally with history day projects they've researched, written and performed under Earle-Rodriguez's tutelage. They've brought alive such personages as Buffalo Bill Cody, Scott Joplin, Florence Nightingale and Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii.

Also, on Thursday, she's taking 27 of her advanced drama students to Disneyland to take an improvisation class.

As a student, Earle-Rodriguez sang, danced and acted at Valley View High School, studied voice, performed at Disneyland and continued to immerse herself in the arts at the University of Redlands. After she graduated, she helped found the Performance Loft, formerly known as Beachworks, a cultural arts center in Redlands. Although she's been in a couple of shows there, Earle-Rodriguez is too busy to teach there.

She and her husband, Steven Rodriguez, 33, the choir director at Rialto High School, live in Beaumont with their two girls, Isabella, 5, and Ava, 3. Both take dance lessons.

Earle-Rodriguez's mother, Shelley Neill, 58, has volunteered in her classes for the past nine years.

"She's my stage mom," Earle-Rodriguez said with pride. "She's a performer at heart." *Reach Laurie Lucas at 951-368-9569 or llucas@PE.com*