

# ATA stalwart Sandra Burns Thomson Wins 2007-2008 ATA School Outreach Award

By Lillian Clementi



Sandra Burns Thomson won the 2007-2008 ATA School Outreach Award with this photo of gifted and talented sixth-graders at Stratford Landing Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia. Sandra lives in Alexandria with her husband Bob, her son David (holding the poster), and her daughter Jennifer.

**It started** as a way to spend more time in her son’s classroom—but before it was over, ATA member Sandra Burns Thomson had captured the winning photo in the 2007-2008 ATA School Outreach contest.

## A Perfect Fit

With her son David already in the sixth grade at Stratford Landing Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, Sandra was looking for ways to stay engaged. “As my children

have gotten older,” she said, “there have been fewer opportunities to get into their classrooms. So when my son’s school called for volunteers, I jumped in. It was a chance to be in his life.” She agreed to present a six-module Junior Achievement (JA) program<sup>1</sup> designed to prepare middle school students for careers in business—and then discovered that the curriculum was entitled *JA Global Marketplace*. “It was a perfect fit for me.”

To Sandra’s surprise, however, the program never mentioned the role of translation and interpreting in global trade. “There was one lesson called World of Words, which pointed out that the language barrier inhibits communication and trade, but never identified translation and interpreting as a solution.”

## Closing the Gap

To compensate for the oversight in the JA program, Sandra supplemented

the curriculum with translation-related material she collected from ATA's School Outreach webpage and fellow translators. "I took five JA lessons on international trade, commerce, finance, immigration, and communication and embellished them with information on translation or interpreting," she explained. To illustrate the importance of localization—a concept not mentioned in the JA material—Sandra took the class on a tour of corporate websites in various countries. "We visited McDonald's restaurants around the world. In the Middle East, the menu includes a lamb sandwich called the McArabia, and restaurants in Cyprus have a special Easter meal."

The students also examined exchange rates, studying various currencies and analyzing the ways that culture is reflected in money around the world. "We also considered information flow and the challenges of different fonts used on computers," said Sandra. Each session ended with a sweet treat from overseas.

### Fun—and Challenging

For the sixth session, Sandra eliminated a JA module on trade agreements, replacing it with a presentation devoted specifically to translation. The session emphasized how much fun it is to learn new languages and to be a translator, and how challenging and important the profession is in international trade and politics. "We first determined how many students knew a language other than English—the tally appears on the blackboard in the photo on page 10—and then discussed the difference between translation and interpreting."

To illustrate the demands of translation work, Sandra took the students through an interactive exercise, providing literal translations of foreign language proverbs and asking the sixth-graders to find idiomatic

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English equivalents. "We also discussed Harry Potter in different languages and checked out some glossaries from Lee Wright's articles

in *The ATA Chronicle*."

To highlight the need for professionally trained human translators, Sandra demonstrated an online translation pro-

## Beating the Odds: Local Recognition for ATA School Outreach Winner

From the  
**WASHINGTON  
BUSINESS JOURNAL**  
to the U.S. Senate

*Inspired by the successful media outreach effort of 2007 School Outreach contest winner Alina Mugford, ATA actively promoted the 2008 award, issuing a press release to Sandra Burns Thomson's local media and sending a letter to her congressional representatives and state officials.*

*It was an uphill battle. Because Sandra lives in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, ATA's outreach effort had to compete against the historic, nail-biting 2008 presidential race—as well as the state and national response to the worst U.S. financial crisis in a century. Yet even amid the dramatic events of last October and November, the widely read Washington Business Journal responded to ATA's press release with an article on the translation industry, and Sandra received congratulatory letters from Virginia Governor Tim Kaine and U.S. Senator John Warner.*

*"[M]y warmest congratulations upon your selection as the winner of the 2008 School Outreach Program Award," Warner wrote. "Your tireless commitment is an inspiration. . . . I am honored to join your family and friends at the American Translators Association in sending my best wishes for continued success in all your future endeavors."*

*Next year's School Outreach winner can look forward to the same media outreach campaign—ideally in a calmer climate.*

gram. “We looked at some of the bloopers from Chris Durban’s column *The Onionskin* and talked about how tough it would be to translate ‘jam’ without context—Toast and jam? Jam session? In a jam? And I admitted to my first mistake as a high school language student, when I assumed that *SENSO UNICO* was the name of the street for our hotel in Rome.”

### Great Prop, Great Shot

The eye-catching yellow poster shown in the photo on page 10 is the centerpiece for the winning photo, but it was also a valuable tool for Sandra’s lesson on the importance of translation. “I wanted a big, bold, succinct visual that would capture the many facets of translation—it’s fun, but it’s serious

translation was scheduled for the last week of school, and the students were being promoted to middle school the next day.

“We wanted to squeeze the translation and interpreting module in before graduation, and it was chaos!” she recalled. “With the school year ending, the energy level was high, but the kids were focused and engaged. The gifted and talented program draws students from a variety of neighborhoods and areas around the county, and they’re all highly motivated.”

### A Passion for Translation

A freelance translator for 14 years, Sandra works from German and Russian into English and specializes in medicine and pharmaceuticals. “It’s

Institute now at Bellevue Community College in Bellevue, Washington, Sandra spent a year as T&I manager at a Seattle-based agency. She joined ATA in 1994 and became an Active member through peer review. “I’m also a product of ATA’s Mentoring Program,” she added. “Ulrike Walter-Lipow mentored me during the first year of the program in 2001, and this year the two of us worked together for the first time.”

### Long-time ATA Volunteer

A skilled editor and proofreader, Sandra has proofread *The ATA Chronicle* for the past four years. “Sandra is an integral part of the production team,” says the magazine’s editor, Jeff Sanfacon. “Her professionalism, positive attitude, and eagle eye for detail help make each issue the best that it can be. She is fabulous to work with.” Sandra has also volunteered as a teller in ATA elections, helping to count votes at every conference since 2004.

School outreach is a recent but satisfying addition to Sandra’s volunteer activities for ATA. “I’ve been meaning to do a school outreach presentation ever since the Association started the program, but this was my first,” she said. Originally trained as a teacher, she loves the classroom and plans to continue using school outreach as a way to stay involved with her children. “That’s why the program is so neat. My son’s middle school has asked me to speak during Career Day, and I’ll be in my daughter’s classroom this year or next just because it’s so much fun.”

### Note

1. For more information on the Junior Achievement program, visit [www.ja.org/programs/programs\\_mid\\_overview.shtml](http://www.ja.org/programs/programs_mid_overview.shtml).



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work. Hence the photograph, with both cheerful faces and a weighty copy of *War and Peace* in Russian.”

She also chose the content with care. “I put training at the top of the poster because people need to understand that being bilingual is not enough. They need to learn young that you need to be trained to practice this profession. We need to think of ourselves as businesspeople.”

### Focused and Engaged

Sandra’s preparation paid off. The sixth-graders gave her an enthusiastic reception, even though the session on

a passion—I just love it,” Sandra said. “Medicine is such an important field. I like feeling that I’m using my abilities to help people. And medical language is fascinating, with so many Latin and Greek terms.”

Before becoming a translator, Sandra managed international programs for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, working with international scientists for over a decade. “I was always interested in science,” she noted, “and medicine in particular intrigued me.”

One of the first graduates from the Translation and Interpretation (T&I)



# Now Open

## 2009 ATA School Outreach Contest

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Make a School Outreach presentation this year, and you could win **free registration to ATA's 50th Annual Conference** in New York, New York, October 28 - 31, 2009. Here's how to enter.

1. Visit ATA's School Outreach Resource Center at [www.atanet.org/careers/school\\_outreach.php](http://www.atanet.org/careers/school_outreach.php) and click on Presentation Resource Materials.
2. Choose the age level you like the best and download a presentation, or use the resources on the School Outreach webpage to round out your own material.
3. Speak on translation and/or interpreting careers at a school or university anywhere in the world between August 18, 2008 and July 20, 2009.
4. Get someone to take a picture of you in the classroom. For tips on getting a winning shot, visit the School Outreach Photo Gallery on ATA's website at [www.atanet.org/ata\\_school/photo\\_gallery.php](http://www.atanet.org/ata_school/photo_gallery.php) and click on Photo Guidelines.
5. Send your picture electronically to [pr@atanet.org](mailto:pr@atanet.org) with the subject line "School Outreach Contest," or mail your entry to 225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590, Alexandria, VA 22314. Please include: your name and contact information; the date of your presentation; the school's name and location; and a brief description of the class. **You may submit multiple entries.**

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**The deadline for submissions is midnight on July 20, 2009.**

*The winner will be contacted no later than August 17, 2009. You must be a member of ATA or an ATA-affiliated organization to enter.*