

Longtime SLV High teacher calls it a career by Joe Shreve

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Preston Boomer, shown here leading one of his famous chemistry demos, recently announced his retirement from San Lorenzo Valley High School after a 56 -year career. Courtesy photo

When school begins at San Lorenzo Valley High School in August, it will be the first time in 56 years in which Preston Q. Boomer will not be part of the faculty. The longtime chemistry and physics teacher known by generations of students announced his retirement after last month's graduation ceremony.

It was not a loss of enthusiasm or a lab experiment gone awry that led

Boomer — “Boom” as he is affectionately known — to conclude a career that’s made him as famous for his longevity as it has his eccentric and effective method of teaching. Rather, it was the accumulation of physical wear and tear from a lifetime of standing at the front of a classroom that led him to step down at 81 years old.

Boomer said that he’d had no plans to retire until this spring, when his doctor told him that he would need surgery to repair a knee and both ankles — the recovery time for which would have cost him a full school year.

“I’m the quiet type,” he said. “We held off announcing it until after graduation.”

Since Boomer’s last official day of teaching — June 14 — accolades, letters, and e-mails from politicians, faculty, and former students have been arriving in droves to Boomer’s Bonny Doon kingdom, “Boomeria,” congratulating him on a career that began during the Dwight Eisenhower administration.

“It’s been endless fun,” he said. “Kids are bringing up stories even I’d forgotten.”

Leaving the job he has held for so long came as somewhat bittersweet for Boomer, who often joked about retiring “when the old corpse is found upon the demo table”; but, as his partner Andrea Merkel pointed out, retirement means he can hear in person what a difference he made.

“The hard part is going to be missing the kids and teaching,” Boomer said. “I just had fun the whole time.”

But don’t expect Boomer to ride quietly off into the sunset just yet. He said he still plans to help out any way he can at the school — whether it’s helping his successor get acclimated, leading the occasional demonstration, or being a sounding board — a teacher emeritus of sorts.

“Of course, it all depends on the new person,” Boomer said, with a chuckle.

When he’s not helping out, Boomer expects to spend time traveling — “I might even travel as far as Santa Cruz” — and greeting visitors at Boomeria, which features a castle, pipe organ and student-built tunnel system on his property.

“We’re the unofficial Bonny Doon recreation area,” he said.

Looking back on a career that first began when he was hired as a science

and math teacher in 1956, Boomer reflected on the many things that changed during his long tenure at SLV High — especially the rise of computers and technology in the classroom.

“We don’t even use the textbook anymore — all that stuff is online now,” he said.

Technology was always at the forefront of Boomer’s classes. He was quick to adopt computer software in helping students learn the periodic table or more complex organic chemistry equations, as well as adapting his lesson plans into PowerPoint presentations and short videos.

“(Technology) has made teaching so much easier,” Boomer said. “I just can’t imagine how many years I was up there writing on the chalkboard.”

Fun while learning has always been the backbone of Boomer’s teaching style, as he adopted something of a mad scientist persona that delighted generations of former students — using stories and slightly ribald jokes to help students remember such scientific terms as the noble gases or the diatomic elements.

“It’s amazing,” Boomer said. “If you have a crazy mnemonic, people remember that.”

He said that his excitement for science was inspired by a physics teacher he had in high school, who delighted in leading demonstrations, and his grandfather, who worked as an engineer for a quicksilver mining company in the Almaden area of San Jose.

One of his greatest inspirations as a teacher came when he took an algebra course at Cabrillo College, which was led by a professor that was so enthused by math, that it inspired Boomer to adopt the same attitude for chemistry and physics.

“That guy got so excited about math,” Boomer said. “You’ve got to get excited about it — and I guess I just stayed excited.”

Biology and environmental studies teacher Jane Orbuch, Boomer’s colleague for 27 years, lauded his long career, calling him “a great supportive colleague over the years.” Boomer’s positive attitude and enthusiasm was infectious to anyone around him, she said.

“I don’t know how we’ll replace him,” Orbuch said. “He has touched countless student lives in the valley and around the world through his website and programs.”

Orbuch said that a little-known fact about Boomer is that he has quite the

green thumb.

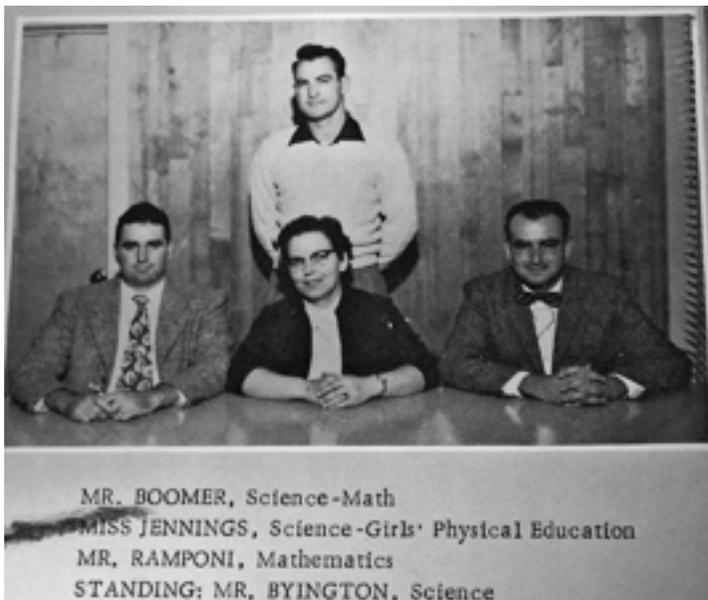
"He planted all the trees around the campus," she said. "All the big trees on campus were planted by the Boom."

San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District Superintendent Julie Haff described Boomer as "totally committed to education."

"He's been an amazing teacher," Haff said. "I don't think there is a teacher who is better known from San Lorenzo Valley."

She said that a celebration honoring Boomer's career was in the works and would likely occur sometime in the late summer or early fall.

"He never lost his enthusiasm and love of teaching," Haff said. "It's sad to see him go."



Longtime SLVHS chemistry and physics teacher Preston Boomer, shown here as a second-year teacher in 1957, recently announced his retirement after a 56-year career. Courtesy photo