Actor Hal Holbrook talks to students and answers their questions about acting at Holyoke High School on Friday.

Actor speaks to Holyoke students

Actor Hal Holbrook was in the area for a performance of his one-man show on Mark Twain, set for tonight.

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HOLYOKE - He was the secret source on Watergate in "All the President's Men" and he will be Mark Twain on stage here tonight.

But Friday, actor Hal Holbrook was storyteller and advice-giver to Holyoke High School students.

"You've got to step forward - it's hard and don't give up. That's the only thing I can tell you. Never give up," said Holbrook, 86.

Holbrook was in the city because he is performing the one-man show he has been honing since 1964 on Mark Twain, tonight at 8 at Holyoke High School auditorium, 500 Beech St.

Holbrook is doing the show and met with students by arrangement with the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts. The local group owns and is renovating the Victory Theatre on Suffolk Street, and proceeds from Holbrook's show will benefit the $28 million renovation.

But, Holbrook told a dozen students at the high school, his ties to Holyoke go back decades.

He performed for four years in the 1950s as a member of the Valley Players at the former Mountain Park Casino. It's where he first did "Mark Twain."

Holbrook folded his overcoat on a railing in the Edward Shevelin Studio at the high school and spoke to the students for nearly twice as long as the planned hour-long session.

He wove together history lessons about the importance of Twain, Ed Sullivan and early television, stage acting versus the movies and TV, and how dedication to his craft damaged his family life.

He won a Tony Award in 1966 for Mark Twain, won two Emmy Awards for TV work and has acted in movies with luminaries such as Tom Cruise, Clint Eastwood and Robert Redford.

But acting was also his way of putting bread on the table, he said.

"You have to work hard, which is what you have to do. You have to do it for yourself. No one can do it for you," Holbrook said.

Ciara Prieto, 14, a drama student, said Holbrook inspired her.

"I thought it was pretty cool to meet him because he's won a Tony, he's won Emmys. I like the way he explained his view on acting," Prieto said.

Kyle Schreiber, 16, said he knew little about Holbrook before but is now a fan.

"It was really amazing to meet him," Schreiber said.


Last year, Holbrook played the father of Katy Sagal's character on "Sons of Anarchy," a TV drama about the leathered-and-tattooed members of an outlaw motorcycle club with Shakespearean undertones.

"I enjoyed it. I love the way they look. They wore those leather vests and the tattoos. It was like Shakespeare. But they were all great guys. They were all so nice," Holbrook said.