

FYI



Among the political memorabilia in Truman impersonator Ray Starzmann's Kansas City apartment is a copy of the Nov. 3, 1948, Chicago Daily Tribune announcing: "Dewey Defeats Truman."

JILL TOYOSHIBA / THE KANSAS CITY STAR

WE'D LIKE YOU TO MEET ... Ray Starzmann

HAIL TO THE CHIEFS

History lover impersonates a full repertoire of U.S. presidents.

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

Many people know Ray Starzmann as a friendly, helpful presence in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art store, where he has worked for 16 years. But behind his mild, bookish facade is a passionate American history buff who has hobnobbed and corresponded with presidents and attained national renown for portraying them.

Teddy Roosevelt, FDR and Harry Truman are Starzmann's specialties. He can quote them by heart, knows the ins and outs of their

biographies and has wowed hundreds with his convincing impersonations.

Starzmann has performed for state legislatures and at political conventions. He has done programs for schools, museums and libraries across the U.S.

Last fall, he was the main speaker for the 70th anniversary of Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. He even did a gig in Paris once, portraying Franklin Delano Roosevelt for a group of businessmen.

"I believe if we put a face on history, history is very accessible," he said.

Starzmann is perhaps best known for his portrayal of Truman, whom he met and corresponded with for many years.

He has saved the complimentary notes

SEE STARZMANN IN ACTION

Go to bit.ly/xEPRdG to see a video of Ray Starzmann's 2009 portrayal of Harry Truman in the Kansas City Public Library's "Meet the Past" series with library director Crosby Kemper III.

people have sent him over the years: "I was definitely engaged the whole time," an Iowa student remarked of Starzmann's 2008 Truman performance in Des Moines.

"You put on a wonderful performance as President Truman," then-Congressman Ike Skelton wrote in a letter dated March 11,

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MEET: A home full of political memorabilia

FROM C1

2010.

Starzmann is an actor, but he never studied acting.

"It just evolved," he said. "I have the knowledge. I listen to a lot of old recordings we have, going back to Benjamin Harrison."

"I guess it's called acting," he added. "The knowledge is the most important thing. And I do look a little bit like Truman."

Starzmann's repertoire includes more than a dozen historical figures, including Adlai Stevenson, who in 1952 lost a bid for president.

"He didn't win because he ran against Eisenhower," Starzmann said. "There was no way anyone could have beat Eisenhower."

But Stevenson, in Starzmann's view, "elevated the character of American political life."

"Patriotism should always be the love of something, not the fear of something," he said, invoking a favorite Stevenson quote.

"He was poetic; he wrote his own speeches," Starzmann said. "Not since Lincoln did we have that kind of language in our political lexicon. I enjoy portraying him, talking about things he believed in. Quoting him is a wonderful thing."

Starzmann's fascination with history dates to his student days at Girard College, a boarding school for grades one through 12 in Philadelphia.

"My third-grade teacher instilled in me the importance and love of history," he said. "As I got older, I started writing everyone."

And they wrote back, as evidenced by the yellowed pages signed by Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover and many others, which Starzmann has carefully preserved in binders.

His book-lined Southmore-

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RAY STARZMANN

land apartment is like a small museum of political and presidential memorabilia, including campaign buttons and original inaugural medals, political posters and photographs of Starzmann with George McGovern, Nelson Rockefeller, Truman and other political luminaries.

He has kept vintage copies of Life magazine and newspapers with historic headlines, including a Nov. 3, 1948, Chicago Daily Tribune announcing "Dewey Defeats Truman." Also on display is a sizable art collection, with works by Kansas City artists such as Tony Naponic and Dick Smith.

"I live with my friends," he said. "Artists would come by over a period of 20 years." On travels east, Starzmann has visited with some of the greats, including Helen Frankenthaler. He is a good friend of landscape abstractionist Wolf Kahn.

Starzmann's passion for art equals his love of presidential history.

"Art is a way we can understand our past. It influences the present and helps us find out where we're going," he said. "I'm very interested in American history and very interested in connecting that with American art."

He has combined his two passions in a presentation, "Picturing History: Art and the American Presidency." He explores the lives of American presidents through photographs, paintings, sculptures and prints.

And he does it while personifying Truman.

Starzmann has presented "Picturing History" and other gallery programs at various museums, including the Nelson-Atkins. There he recently played William Rockhill Nelson, the founder of The Kansas City Star whose fortune helped establish the Nelson-Atkins.

"I spent a lot of time doing research," he said. "(Nelson) was a very ethical man; he was remarkable. He did not believe in yellow journalism."

Starzmann learned that Nelson, as a developer and builder, championed the idea of having windows in bathrooms in houses for health reasons.

"He was a progressive, long before there were progressives," he said.

Of all the groups he performs for, Starzmann said he especially enjoys school groups.

"I regret not having been a teacher all my life, but I'm doing that now," he said.

Starzmann is particularly in his element during an election year. Since 1968, he has thrown an election night party in which more than 100 people gather in his building and peruse his collections.

"I pull out all my political memorabilia," he said. "Stuff going back to Lincoln."

And he's a man in demand, scheduled to speak to educators in two workshops for the Smithsonian and performances

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Each week in "We'd like you to meet ..." we'll profile a local person doing interesting things. If you have a special someone in mind, send a note to starfyi@gmail.com.

for several groups at the Truman Library.

"History is to a nation what memory is to the individual," he said. "If a nation forgets its history, it is disabled."

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