



SCOTT S. HARRICK / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Peter H. Gibbon, a Harvard education researcher, talks to fifth graders at Toby Farms Elementary School about what a hero is. "A hero has character, is a role model for others, is brave, and does the right thing, sometimes even at the risk of death," he said.

Teaching children to discover heroes

An educator wants to bring back such role models so students can find inspiration for their own lives.

By Gloria A. Hoffner
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

CHESTER TOWNSHIP — Jackie Robinson and Julia Roberts are both celebrities, but are they both also heroes?

Peter H. Gibbon, a Harvard education researcher, posed that question to 125 fifth-grade students at Toby Farms Elementary School. Roberts and Robinson are both famous for their success, he said, but only one is a hero.

"Jackie Robinson was not only the first African American in major league baseball and a great baseball player, he also refused to react negatively to racial criticism," Gibbon said.

"A hero has character, is a role model for others, is brave, and does the right thing, sometimes even at the risk of death."

Concerned over the decline of he-

ros in American popular culture, Gibbon, a former teacher and private-school headmaster, has traveled to more than 60 U.S. schools in the last two years lecturing on heroes. As part of his research for a book on children and heroes, he spoke last week with students at several local schools, including Interboro High School, Episcopal Academy and the Haverford School.

"This is a television generation. PBS announces Julia Roberts' birthday, and children learn about the flaws in great Americans, from Lincoln's depression to Jefferson's slave mistress," Gibbon said.

"It's become cool to identify with the antihero; goodness is boring. What's been forgotten is, while heroes are not perfect, they still have much to admire."

Jefferson was a slave owner, Gibbon said, but he was also a writer,

an inventor, a devoted father and a statesman.

Popular culture has turned Columbus from an explorer to a murderer, he said, and forgotten other heroes of the age.

"Columbus was a visionary sailor who did not have the foresight to see what he was doing to the native people," Gibbon said. "Las Casas was a missionary priest who spent his life fighting to free American slaves from Spanish prisons."

Gibbon said he believes that students should read about heroes, even fictional ones such as Jo from *Little Women*, as inspiration for their own lives.

"Superman is OK because he fights for truth, justice and the American way," Gibbon said. But he said he is concerned that one comic-book publisher's official book of super villains is three times the size of the book on super heroes.

A survey found that more fifth graders knew Freddy Krueger (a character in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies) than Abraham Lin-

coln, he said.

This is not true at Toby Farms, an elementary school in the Chester Upland School District, where leadership is part of the fifth-grade curriculum, principal Joyce Wells said.

Gibbon said that, during his visit, he was pleased to find students who knew the stories of Harriet Tubman, Neil Armstrong, Frederick Douglass and Ruby Bridges, the little girl who withstood jeers and isolation in order to integrate a New Orleans public school in 1960.

"In the beginning of the year, they say Spider-man is a hero," teacher Ed Rayer said. "As they learn about real-life heroes, they are asked: 'Is Michael Jordan the same kind of hero as Martin Luther King Jr.?'"

Gibbon encouraged students to look for heroes in their own backyard.

"Heroes can be mothers, fathers, coaches, teachers, bus drivers, but not just anybody can be a hero," Gibbon said. "Heroes must do something spectacular that is a model for others."