

Bruce Schimmel, center, with members of his "Sonic Squad" — a training group for budding journalists — from left, Hannah Williamson, 10, Alex Maloy, 10, Ian Evans, 14, and Maggie Williamson, 8.

# Storyfinder

Bruce Schimmel wears many creative hats, but above all, he's a listener, searching for what people have to say

**A**lexis Heuring has a story to tell. And Bruce Schimmel is helping her tell it. "Take a breath. Breathe, breathe," Schimmel coaches her. He is wearing headphones, their long cord reaching across his home recording studio to a black tower of blinking equipment. Alexis, 9, is standing before a silver-and-black microphone, reading from a three-page manuscript.

Her feet planted on a small yellow square of paper stuck to the carpet, her hands holding her manuscript at eye level so she talks into the microphone, Alexis tells her story — of her grandmother fixing pancakes, of her grandfather's teeth, pulled out by sticky syrup, landing on his plate, of the laughter that followed. It takes her 11 minutes, saying each sentence at least twice, sometimes six or seven times, until Schimmel smiles and, with a thumbs-up, lets her move on to the next story.

"Look at me. Tell me," he coaches her through the story. "Remember the image, work with the image that you have."

And finally, at the end: "That's better — I could hear the emotion in your voice."

Alexis is one of nine students from Milton Elementary School who are part of the Sonic Squad, Schimmel's name for his training group for budding journalists. The children are learning how to write a descriptive account of an event and how to tell that story so that others understand it. Schimmel will whittle their recorded stories down to tight, one-minute vignettes and post them on a Web site for their families to read. The best readings may be aired on the public radio station that reaches coastal Delaware, WSCL, in Salisbury, Md. ➤

Story by Lynn R. Parks  
Photographs by Kevin Fleming

It's not that he has a great affinity for children, says Schimmel, 51. "I don't really understand them," he says.

Rather, he leads the Sonic Squad — meeting with the children weekly, for two hours at a time, editing and re-editing, advising and encouraging — to train young people in the ways of good journalism, "so by the time they are 15, they are ready to go out there and report," he says. "So they have a good sense of story."

"Lesson No. 1 is to tell the truth," says Lynne Maloy of Milton, whose 10-year-old daughter Alex is a member of the Squad. "Kids are so used to a half-explanation; they're not into a lot of adjectives. But Bruce makes them think about the story, articulate it and write it. In the process, they get an understanding of truth versus fiction."

Schimmel is a journalist. The founder of a weekly newspaper in Philadelphia, he has, in the 12 years since he bought a home in Milton, written and produced a number of radio stories about the people and the natural environment of his adopted home.

The "Life on Delmarva" series Schimmel produced for WSCL, featuring people from the peninsula talking about themselves, much like the Sonic Squad's stories, won him a Golden Reel award from the National Federation of Community Broadcasters. The award hangs on a wall in his recording studio, along with a dozen Associated Press awards. He has also been recognized by the Public Radio News Directors organization, winning a first-place award for a 1998 story on the Punkin Chunkin event and a second-place award for a 2001 piece on pollution in the inland bays.

His stories have been broadcast on such National Public Radio programs as "All Things Considered," "Pulse of the Planet" and "Living on Earth."

"I am sure there are others who could do what he does," says Fred Marino, general manager of the Salisbury radio station. "But we haven't found them in this area. Bruce knows what news is and how to find it. He also knows how to produce it for the ear."

Schimmel believes in the power of accurate reporting. He also believes in the value of stories, especially those of people, like children, who are often shouted down by the more powerful.

"It is imperative that we do the stories

from people who are not heard — that we hear their voices and allow them to have an impact," he says.

Maloy says that the Sonic Squad children often did not appreciate the value of their stories. "They were everyday activities, boring," she says. "But constantly, Bruce was asking them, 'What is important about that?' 'Why do I care?' It made the kids think about what they were saying, and understand its value."

### Concerns about development

In some ways, Schimmel has found in rural Milton what he was searching for when he and his wife, Kate Maskar, bought their home. He had sold the *Philadelphia City Paper*, the weekly that he founded in 1981, and he and Kate wanted a second home someplace about two hours from Philadelphia, where they still have a home and where Maskar works as a graphic designer. Someplace where "we could garden in the nude if we wanted to," Schimmel says.

They have not tried naked gardening yet. Not that they couldn't — woods nearly hide their two-story, wood-sided home, which overlooks a forested gully.

But they have come to love Sussex County.

"The land is lovely, and there are so many people in the community that Kate and I care about and who would be irreplaceable in our lives," Schimmel says.

But the county is changing. Su-Sax Acres, the community in which Schimmel lives, is expanding with new homes. Sussex's population is exploding — nearly doubling since 1970 and expected to grow by another 50 percent to a quarter million people by 2030 — and Milton is one of Sussex's fastest-growing towns. And that growth, Schimmel says, is being poorly managed.

"I found myself here and I looked around, and Delmarva was this unique place," he says. "But it is becoming less of a unique place, so changed by development. Its natural environment is being pushed off and its natural culture is being pushed off."

At the entrance to Schimmel's driveway, next to the sign that cautions visitors that the property is guarded by a cat, is a large notice that warns potential Su-Sax buyers that there are things they should know before they buy. Fliers, written by Schimmel and available there next to the notice,

warn about what he says are problems with the development's road and with Diamond Pond, around which Su-Sax houses are built. The fliers also caution that additional development is coming.

"I am doing my best to slow development down. I have flown across the country," says Schimmel, a licensed pilot who owns a Ximango sailplane, "and when you do that, you get a sense of place. This place is not developing well."

Schimmel is concerned by environmental troubles that he says are facing the county and are indicators of poorly planned development. In addition to stories about pollution in the inland bays, he has done radio stories about the declining numbers of horseshoe crabs that use Delaware beaches for spawning grounds and on the use of alachlor, an herbicide, and resultant damage to groundwater.

But more than that, he is angry at the effect development and rapid change are having on the citizens of his adopted county. He has written radio stories about the homeless and about the Sussex prison population. He is working on a radio series about obesity in children, particularly Sussex County children, an indicator, he says, of the degrading environment in which many children live.

"We are hollowing out the middle class, creating classes of rich and poor," he says. "We increasingly have haves and have-nots, and the have-nots are being shoved into a corner. There is a total disconnect between rich and poor."

To prove his point, he cites statistics about child poverty in lower Delaware, statistics he is using in a story about health care. From 1989 to 2002, poverty rates among Kent and Sussex children rose from 10.8 percent to 23.3 percent. In that same period, the children's poverty rate in New Castle County dropped from 13.2 percent to 9.2 percent.

Schimmel's rage is obvious when he reads the statistics from "Kids Count in Delaware 2003," a fact book on the state's children and teenagers produced by the Center of Community Research and Service at the University of Delaware.

"Those numbers are stunning. Kids are a leading indicator of problems in society, and they are being left back," he says. "Nobody is paying attention to that."

He isn't surprised at the lack of attention by news outlets to children's poverty and to Sussex's natural resources "being

stretched to the limit to maximize profits."

"You aren't going to read about those kinds of things in a paper that has a real estate section," he says. "But I've got a big mouth, and I can see what's going on. Somebody's got to say it. This is what I do."

"Bruce deals with controversial topics," says Marino. "But he feels a strong obligation to the people he is reporting about, as well as to the audience, to be fair. He is very professional in that regard, better than most."

### A watchdog, not a cheerleader

A native of New York City, Schimmel graduated from the University of Rochester in 1974 with a bachelor's degree in English. He went on to the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned his master's degree in English two years later. From 1977 to 1981, he was a lecturer in the English department at the University of Pennsylvania and in 1981 he founded the *Philadelphia City Paper*, an alternative weekly which has grown to a readership of 450,000. In 1992, the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce commended the paper for its arts advocacy. Schimmel sold the paper in 1996 but still writes a regular column, "Loose Canon." Recent topics have included the war in Iraq, a call to Americans to serve in the military ("If a nation decides to kill, it is a moral imperative that all its citizens, from all walks of life, share in the burden of dying"), national security alerts and gays in the Boy Scouts.

Being a journalist in the city is different from digging for the truth in a close-knit Delmarva community. "In Philadelphia, it was easy," he says. "I could do a story, then just walk away. Here, I have conflicts of interest. And I know the people. It is hard for them not to take things personally."

Last summer, while Schimmel conducted interviews for a story at a small grocery store in Milton, town police took him into custody and held him at the police station for two hours. No charges were filed.

The focus of the story he planned was to be on changes in Milton over the last 50 years. He had already interviewed long-

time residents. At the grocery store, he was talking with teenage boys, who were buying rolling papers, and girls, who were just hanging out on a summer Saturday night. He was interrupted in his interviewing by the police, whom he believes were called to the store by someone who did not want that side of town revealed.

Schimmel never completed his story. But he still has his tapes, including



Bruce Schimmel works in his Milton studio, where he has produced stories that have aired on National Public Radio programs.

recordings made after the police showed up. With no apologies, he predicts that someday, he will tell the story about change in Milton.

"My job is not to be a cheerleader," he says. "I am a watchdog."

Don Rush, news director of WSCL radio, says Schimmel's broadcasts capture a part of life that is not often reported. "He gives a real human dimension to issues around life on Delmarva, to things that sometimes get lost in the regular news," he says. "He looks at the dynamics of what is going on, not just the who, what and where of it."

### Telling stories, telling the truth

Back in Schimmel's studio, Alexis Heuring has been replaced at the microphone by 10-year-old Alek Faust, who is reading a story about the death of his 23-year-old miniature pony, Nellie. When he says his last good-bye to his dying pet, he has written, he gives her his "last and longest hug." Despite her pain, "she still wants to follow me out the door," he recounts.

"That story gets me every time," Schimmel says. "I hope we can get it on

the radio."

Brian Wingo, 11, follows with a story about visiting a Lionel train display. Then Hannah Williamson, 9, tells about her rooster, Cocky Locky, and his encounter with Jasmine, the black Lab. Her mother repaired the damage to the rooster's throat with needle and thread and Cocky Locky is now "so perfect, he looks like those plastic roosters that you buy at Wal-Mart."

"One really good way to tell the story about changing lives is through children," says Schimmel, after the last of the Sonic Squad has left for the afternoon. "They are a really good indicator of the status of society."

He feels an imperative to tell people's stories, to get them out before they are lost. "This is an amazing place," he says. "Everything is changing so fast. I feel a sense of urgency and seriousness here that I never felt in the city."

"His talent as a reporter is a combination of greater than average curiosity and an

eagerness to tell the story of people who aren't being heard or whose stories can't be told any other way," says Marino.

At a recent Milton Poetry Festival, Schimmel was asked to speak to the winners of the children's poetry contest. He talked to the children about the poet John Milton, for whom Milton is named and who wrote, in addition to "Paradise Lost," "Aeropagetica," a treatise on the value of free speech.

"If people are allowed to hear a free and open debate, Milton believed that truth would come out the winner," he told his audience. "So, Milton would say that it is our goal, as poets or writers, to seek the truth. And that it is our duty, as citizens, to be sure that truth-seeking people are never gagged or kept silent."

"This is what I have always done," Schimmel says. "I have always worked very hard to see the truth and to tell it. In a fair fight between truth and lies, truth will always emerge victorious. It has to." ■

*Freelance writer Lynn Parks of Seaford is a regular contributor to Delaware Beach Life.*