

Teacher teaches book on Polish family

BY THOMAS HEALY
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — For years now, Daniel Berenson has been inventing stories about children that have entertained and delighted his students at Githens Middle School.

But the story that's earning him the most attention these days didn't come from his imagination — it came from a student, a young Polish immigrant whose saga Berenson has recorded for posterity.

In his 160-page book, "The Sleeping Knights," Berenson recounts the struggle of Mateusz Jakubowski and his family during their flight from communist Poland in 1987.

He follows their journey from the day they defect on a vacation ship to the moment they land in the United States two years later.

Along the way, he describes their travels in inhospitable lands, their attempts to survive in foreign cultures and their ultimate victory — a visa that brings them to Durham.

Writing the book has been a learning experience for Berenson, a 22-year teaching veteran who has penned several children's humor books.

With the help of a grant from the Durham Public Education Network, he is printing 83 copies of the book for the sixth-graders he teaches at Githens.

Then, during the next five weeks, the students will read the story and discuss it during class. Berenson will give lectures on writing a novel, including discus-

sions about plot development, character building and editing.

But the highlight of the program will come when the Jakubowski family comes to class. They'll describe firsthand how they escaped the tumultuous political climate in Poland during the '80s.

Berenson hopes the effort will give his students a new perspective on the world and expose them to cultures and political struggles they know little about.

"This is what 20 million people around the world are going through — constantly moving and trying to save their families," he says. "And I think it will be pretty neat for them [the students] to see who these people are."

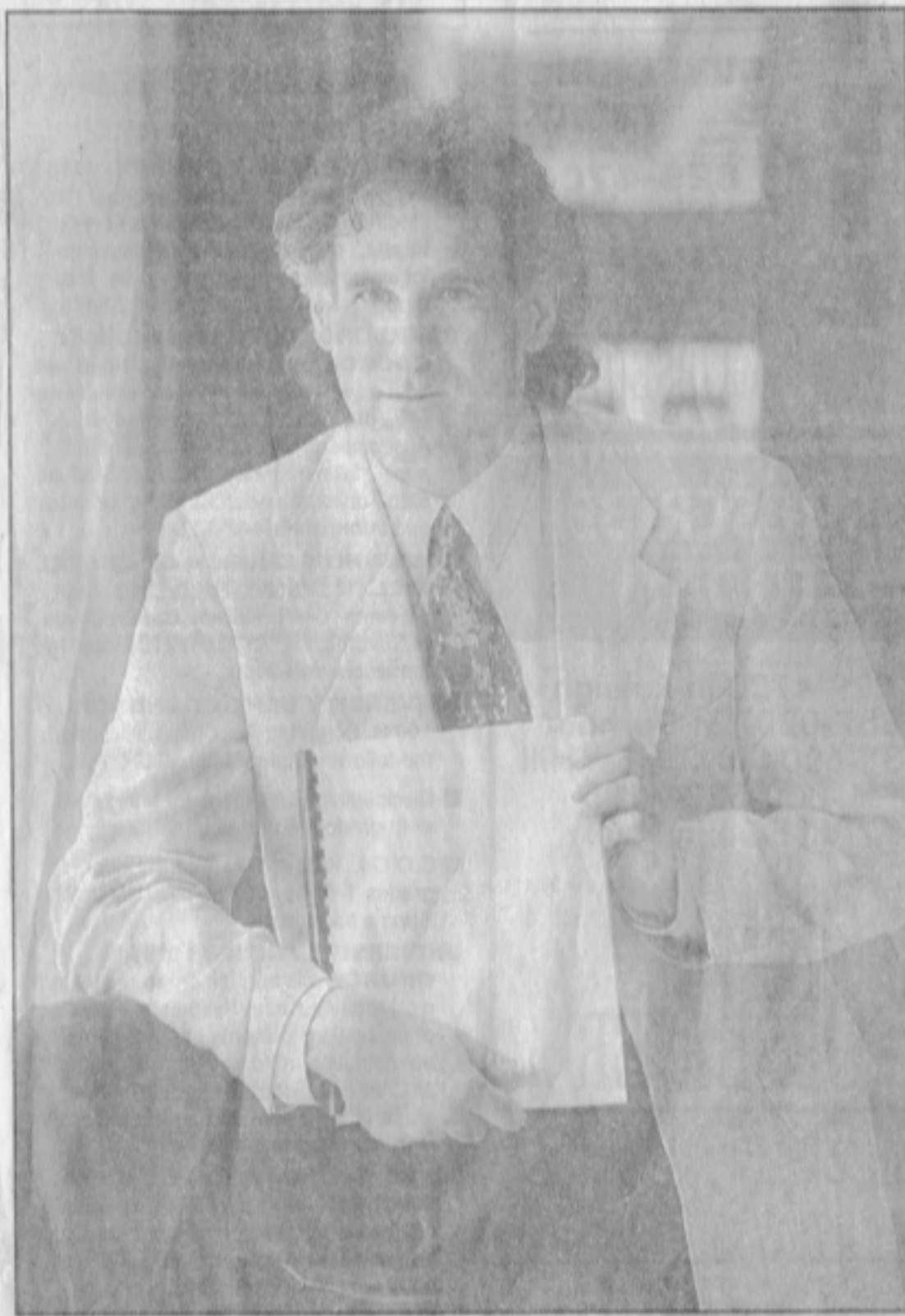
For Berenson, the project also offers the chance to be critiqued by a discerning audience. The suggestions he gets from the students, he says, could help the book — and improve its chances of getting published.

An English and social studies teacher, Berenson has written a handful of short books and displayed them in the library at Githens. The stories have been a big hit among his students.

Several students are already reading "The Sleeping Knights," and Berenson says he is encouraged by their reaction.

But more important, he says, the book is teaching them more about writing than they could ever learn in a textbook. After all, they have the author, the finished product and the subjects at their disposal.

"I think it's pretty unique," he says. "The novelist is teaching his novel."



Daniel Berenson's latest story didn't come from his imagination — it came from a young Polish immigrant who was one of his students.

STAFF PHOTO BY JIM BOUNDS