

## Bartlett's News Briefs



# NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories

by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

# THE INNOCENCE OF STEVE MERRING

Story out of Michigan could happen to anyone, anywhere



Steve Merring of Hastings, Michigan.

It happened in April. Steve Merring of Hastings, Michigan, was doing laundry in his basement one evening in 2014. Suddenly, like all mammals, except for bears when in hibernation, he had to pee. He does not have a bathroom in his basement, but he does have thick vegetation outside. So, he made the decision that women wish they could make when traveling on an endless road trip between gas stations – he peed discreetly – and even more so in his case because he peed in his own backyard. Unbeknownst to Steve, his neighbor somehow saw it all. She phoned the police. She reported that Steve, while in his own

backyard, near his basement, under his deck and hidden by foliage, and with a large empty lot between her residence and his, had exposed himself to her while urinating.

"Meanwhile, I go back to doing laundry in my basement and suddenly someone is banging on my basement door," Steve noted in a recent interview. "I opened the door and there is a police officer and he said, with just a slight difference in wording, 'Did you just urinate in your backyard?' And I said, 'Yes, I did officer.' And he said, 'Your neighbor saw you.' And I said, 'Oh, no. I didn't know that. Sorry about that.' And the officer said to me, 'Don't do it again,' and he left. I went back to doing my laundry.

"Several days later, I get a big knock on the door and it was the same police officer. 'Remember me? You are under arrest.' I said, 'What?'

"They smacked me down on my kitchen countertop and put handcuffs on me. They put the cuffs on so hard that my hands started swelling. It was painful."

Handcuffs applied too tightly can make a person's hands swell and can result in serious injury, including permanent nerve damage.

"This is late at night, and it's a school night for me. I was getting ready to go to bed. They put me in the back of the police car, took me to the police station—fortunately just a 10-minute drive—they charged me with indecent exposure, fingerprinted me and took my mugshot. I was released at 12:30 a.m. and told to walk home, which I did."

Hours later, the elementary school teacher was on the phone with his union representative.

Before all this happened, and frankly even after it happened, who exactly was/is Steve Merring? Steve graduated in 1982 from Williams James College, a progressive, interdisciplinary experimental college within Grand Valley State University, with a bachelor of science in urban and environmental studies. In 1986, he earned his Elementary Teacher Certification, K-8, all subjects; and Group Social Science Major, 9th Grade; and a Geography Minor. Later, in 1997, he returned to school and earned his Biology Minor, Secondary Certification Biology and Geography, and Group Social Science 9-12 Grades. And to go back in time just a bit, in 1977, Steve earned the highest rank attainable in the Scouts BSA program of Scouting America – Eagle Scout.

Steve's teaching career began at North Kent High School, an alternative high school within the Comstock Park Public Schools District. From 1986 until 1997, he taught biology, aquatic ecosystems, algebra, geometry, outdoor survival, physical education, geography and landscaping. From 1997 until his retirement in June of 2023, he taught in the Hastings Area School System – Central and Southeastern elementary schools.

His awards include: "Educator of the Year," Trout Unlimited, 1989; "Top 10 Science Class, PBS Special Earth Day and Governor Blanchard Award," 1990; "Environmental Educator of the Year," Kent Intermediate School Districts, 1994; and "Educator of the Year," Barry Conservation District, 2000.

For years, Steve's educational outings and studies with his students was a mainstay in *The Grand Rapids Press*. One such outing was a visit to his school's neighboring Strawberry Creek. The class had gone there a number of times, and each time they had viewed 10 to 20 trout together in the creek's pools. This was normal. But this time they saw a dead frozen fish. Steve told the newspaper that was a red flag and the class followed the creek until they came upon an area where they suspected toxic chemicals were entering the water. Steve had his students contact the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, who took samples and confirmed chemicals were coming from a storage company. Steve told reporter Kathy Bush,

"I hope my students take with them the ability to see that they can teach themselves and to see that they can have a positive impact on their surroundings."

Steve has taught his students water chemistry, plant biology, cell respiration and hydroponics. With the latter subject, his students learned how to grow all the ingredients for a healthy salad, which they harvested and enjoyed. Steve has taught outdoor survival skills on winter camping trips. He has taught his students how to measure a stream—its depth and its width—to find the speed of the stream, to take the stream's temperature, and how to determine water acidity using the PH factor. Throughout the years, Steve's students, their parents, and Steve's community made it clear they thought the world of him.

When the teacher's arrest made the news, it did so over and over, both online and on television screens. Steve was put on paid administrative leave.

"Thank you to my union for supporting me. They couldn't have been more helpful or kinder and because of them, everything fell into place like a deck of cards. Right after I talked to my union representative, we met with the school district superintendent. I was also put in touch with my lawyer, Fil Iorio. Fil is a great guy and very dynamic. Was I confident I would be exonerated? I was totally confident that in the end, I would be exonerated not only because I didn't do anything illegal, but because I didn't do anything wrong." Steve was right.

But, let's pause for a minute. Why report on this Michigan story, all the way out in Pacifica, California, which is located approximately 12 miles south of San Francisco along the coast? Three answers: 1. As anyone who is familiar with the trivia game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" can tell you, two people anywhere in the world are connected by no more than six social connections. Steve Merring of Hastings, Michigan, has family in Pacifica, California. They contacted me. 2. The family contacted me because 12 years after this horrific event took place, anyone still doing an internet search on this innocent man will first see the newspaper accusations of 2014. Those stories are eventually followed by "Teacher Cleared" articles – if the online searcher sticks around long enough to investigate. The hope is this article on Steve's innocence will find its way to the top of the internet reads. Answer 3 is simple: this story out of Michigan could happen to anyone, anywhere.

Court trials do not happen overnight. Steve kept a low profile as he waded through this difficult journey. He did find comfort in the peace of his backyard. His backyard qualifies for a National Wildlife Federation Wildlife Habitat certificate. Qualifications include: "native plants, water, cover, and sustainable garden practices" – and the backyard's "lush patch of vegetation must be identifiable on high-resolution satellite imagery." A qualifying yard must provide wildlife places to raise young – such as trees or nesting boxes, and offer clean water sources for drinking or bathing, for instance a birdbath or a small pond. It must provide at least three sources of food, such as bird feeders and native plants. It must have cover such as shrubs or log piles.

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the City of Hastings has a population of 7,514. Its closest major city is Grand Rapids and it lies along the Mississippi Flyway migratory path. Some of those species which fly over and nest in Hastings include: Mallard Ducks, Canada Geese and Sandhill Cranes. The amount of birds and waterfowl in the Hastings area are too many for one article but they additionally include: Wood Ducks (Michigan's official state duck as of 2026), Blue-winged Teals, Green-winged Teals, Tundra Swans, Great Blue Herons, Double-crested Cormorants, Red-tailed Hawks, Cooper's Hawks and Bald Eagles.

"My house, my space, is like a stopover that is well-known by all the migratory birds and geese and ducks. I never get tired of it."

On Monday, October 13, 2014, Steve Merring had his day in court and he was exonerated.

The court proceedings gained a fair amount of coverage due to their speed. They were over and done with in under three hours.

"I testified. The neighbor testified. The jury retired to the jury room, selected a foreperson, unanimously voted 'not guilty' and returned to the courtroom. It is my understanding that it was the shortest proceeding ever in the Barry County Circuit Court."

How much did all of this cost Steve in fees?

"Scores of thousands," Steve stated. "But I was so relieved to be acquitted of any crime and so eager to get back to teaching."

Yet, the horror show wasn't quite over for Steve. While he was acquitted of indecent exposure for urinating in in his own backyard, the Hastings Area School System/The Board of Education decided to bring tenure charges against him, charges which included, "harming the reputation of the school district." Steve's community was not impressed.

A "Support for Stephen Merring" Facebook page went up immediately. A GoFundMe page for Steve was established. Some of the support comments on the Facebook page have been noted here. One parent wrote: "Not only was Steve a teacher to 2 of my children, but I can honestly say that it was a huge honor to work side-by-side with him in his P.E. classes. The way he engages his students to always strive to be better than their best shows complete dedication to ensuring a positive future for our children!"

A former student wrote: "Steve Merring is a man a character and a man of dedication. Steve's approach to teaching is simple; if one is willing to learn, come over and we'll discuss it. Because of this approach, many feel instantly comfortable being in his presence. Steve Merring is one of a few people I can recall playing a pivotal role in my high school academia. If Steve and these few others had not taken the time to ask students to dare to dream and advance in that direction, while helping us to take flight in pursuit of those dreams, many of us would not be where we are today. Many of us have grown to be successful individuals, parents and obtainers of higher collegiate degrees; some of us have passed. I dare say that the dedication and approach of Steve Merring is the catalyst of the journey I take toward furthering my education to this day. In short he has changed my life along with the lives of many others encountered throughout the duration of his career."

A fellow teacher wrote: "I went to high school and college with Steve. I am also a teacher and can attest to his upstanding character and integrity. Teaching is a profession where you serve many masters and, unfortunately, a superintendent is one of those masters. Stay strong and know that many are praying for you Steve!"

To wrap this up, and to the cheers of his students, his students' parents, fellow teachers and countless community members – Steve returned to teaching in the fall of 2015.

"I was advised by my attorney that I could sue my school district for slander, and win, but I didn't want to do that. I just felt that I had been shoveled through the news media for so long I wanted to be done.

"And here's the thing. I know my community. I love my kids. This is a hard district and I did not want to sue the school district and hamstring them for the next 25 years. I love teaching too much for that and so I returned to the classroom."

Steve's love for teaching comes naturally. His father, George Merring, was a science teacher in the West Bloomfield School District near Detroit.

"My father taught sixth grade the majority of his time. Like father like son, I started out with my student teaching with sixth graders and then I moved into high school alternative education. But, since the day I was born, I always had a desk in my father's classroom. I was in sixth grade before I was in kindergarten!"

Steve's dad was recognized locally for his conservation and environmental practices, and he taught his son how to observe the environment – and how to photograph and document the waters, lakes and streams.

"I learned how to manage a classroom because of him. When I was a young kid, I watched my dad orchestrate the entire thing. I was an apprentice in his classroom."

Sadly, Steve lost his dad when he was 9 years old. An outdoor garden, located at the Frank E. Doherty Elementary School in West Bloomfield Township, was dedicated to Steve's father: "George Merring Outdoor Science Study Area."

"My father was quite young when he died, 39, and he knew he was going to die and so he wrote me a letter. He told me to learn as much as I can, take as much time as I need, and then make my decision based on all of the information that I have. This is what I always taught my students.

"Here's the thing, and maybe it sounds incredulous but it is true nevertheless for me. I have always felt as a teacher that I have taught with the light of God walking with me. A great many of my students over the years have been deemed "the worst" students or "the troublemakers," and they were all incredibly bright but you had to work with them. I wanted to work with them and these so-called "worst" students have turned into really good people.

"To me, the most important thing to teach my students was to teach them what my dad taught me. Make good decisions based on the knowledge that you have at that time. You are teaching them to think for themselves and to be confident in themselves, by learning as much as they can.

"Despite all that happened to me, I am so grateful for every minute I have spent teaching."

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**By Jean Bartlett** (April 9, 2026)

*Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, [www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com).*