

This American Life Episode Transcript
“What’s That Smell?”
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Acts One of Episode #406, “True Urban Legends”

Act One: What’s That Smell?

Ira Glass: The way Steve Poizner sees it, he did something admirable, something daring, something unusual, and when I read his account of what he did, he seemed sincere about it, too. He's a bit of a corny writer, though even that you can kind of forgive him. He's not a professional author.

At the age of 45, after starting one Silicon Valley company that he sold for 30 million dollars and a second one that sold for a billion dollars, Poizner didn't need to work any more.

He says he wanted to do some good for people, and so he called a dozen public high schools and volunteered to be a guest teacher of some sort. One called him back - a high school called Mount Pleasant- and Poizner got in his car and drove the 15 miles from his neighborhood in Los Gatos in Silicon Valley to East San Jose.

Steve Poizner: [reading] I passed nearby my neighborhood French bakery and the local Ferrari dealership.

Ira Glass: This is Steve Poizner, reading from the book he wrote about this.

Steve Poizner: [reading] Several miles and a couple of highways later I took the Capital Expressway exit and drove into what felt like another planet. Signs advertising janitorial supply stores and taquerías. Exhaust hung over 10 lanes of inner city traffic; yellowing, weedy gardens fronted many of the homes, as did driveways marred by large oil spots or broken down cars.

Ira Glass: When he sees the sound walls that separate California homes from the highway he asks, "were they keeping out the city's grit and noise, or hiding profoundly sad lives?"

He's allowed to teach one U.S. government class for one semester, under another teacher's supervision. What he finds in the school are leaky roofs, hardened, unresponsive students, gangs and violence, a dropout rate twice the national average. He worries that one student is going to punch him and later that this student and his thug friends are going to push him up against a wall. He wonders if the kids are "too busy ducking bullets to consider their careers?" At the end of his first visit to school, he's relieved to find his Lexus still in the parking lot where he left it.

Steve Poizner: [reading] The shadows grew longer and the surroundings became a bit scary. Opening the door to my car I noticed a residential street just over the school's parking lot's fence. There was an old Cadillac resting on two flat tires, something smelled rotten like trash that had sat around for too long, and a dog's raspy bark sounded uncomfortably close.

Ira Glass: And the only problem with this is, a lot of it might not be true.

Male newscaster: Good evening. Steve Poizner released a new book today. It is about his time as a substitute teacher at a high school in East San Jose and what he put in print is drawing a lot of heat. ABC's 7's Lisa Amin Gulezian is live tonight to explain tonight....

Ira Glass: Steve Poizner's book got more attention than most do because in the seven years since he spent one semester at Mt. Pleasant High School, Steve Poizner ran for assemblyman and lost, ran for a statewide

office - California insurance commissioner - and won. He's in his fourth year in that job now. And today, he's one of two frontrunners to be the Republican candidate for governor of California. And right after publication, his book - which is titled *Mount Pleasant* - jumped to number five on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Female newscaster: Mt. Pleasant High School students, teachers, parents and alumni are outraged.

Woman in audience: Tonight we are here to denounce Steve Poizner's comments...

Male Newscaster: Well you know, it got very heated inside Barnes and Noble before Steve Poizner's book signing. Eddie Garcia, the president of the East Side Union School Board, got in Poizner's face challenging him about things that were written inside *Mount Pleasant*.

Ira Glass: I heard about Steve Poizner and the controversy over whether his book got things wrong when a publicist for the book contacted our show. She wrote an email describing the incident at the bookstore this way - "Liberal activists took offense at how he describes the school -- ACCURATELY -- as plagued by gangs, teen pregnancy, and disrepair. They are trying to shut him up and discredit his argument about charter schools." (Poizner makes a case for charter schools late in the book). "This is a classic case of liberals refusing to listen to simple facts and rational solutions."

So I read the excerpt of his book online - there's a full chapter and Poizner links to it from his campaign website, you can read it yourself. And the chapter raised more questions than it answered. It is a very odd chapter, all about Poizner's first days teaching a class at Mt. Pleasant. There's scene after scene where he's floundering, standing in front of the class asking big, abstract questions - "would you want to live in a country where the leader didn't want to lead? If the money issued by the government wasn't any good, or people were treated unfairly?" None of the students respond. He's a rookie teacher; he doesn't know how to engage them yet. Nothing unusual there.

But here was the strange thing: the conclusion Poizner comes to - again and again during these scenes - isn't that he's doing anything wrong or has anything to learn as a teacher. Instead, he blames the kids. They're tough, they're unmotivated, they lack ambition, they're wired differently. The students, meanwhile, in every scene in the book (I read the whole book), seem utterly lovely. Polite, they don't interrupt, they don't talk back, they just seem a little bored. His very worst student is a graduating senior who's hoping to go into the Marines.

Checking school records I learned that Poizner's unmotivated, unambitious class included one of the school valedictorians, Charles Rudy, who graduated and went to college.

Could he be getting this so completely wrong? I wondered. Could he have written an entire book misperceiving so thoroughly what was happening right in front of his eyes, and now is trying to use that book to run for governor? It seemed too incredible. And, that's what brought me to San Jose last week, to visit the school and its neighborhood.

Joe Lovato: My eyes were rolling throughout the entire book. [laughs]

Ira Glass: This is Joe Lovato, he teaches English at Mount Pleasant. His dad taught English at Mount Pleasant before him.

Joe Lovato: Well, in the book he tells stories of crossing the valley from his local Ferrari dealership past his local French bakery. Crossing town, getting off the freeway into my neighborhood and passing the taquería, and then wondering about the profoundly sad lives of the people who live behind the sound walls along the highway there. That's me! I live there. I can tell you, I have the white picket fence...

Ira Glass: Literally.

Joe Lovato: Yeah, literally. A very well manicured lawn. My Infiniti is in the front and I've got a real cute dog. I've got two kids running around in the front yard with my wife chasing them around.

Mark Holston: The derogatory statements to our students, the inaccuracies, the exaggerations...that's the part we're upset about.

Ira Glass: Mark Holston is one of Joe's colleagues in the English department - in the book, Poizner talks a few times about wishing he could have a *Stand and Deliver* moment with his students, and Mark says that's the problem right there.

Mark Holston: There's a narrative he had in his mind. He saw teacher movies and that was the narrative he had and it fits his narrative to show that this school is a horrible school. I wouldn't work in the school he described. I would be afraid to the school that he described in the thing. It's almost like he's stepping over bodies and there's gunshots as he goes to his classroom every day, and that's completely inaccurate, but it fits his narrative. It fits promoting himself for the governor. And if anybody - some people say it's not true, we know it's not true, it's an exaggeration, but anybody else outside of East San Jose reads this book, that's the truth.

Ira Glass: Driving around the neighborhood, it is hard to disagree with the teachers who say it's a perfectly nice middle class and working class area. Occasionally you'll see a house in bad shape, but overwhelmingly it's neatly tended yards, garages, decent cars and SUVs in the driveways. It's suburban. I was surprised to learn that when Poizner taught here in 2003 there was a golf course just a few blocks from the school - there's still a lake and the Raging Waters water park. He doesn't mention those in the book. We called a half dozen local real estate agents who confirmed what teachers told us - that the neighborhood looks the same today as it did back in 2003. If anything, they said, with the recession it's gotten a little worse - the average house price in 2003 near the school was \$457,000. Today it's \$317,000.

Ira Glass: [dog barking] Well it's 4:45, and I'm standing in the staff parking lot where Steve Poizner used to park his car, I suppose, and I am hearing the raspy sound of a dog's bark. I can't see any beat-up old cars over the fence. Mainly, it's incredibly lush, and green, and beautiful. There are little purple flowers. There are palm trees. And it's just lovely, and it smells [sniffs] nice, though there is the dumpster for the school right by the parking lot. Conceivably on some day that he was out here, what was making the trash smell...was the school's own trash.

Ira Glass [addressing Steve Poizner]: Now we went to the neighborhood and were told it hasn't changed so much since 2003 when you were there and...

Ira Glass: So I ran all of this by Steve Poizner - the tidy houses, the golf course, what I did not smell in the parking lot.

Ira Glass: Are you overplaying the desperate poverty of this neighborhood?

Steve Poizner: No, I don't think so. I mean, it's definitely not like some inner city areas. And I don't know, what you described doesn't strike me as the neighborhood I was at. I mean, at least in 2002 and 2003, the neighborhood is rough-and-tumble. In that there's definitely a lot of crime, and no question lower income. And there's a lot of, you know, signs that people were struggling economically. That's why the crime statistics for surrounding the school - you know you can get those from the San Jose Police Department, like I did - and we definitely documented that not only did it appear to be a rough up and coming area, but the police will tell you that too.

Ira Glass: So we went to the police, and they informed us that no, the neighborhood around Mt. Pleasant high school is NOT especially dangerous or crime ridden. It's average for San Jose. And while San Jose might have a reputation in the richer suburbs around it for being sketchy, and definitely was more dangerous in the '70s and '80s, a police spokesman told us that view is out of date, an urban myth. According to FBI statistics, San Jose is one of the safest cities in the country. There were 371 violent

crimes per 100,000 people in San Jose in 2003, the year Poizner was there. You'd be more likely to be a victim of violent crime in Austin, Texas, or Seattle or Phoenix or Columbus, Ohio or San Francisco. When it came to property crime that year, you were more than twice as likely to have something stolen from you in Honolulu, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco or nearly any big city you can name.

In his book, Poizner plays up the violence at the school itself. He mentions a shooting at the school that happened all the way back in 1990, where a Vietnamese student from another school shot a Mount Pleasant freshman, and Poizner tells the story of a student of his who lets him know that she won't be at class for a couple days because her boyfriend is on trial for being the driver in a bank robbery. There's another student in Poizner's class that Poizner assumes must be in a gang – though confusingly in the book Poizner never actually goes to the trouble to find out if the student IS in a gang. That's the student who Poizner worries will hit him, or get his thug friends and push him against a wall.

So is the school dangerous? I checked with the man who knows: Christopher Schroeder, the associate principal at Mount Pleasant in charge of discipline.

Christopher Schroeder: There is a gang presence in the area. They've been here for - we're into the second and sometimes third generation of gang families, we know this, but at school we don't have gang problems per se. Our students are able to sit next to each other in a classroom and not have conflicts. We don't have fights in the classroom. We don't have fights on campus. We have few fights. Off the top of my head, I think we've had about a dozen fights this year.

Ira Glass: That's about the number of fights you'd get at any high school, even in a fancy neighborhood. There are no metal detectors at the school's entrances. Mr. Schroeder says the total number of gang members among the 1900 students here? 50. At most.

Christopher Schroeder: They are aware that we know who they are and we also have gang intervention specialists who work with them every day, almost every day. We have a gang intervention specialist out there with those guys, talking about their problems, talking about what's happening on the street, making sure that we have peace on campus.

Ira Glass: When it comes to the dropout rate, Steve Poizner also seems to be choosing his statistics very selectively. Mount Pleasant's dropout rate (including the year he was there) is consistently better – sometimes FAR better – than the state and national dropout rates, which is a huge achievement for a school like Mt. Pleasant that's two-thirds Latino. Nationally, Latino dropout rates are much higher than those of other students.

In his book, Poizner doesn't mention any of those numbers, and doesn't mention the school's stats at all, but instead quotes a number for the district the school is in, the East Side Union High School District. Even here, he cherry-picks. In 2003, the year Poizner was at the district, its dropout rate was slightly lower than the state and national averages. Poizner instead chooses to quote the number for one of the two years during the past decade, 2005, when the district had twice as many dropouts as the state and national numbers.

Statistically, Poizner did not teach at a terrible school in a terrible neighborhood, but an average school in an average neighborhood.

Mt. Pleasant student production [song]:

Lead: You got trouble

Chorus: Oh we got trouble

Lead: Right here in River City

Chorus: Right here in River City

Lead: With capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for pool

Chorus: That stands for pool

Lead: We surely got trouble
Chorus: We surely got trouble
Lead: Right here in River City
Chorus: Right here

[music continues]

Ira Glass: These are the dangerous toughs of Mt. Pleasant High School rehearsing *The Music Man* in the brand new auditorium the school just built.

This school has 150 students studying animation in a special studio with rows of Macs and animation stands - this was all going on while Poizner was at the school, too. There are 19 AP classes. There's a vocational program teaching metal and woodworking and computer-aided design, plus a variety of special projects and programs to close the achievement gap and get less privileged kids to college. School attendance is 95 percent.

[Voices sing and piano playing as music number ends]

Woman [to students]: All right, Iowa Stubborn! Everyone into place!

Ira Glass: Some things about the school though clearly could be better. The school doesn't hit its goals in statewide testing. It ranks in the 40th percentile of all CA schools, partly because a fourth of Mt. Pleasant's student body is rated not proficient in English. But measured against schools with similar demographics, it's in the 70th percentile.

For years, I was a reporter in the Chicago public schools for NPR's daily news programs. I've been in great schools, I've been in dangerous schools—urban schools, suburban schools. Mt. Pleasant is definitely one of the better public high schools I've ever visited. And I know it may seem like I'm belaboring all this, putting this book under a microscope point-by-point, but so many of the political discussions in our country seem so disconnected from reality. Every year there are egregious examples of politicians and commentators who believe if they repeat some non-fact over and over, it becomes true. And the more I looked into Poizner's book, the more it seemed like one of those rare cases that's so obviously and provably untrue. Though in Poizner's case, what made it especially interesting was that from his book it seemed very possible that he really is just a well-meaning, idealistic guy who wants to help people, who just got a lot of this wrong.

Though when I asked Steve Poizner if that's what happened here, that it is not a dangerous, bad school, he stuck by his guns.

Ira Glass: You write really honestly in the book about how you aren't from a neighborhood like this and how naïve you are going in. I mean you write really, really honestly about it. Do you think it's possible you went into this neighborhood and you just misperceived how dangerous and tough it is and that's what people are pointing out?

Steve Poizner: Well most people who are reading the book just don't have that reaction, there are some...

Ira Glass: Well no, but I'm talking about the people in the neighborhood, who know the neighborhood.

Steve Poizner: I don't think it's a surprise that people who are in that neighborhood bristle at blunt observations.

Ira Glass: [Poizner talking underneath] But do you think it's possible, but do you think it's possible, I mean you talk so honestly about this in the book, do you think it's possible that you just misperceived it, because you weren't used to that kind of neighborhood?

Steve Poizner: Well this is a book about my experience...

Ira Glass: Exactly.

Steve Poizner: ...and so that's all that the book's about, based on my background- this was the way that I perceived it...

Ira Glass: So are you saying you do think it's possible? So you think it might be possible?

Steve Poizner: No, I'm not saying that.

Mark Holston: What upsets me from the beginning and even now is his intent.

Ira Glass: Again, English teacher Mark Holston.

Mark Holston: Soon after his experience at Mount Pleasant he ran for assemblyman, and I think what kind of turned me off to him was I got some of his campaign literature, and on there he had businessman slash teacher, based on his ... one semester of teaching, and it claimed he was a teacher by profession, and right away that's kind of what offended me. A centerpiece of his campaign was his experience at Mount Pleasant High School. In his commercials, he said "I've taught in schools, I know what's it like to work at a school, I can fix the problems" and things like that and from my understanding it was obvious that he was there to exploit our students, to exploit our school. He came there saying he had no political ambitions, he told our principal "this is not about politics, I just want to give back to the community, I just want to see what it's like to teach in a school and get a better understanding of what the schools are like." Even in his book he says, "I had no intention of running for office when I went there."

Ira Glass: Poizner still insists on that.

It was two months after he left the school that he filed papers to run for assemblyman, and the spring after that his campaign came back to Mount Pleasant, to shoot a commercial with testimony from teachers and students about what Poizner had done for the school. A videographer set up a camera and lights in one of the classrooms during 7th period, and students were ushered in one at a time.

In campaigning, including in one of his campaign biographies—a biography, by the way, which calls Mt. Pleasant an "inner city high school" – Poizner also touts the fact that the principal of Mount Pleasant named him "rookie teacher of the year."

[people laughing]

Mark Holston: Oh the rookie of the year thing...

Ira Glass: Mark Holston and Joe Lovato explained that at the end of school that year, the principal quickly wrote up a bunch of certificates on his computer for a staff party. Lots of people got them, for all kinds of things.

Mark Holston: And that's the other part that really incensed me, when he put out his press release as a result of his receiving a "rookie of the year" award, as if it was voted on statewide, and there was a board, and there was a panel, and the essays were written about how great he was. It was a certificate, printed out, and everybody that was leaving was getting certificates, and that was a certificate of appreciation.

Todd Richards: You know, the reason I've been wanting to talk to people about the book is that I hate to see somebody's character assassinated unfairly, which is my judgment as to what's been happening.

Ira Glass: Todd Richards is the social studies teacher who supervised Steve Poizner in classroom 6-12 back in 2003. He's still there.

Todd Richards: Well, you know it's still largely as it would've been when Poizner was here. You can see the usual white board in front, a screen for the LCD projector.

Ira Glass: In the debate among Mt. Pleasant teachers over whether Steve Poizner was a Machiavellian schemer who used them, or a sincere, perhaps slightly naive guy who actually wanted to help out, Mr. Richards is a principled agnostic. We can't know what he was thinking, Richards says. So let's judge his actions. Richards was as suspicious as anyone when this millionaire showed up. But over the course of the year ...

Todd Richards: I came to think that he was someone who cared deeply about the students. I'd had people from the business world come in and really talk down to students, not put in any effort into it, speak to them in jargon, just, "I never want you back" kind of thing. Poizner clearly worked very, very hard on this class. He was a rookie, he made rookie mistakes, but he clearly wanted the kids to have a valuable experience. He clearly cared that they graduate and do well.

Ira Glass: When I recorded Mr. Richards teaching a class – his 6th period college-level macroeconomics class, for seniors –

Todd Richards [speaking to class]: So, C plus I plus G plus X minus N....

Ira Glass: He asked me if I'd like to take five minutes and ask a few questions of the students. He left the room so his presence wouldn't bias anybody. I asked the students if there was anything they would want me to ask Poizner for them, or to say to him. One senior raised his hand and said he just heard from colleges.

Senior male: I'm going to Berkeley. Take that Poizner! [Class laughs] No, seriously, how is he going to talk about us the way he did when we had almost nine people get into Berkeley this year. That's ridiculous.

Ira Glass: Yvette Rodriguez, another senior, spoke up.

Yvette Rodriguez: Like a lot of things he said is something that you would expect someone who doesn't live in this neighborhood to think of us. He was just like really quick to judge. He didn't grow up here, and he says it in his book, like where he grew up they don't have any of this, so how is he.... I'm not going to go judge him and say, you know, "he's a rich white guy, and doesn't know," because I don't know him. But yet he's over here judging us. That's stereotyping. I think he needs to come out and apologize I think, at least, because a lot of us felt really offended by it.

Ira Glass: When I visited the school, I went to Mr. Richard's class and I asked the students if they had questions for you or anything that they would like me to say to you, and they had one request. One senior girl said she'd like you to admit you got things wrong. She'd like you to apologize. What do you want to say to her?

Steve Poizner: Well, no. I mean, I appreciate her feedback, and I appreciate their passion. And by the way, it's been pretty interesting to see how much school spirit has emerged as some people at the school were, you know, concerned about whether their school was being fairly characterized.

But let's step back for a second and just think about what I've done and what I'm doing. So here I sell my last company for a lot of money and I'm pretty financially well off, and I decide to go into Mt. Pleasant High School, and then after I teach at the school for an extended period of time, I then go back to the school every year to do guest teaching. And then my wife and I, you know, get all kinds of requests from teachers and students about certain projects and we end up donating over \$80,000 to the school over a period of many years. You know, I love the school. And then I write this book about my experiences at the school. And the purpose of the book, even the critics at the school, I guess seem to understand the purpose of the book is to zero in on the fact that Mount Pleasant High school is underperforming. Huge opportunities to improve. The school is in the bottom 40%. And I guess you can argue about my characterizations of the school. I stand by them. But no seems to be arguing the conclusions of the book.

Ira Glass: Well, sort of. Some conclusions obviously people do argue with. But this particular conclusion – that being at the 40th percentile among California public schools is not good enough – is one that's sort of gotten lost in the shuffle, in a lot of the discussion at the school.

Sudhir Karandikar: And that's the part that kind of frustrates me.

Sudhir Karandikar created the AP calculus program at school and teaches 4 classes of AP calculus. He's the only teacher I saw at school that could be described as dapper, and the only one wearing a suit, a charcoal grey pinstripe. He's been at Mt. Pleasant 14 years. He says sure, Poizner got it wrong when he wrote that this was a dangerous school.

Sudhir Karandikar: The whole ducking bullets, and the kid's going to hit him and his Lexus is going to get stolen, it was either a gross exaggerations for the sake of making a dramatic book or he just misread it. Let's move on. We know he got the safety issue wrong. As far as academic performance of the school, he was dead on. Academically, I don't find anything wrong in his conclusions or assessments of our school. Academically.

Ira Glass: We should be doing a better job with these kids, Mr. Karandikar said. That's what we should move the discussion to now.

And a few teachers told me they agreed with Poizner, that academically the school should be better. And they liked the fact that Poizner gives lots of details in his book to help his readers understand the money problems the school faces. And that he shows some of the everyday teaching problems they're up against, stuff that really isn't talked about in the news or normal political discussions about schools. Here's English teacher Vivian Bricksin.

Vivian Bricksin: He talks about one student that tells him, "I don't think I want to do that," [laughs] when he's trying to encourage them to work a little harder, and that is kind of a surprising challenge to face as a teacher- "No, I don't think I want to do that." And the lack of motivation is a daily challenge, I think, for teachers in the school, even if they're veterans.

Ira Glass: Steve Poizner says this is exactly what he hopes readers will take from the book. He wants it to lead to a better discussion about how to improve schools. In the book he talks mostly about charter schools as being a good laboratory for new ideas. In his gubernatorial campaign he also talks about cutting down on the central school bureaucracy in California - giving more control of the curriculum and more money to local schools - two things that teachers like of course. Many of Mt. Pleasant's teachers are less keen on two of Poizner's other big proposals - to make it easier to fire teachers and suspend rules at the bottom 40 percent of California schools, and to expel from public schools all the students who are in the country illegally. Which would, of course, affect students at Mt. Pleasant.

Poizner told me that in the end it doesn't matter if he got facts wrong about the school, because everywhere but at Mt. Pleasant itself, this is the discussion his book will hopefully engender.

Steve Poizner: Most Californians have absolutely no idea, you know, what goes on, you know, in a classroom, what goes on in the public education system. And so at the end of it all, a month from now or a year from now when people are debating this book, they're not going to be debating whether my characterization of the smells in the neighborhood are the same as yours when you went there. The purpose of the book is to improve the public education system.

Ira Glass: English teacher Mark Holston sees this one differently. He says for Poizner to misread what this school and this neighborhood are all about says a lot about his judgment, and that does mean something.

Mark Holston: Half the state of California who he's trying to represent looks like our neighborhood. Our neighborhood looks more like California than the neighborhood he comes from. So I think he's completely out of touch. I hate to think that somebody even getting this far could be that naïve and be that clueless. That's even scarier, because I'm sure he's going to run for something else, and he can't be that way off. It's terrifying if he's that way off again. This is an average high school, and if he was the governor, he'd be the chief educator for the state of California. And if he can misinterpret what he sees in this school, and portray a school as one of the toughest when it's an average high school in California, it's scary for our future in California if he ever got elected.

Ira Glass: One week after Poizner's book made it to #5 on the bestseller list, it dropped to #33. The campaign declined to give sales figures for the book, and declined to say whether it bought enough copies itself in that first week to put the book on the bestseller list.

The principal at Mt. Pleasant told me she now finds herself now with an awkward dilemma. Poizner has donated the profits from the book sales to the school, and she's not sure they should take it. He got so many things wrong about Mt. Pleasant and offended so many people. But at the same time, with budgets being slashed, it's hard to turn her back on any money that might help her students.

END