

High school revisited

Reporter gets an education in paperwork

During January, 24-year-old reporter Leslie Linthicum spent 11 days posing as a student at Eldorado High School. This is the first in a week-long series of articles relating her experiences.

By LESLIE LINTHICUM

Tribune Staff Writer

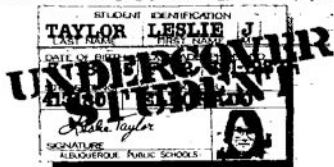
The topic of discussion in the high school classroom is last night's Aerosmith concert at Tingley Coliseum.

Students are engrossed.

At issue is whether the "heavy-metal" rock band's prancing lead singer Steve Tyler is sexy or queer.

Some of the boys are swapping rumors of beer parties and coming to the sober conclusion that no "keggers" are on tap for the weekend.

A tall, shaggy youth distributes stale bubblegum balls from a bulging plastic bag, and the pop of



bubbles punctuates the hubbub in the portable metal building.

It's my first day in class as an "undercover student" at Eldorado High School, and already I'm getting a hint of what the Albuquerque Public Schools are like these days.

Our teacher, Oleta Saunders — a middle-aged woman in a baggy sweater, pants and boots — is perched on one of the desks scattered around the classroom.

She frowns, at first, on the gum-chewing, but then she accepts a piece herself and joins in the munching while welcoming the students to a new semester and explaining her grading procedures.

Her voice is weak from a cold; the din continues undiminished.

Finally, she bellows, "I can get nasty if I want to," and, with a few scattered giggles, the classroom pipes down.

I had arrived at Eldorado the day before — Thursday, Jan. 13 — my graying brown hair freshly dyed, fingernails youthfully nibbled, clutching a new, red three-subject binder.

I had transformed myself from Leslie Linthicum,

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(Tribune photo by Dennis Dusenbery)

"Undercover student" Leslie Linthicum wends way through cafeteria Gas bill was only documentation needed for enrollment in Eldorado High

APS paperwork greets reporter

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24-year-old newspaper reporter, into Leslie Taylor, 17-year-old high school senior, adopting the last name and Northeast Heights address of a friend.

To deflect any attempts to trace my academic background, I had chosen as my feigned hometown a suburban Pittsburgh mining community, where a months-long teachers strike had closed the local school.

Dressed in jeans, loafers, a blue Oxford shirt and parka, and with barrettes in my hair, I arrived at the city's largest and, in terms of test scores, best high school, hoping to discover more about how APS is educating Albuquerque's teenagers.

The assignment was something of a follow-up to *The Tribune's* "Undercover Teacher" project of two years ago. That project, during which a reporter worked as a substitute teacher, had stirred considerable controversy by raising questions about the discipline and quality of education in the city's classrooms.

My editors wanted me to find out if improvements had been made and to see how the education system looked from the perspective of a student.

The first thing I learned was that I need not have worried about the elaborate cover story. Getting into Eldorado was easy.

Pleading a need to pick up enough credits to graduate, I slid into the APS system by using a Gas Company of New Mexico bill to show residence within Eldorado's boundaries.

A sympathetic secretary led me through the sprawling administration building and informed the curly-haired registrar of the bureaucratic nightmare I presented.

The registrar's first reaction: "Oh, barf!"

After further exclamations, she told me I would have to produce a transcript or provide the telephone number of my former school district so APS could verify the classes I had taken. But when I returned an hour later with the telephone number of the Pennsylvania high school, the need for verification seemed to have been forgotten. I was told just to jot down the credits I had earned and that would suffice until officials had a chance to send to Pennsylvania for a copy of my transcript.

Next stop — the counselor.

I lounged in the lobby, flipping through college catalogs for about an hour before I saw David Salazar, a young, cheerful man harried by between-semester scheduling and a 400-to-1 student-to-counselor ratio.

Clad in blue jeans, he took the steps two at a time as he hustled me into his cramped downstairs office, with its desk cluttered with drop-add slips and class schedules and its walls papered with religious posters.

He looked at my list and placed me in three classes I needed to graduate: Civics, Human Development and Independent Living. The latter two were the only open courses that would fulfill a practical-arts requirement of the Albuquerque school system.

"What kind of classes do you like?" he then asked, hunching forward in his chair.

—Leslie Linthicum, 24, a native of the Midwest, graduated from Deerfield High School in Deerfield, Ill., in 1976.

That same year, she won the National Council of Teachers of English writing award.

Ms. Linthicum received a bachelor's degree in journalism and sociology from Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., in 1980 and worked as a reporter for the City News Bureau in Chicago from 1980 to 1981.

She joined *The Tribune* in 1982 as a reporter.

My favorite subjects, I said, were English and history, and I was interested in journalism.

"I like to read," I mentioned.

So Salazar placed me in Popular Fiction, a senior English class, and put me on the staff of *Eagle Spirit*, the school newspaper. Then he wrapped up our brief scheduling session, apologizing for "throwing" me into the courses and handing me a mimeographed map of the campus.

"I'm not trying to put you off, sister, but you can't just give teachers another student at the last minute," he explained.

By then, several students were standing in the hallway waiting to see the counselor. Glancing at his digital clock-radio and complaining about having to leave at 2 p.m., Salazar told them, "I can only see you for a minute" and ushered me out of the office before I could find out when classes began, how to get a locker, when to eat lunch or how much lunch money to bring.

Those hurdles would be crossed the next morning, as I joined the campus swirl of straight-legged blue jeans, running shoes, pastel ski jackets and rock T-shirts.

I also would find out about "Jock Wall" and "Freak Wall" and the rigid social divisions students impose on themselves. I would see the rock-and-roll graffiti on the walls of restrooms and classrooms and the cigarettes crushed on sidewalks and hanging from students' lips. I would learn that my loafers were hopelessly "out" but my buttonup Levis were "right."

Perhaps most important, I would begin to understand the attitude many students and teachers have toward learning at Eldorado.

Back in the English classroom of bubblegum chewers, the students are settled down and the class is told it must read the short classic, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee.

A dark-haired girl slumped in a desk at the back of the room mutters loudly enough for the class to hear:

"You mean we have to read?"

NEXT: Movies, film strips and in-class reading take the place of lectures during most Eldorado classes.

EHS — biggest and the 'best'

"Biggest" and "best" are adjectives that describe Albuquerque's Eldorado High School.

The school, 13000 Montgomery Blvd. N.E., has the largest enrollment of the Albuquerque Public Schools, and its students continually lead the city in test scores and sports rankings.

In 1981, Eldorado finished first among 71 schools participating in the 32nd annual High School Mathematics Examination.

The school's students scored highest in the city on the American College Test exams in 1982.

Eldorado's music program also has garnered many honors. The Eldorado Chamber Music Orchestra placed sixth in the 1981 International Youth and Music Festival in Vienna, Austria. The school's Symphony Orchestra took fourth place in the competition among 42 countries.

Since the school opened in 1970 in the burgeoning far Northeast Heights, attendance has grown to 3,100 students.

From that population have come many of Albuquerque's top athletes.

The Eldorado Eagles boys basketball team has reached the playoffs four of the past five years and

finished second in the state in 1982 under Coach Rick Pokorski.

Eldorado's football team has qualified for the state playoffs each of the past 10 years, compiling a 55-4-1 record in district play during that time. In 1980 it won the state championship.

The girls basketball team has won six state championships in nine years and has been runner-up twice. Over the past decade, the team has racked up 234 wins and only 9 losses.

The school serves a predominantly Anglo community of homeowners with incomes above the city's average. In 1977, the median income of Eldorado families was \$23,360.

The 59-acre campus is among the prettiest in the city. It offers both a striking view of the Sandia Mountains and a western overlook of the city.

The campus is laid out on three levels with 12 separate buildings and 21 portable classrooms.

A new lecture hall is under construction behind the Media Center.

Half the school's 149 teachers hold master's degrees or higher accreditation.