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Always a blast with the Boom

Preston Boomer has been teaching science at the same school since 1956. Generations of students recall a fun taskmaster who likes his explosions.

By John M. Glionna, Times Staff Writer

Felton, Calif. — THE Boom is bouncing around the classroom like an overgrown kid. With his bushy gray eyebrows and mad scientist's grin, he's demonstrating the density of methane to 25 rapt teenagers at San Lorenzo Valley High School.

"Let's see if we can do this without burning the place up again," he says.

"Again?" gasps one girl.

Explosions are nothing new to Preston Q. Boomer's physics and chemistry classes. Neither are flash fires, electric shocks, spark-spitting transformers or deafening gongs, sirens and klaxons. He begins many lectures with the subversive come-on: "Want to blow something up today?"

It's the Boom's Big Bang Theory of teaching: Noise is fun, even instructive. But his wacky experiments can go awry. One day the cops showed up as a result of a half-baked Boomer stunt. The teacher was testing whether a 1.5-million-volt Tesla coil could shoot a spark across the room. In the process, he cut off all police radio communications for miles.

Boomer's reaction: "Neat!"

Preston Boomer is 75.

He's been teaching science at the same school near Santa Cruz since 1956, the year Elvis Presley released "Heartbreak Hotel."

He's had 8,000 students in the last half-century — three generations of some families. Many teachers and administrators once sat in his class. He often hears from former students long retired. But like the Robert Crumb cartoon posted in his class, he prefers to "Keep on Truckin'."

High school graduates everywhere can recall a teacher who was a favorite despite the generational divide. Boomer is that teacher taken to the next level. He is one of fewer than 20 California instructors with 50 or more years in the classroom. It's not just his longevity that amazes colleagues and students; so does his energy.

Boomer's pension now outpaces his salary, so he'd make more money if he called it quits. Yet with no mandatory retirement in his district, he says his goal is to remain "until they drag my corpse off the lab table."

There's this thing about retired teachers, he says: "Before you know it, they're dead."

Over the five decades, Boomer says he has missed work only twice — once for a conference, the other time for his grandfather's funeral. He often walks with a cane and likes to riff on his advancing age, telling students he was conceived in the rumble seat of a 1931 Model A.

"You're great kids," he says. "So were your grandparents."

The Boom (the nickname is short for Boomer, not an explosion) is a master teacher, stand-up comic and circus showman. To the kids, he's Yoda with a chemistry set. Or a character from a "Far Side" cartoon.

He's also an innovator — the first instructor in his district to use computers and PowerPoint demonstrations as teaching tools — and a tough disciplinarian who bills his "Big Chem" and "Mighty Physics" classes as rigorous college boot camps.

The lessons don't stop at school. The grandfather of two often hosts students at "Boomeria," a Disneyland for science geeks that he and his students have created over the years at his home in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Boomeria features a wooden castle and guard towers, a 2,000-pipe organ housed in its own chapel — even a working guillotine with a steel blade that students use to cut watermelons, not necks.

Students often wage "war," marauding through Boomeria's hand-dug catacombs, firing water cannons and hurling eggs and water balloons from catapults.

There's a method here: Teens learn about concepts like water propulsion and the fact that it takes just a tad of zinc mixed with sulfur to make an explosion. All while the self-proclaimed "King of Boomeria" plays a dirge on the mammoth pipe organ.

His tutelage has paid off. Ex-students e-mail to say his lessons primed them for their toughest college classes. Many Boomer graduates have gone on to lucrative careers in Silicon Valley and Hollywood. Most attribute their continued love affair with science and technology to the teacher they call their most influential childhood mentor.

One of them, Hoyt Yeatman, became a Hollywood visual-effects supervisor and in 1989 won an Academy Award for the special effects in the film "The Abyss."

"The most important thing I learned from Boom is that you don't have to grow up to grow old," said Yeatman, 52. "He still plays in this fantasy world, even as an adult. Many of us eventually lose those childlike abilities, but he's stubbornly held on to them. I've used his inspiration throughout my entire career."

Yeatman's mother, Marie, now 81, at first worried about the eccentric teacher — enough to check out Boomeria for herself.

"It didn't *look* dangerous," she said. "Of course, that was before the guillotine."

THE teacher is working his alchemy, demonstrating wave harmonics. He holds a 20-foot line affixed to a door, furiously whipping the end to create ever-shorter wave lengths.

Soon he is out of breath.

"I took an aspirin so I wouldn't have a heart attack," he jokes. Dressed in his "physics is phun" T-shirt, Boomer storms the room, pausing only to hitch up his sweat pants. He refers to himself in the third person: "Is the Boom nervous today?"

Before Boomer's ankles gave out, janitors each summer had to replace floor tiles worn down by his incessant pacing.

In a fast-moving lecture, he handles such dense concepts as the Doppler effect, shock waves and sonic booms. In a spiel on beat frequency, he plays a few notes of the Sonny and Cher song "The Beat Goes On."

"You guys were born in the wrong time," he tells his class. "The hippie era was really fun."

Next he's using a contraption called an equalizer to measure the harmonics of various sounds. A student blows his nose.

"Good tone," Boomer says. "Bring it up here and let's put in on the equalizer." Soon he tries to pull an answer from the class. "Inter? Inter?" He pauses. "Intercourse?" The class cackles.

"No," he deadpans. It's interstitial, referring to the spaces between molecules.

The room is a shrine to science and Boomer's warped humor. Next to posters showing the Periodic Chart of Elements and Fundamental Particles and Interactions is a photo of a young Boomer in the Naval Reserve and a hand-drawn sign reading: "Time will pass, you may not."

Most students stay riveted. There's no whispering or note-passing, no gum-chewing condescension. They know their

roles: The Boom is the performer; they're the attentive audience.

They preface questions with "Hey, Boom," reveling in his off-the-wall answers.

"No teacher comes close to him," said Cammie Dueber, 17. "He's so weird."

In class, Boomer will command "OK, write this down," and all heads will plunge toward their notebooks. Students must write in ink and in complete sentences. All submitted papers must be stapled; names printed legibly, not scribbled. Late arrivals or in-class bathroom runs are not tolerated. He'll reduce grades on papers for including what he calls "Baloney Stuff (BS)."

He refuses to approve most field trips during his teaching hours, insisting that nothing is more important than his own class.

"In my day, he fanatically rejected blue jeans for some reason, to the point of kicking people out of school dances for wearing them," said former student Bill Gervasi, 50, now a computer hardware executive.

Boomer is better at making rules than following them.

In his early years, he rigged a "principal alarm" to alert him when administrators were approaching his classroom.

He still has a note in his file for sneaking out of a staff meeting — or, as he calls it, "a pooling of ignorance."

Boomer once used a fire extinguisher to snuff out a colleague's smoldering cigarette in the teachers lounge.

When he used the same trick on a girl for talking in class, she blasted him back with her own extinguisher. Boomer retreated under a desk and, to the delight of the class, raised a white flag.

What charms students hasn't always charmed the school board. One member tried to fire him years ago, saying he gave easy grades to girls who wore short skirts to class.

An inquiry cleared him.

Boomer says he bears no grudges, but adds of the board member: "I gave her a C in class. I guess she wanted to get even."

Said Paul Sacco, a former counselor: "Make kids accountable and you make enemies."

AS a boy growing up in San Jose, Preston Boomer had a penchant for the macabre: He read about medieval torture, engrossed in the workings of guillotines and dungeons.

He devoured his parents' 1879 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In high school he was inspired by Mr. Fisher, his physics instructor, who taught his young student how a teacher could be a showman.

"One day I came in early to class and saw him wiring a bunch of student seats to a high-voltage induction coil. He believed some kids needed a jolt now and then to stay awake in class," Boomer said.

As the story goes, Boomer's backyard fantasy land was born the night a carload of students tried to egg his home as payback for bad grades.

Boomer was ready: He set a booby-trap of honking horns and water guns in what became known as the first epic battle for the soul of Boomeria.

Students still make pilgrimages to his home, laughing at the front gate as his voice booms over the loudspeaker: "Who goes there?"

"The Boom loves science with a deeper passion than anyone I've ever known," said onetime student Lance McVay, 39, now a high school teacher. "He's like a little kid with a chemistry set. His just got bigger and bigger. Boomeria is one

man's ode to childhood."

Boomer once turned an upside-down tub into a bathysphere in his backyard pool. He pumped in air and sent sandwiches down by pulley as students competed to see who could stay submerged the longest. (The record was two hours.)

Beginning in the 1960s, science students who referred to themselves as the Natural Philosopher's Club started digging catacombs across Boomer's 2 1/2 -acre spread. They're now big enough to stand inside of.

In battle, students use water cannons and makeshift catapults — and the losers sometimes spend the night in the dungeon. They get one phone call to let their parents know where they are: in jail at their teacher's house.

The teacher's troops usually emerge victorious, because as the Boom reminds kids: "The King always wins."

Boomer's two sons recall their father as a mix of Mr. Rogers and David Lynch. "My childhood was defined by all-night water battles, people sneaking around in the woods, alarms going off at all hours," said Alex Boomer, 49, an electrical contractor in Fortuna. "I thought it was normal until I got out in the real world."

Not every parent got the joke. Boomer remembers one father who threatened to sue if his son got hurt at Boomeria. "I told him, 'Then we won't have your child up to the house.' He called me right back and changed his mind. He said he didn't want his son to miss out on all the action."

Some former student warriors say Boomeria's crowning glory was the "aqua goose," a geyser of water shot from a hidden underground nozzle. One night, an army of students set off the geyser beneath a car without headlights, which they assumed belonged to an enemy scout.

Recalled Gervasi: "This massive amount of water shot up beneath the vehicle and suddenly the car's loudspeaker says, 'Mr. Boomer. This is the police. We need to talk.' "

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