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**Q&A:** Danny Russel

# Young 'Riley' to visit festival

*Actor will perform for Oct. 4 breakfast in annual tribute to poet*

By Bill McCleery

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A tradition will continue Oct. 2-5 as the city of Greenfield once again hosts the Riley Festival.

Several things have changed. The former Mayor's Breakfast, for example, has been renamed the James Whitcomb Riley Breakfast — partly because Mayor Brad DeReamer will be in Japan the weekend of the festival.

While overseas, the mayor will join in celebrating the 50th anniversary of Greenfield's sister city, Kakuda, and participate in several other activities aimed at economic partnerships between Greenfield and Japanese companies.

Many things, however, remain the same for the festival, which is one of the largest fall festivals in Indiana. The focal point, as always, is Greenfield's most well-known native son.

The "Hoosier Poet," James Whitcomb Riley, was born Oct. 7, 1849. The festival each year is held on the weekend closest to Riley's birthday.

At the Saturday breakfast, hometown hero Josh Bleill — a U.S. Marine wounded in Iraq — will speak. In addition, actor Danny Russel will perform his popular portrayal of Riley.

Unlike many impersonators, who depict Riley in his older years, Russel performs as the poet in his younger days, when he was traveling the countryside painting signs and performing at medicine shows.

The breakfast will be at 7:30 a.m. Oct. 4 at Park Chapel Christian Church, 1176 E. McKenzie Road. Tickets are \$10 a person. Call (317) 462-2141 or log onto [rileyfestival.com](http://rileyfestival.com) for more information.

By e-mail, Russel recently answered questions about his popular Riley act, which he performs Tuesdays through Fridays each week at the Indiana State Museum.

**Question: What got you interested in James Whitcomb Riley?**

**Answer:** In 1997, I was merely another typical unemployed actor who was thrilled to be cast in an original play, commissioned by The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, celebrating the life of our legendary Hoosier Poet. We played to thousands of students for three months and, due to overwhelming response, revived our production in 1998, 1999 (coinciding with Riley's 150th birthday) and 2002. After that, I developed a one-man vehicle and traveled the state.

**Q: What's the most memorable experience**



Photo provided by DANNY RUSSEL

Warren Township resident Danny Russel portrays a young James Whitcomb Riley in his one-man act, recapturing a time when the poet was traveling the countryside painting signs and performing at medicine shows.

**you've ever had while performing Riley?**

**A:** My most gratifying and memorable experience? In 2006, I began appearing at the Indiana State Museum. During the month of May, many of our patrons were international visitors in town for the Indy 500. I was astonished that, not only was a particular family from Ireland cognizant of Riley and his work, they requested poem after poem (I've memorized 40 of his 1,044 published pieces) and left me a \$200 tip! There's simply no finer example of Riley's universal appeal.

**Q: Have you ever been to the Riley Festival before or visited his boyhood home in Greenfield?**

**A:** Over the years, I've visited the Riley Festival in Greenfield several times, although ironically, it's the first time I'll be performing there. I've portrayed Riley

### More about Danny Russel

» **FAMILY:** "Wife, Teresa (she's an accountant, so when we met, she became my financial manager — even though, at the time, I had no finances to manage); son, Grant, 17, is following in dad's footsteps and is playing a lead in "High School Musical" at The Artists' Studio in Fishers; son, Drake, 14."

» **RESIDENCE:** Warren Township.

» **OCCUPATION:** Actor.

» **AGE:** "I never disclose it, since that would limit casting directors' perceptions of me."

» **EDUCATION:** Chicago Actors Studio; bachelor's degree in theater from Ball State University.

» **HOBBIES:** Reading, songwriting, playing guitar.

» **CONTACT:** "Go online at [www.dannyrussel.com](http://www.dannyrussel.com) for lots of photos and details about my Riley show."

virtually everywhere in Indiana — except his hometown!

**Q: How often do you typically portray Riley in the course of a year?**

**A:** I currently perform 250 to 275 shows each year at schools, libraries, churches, nursing homes, private parties, festivals, etc. Youngsters scream with laughter as they're introduced to him, and the older folks smile in recognition and can often recite right along with me since they grew up with his poetry. These days, I'm extremely blessed to enjoy such a wonderful career honoring Riley's legacy and keeping alive his memory.

**Q: What is your favorite Riley poem?**

**A:** My favorite poem is undoubtedly "Little Orphan Annie" (1892), which is also his most popular and widely recognized work. Even if people have never heard of James Whitcomb Riley, they all seem to know "the gobble-uns'll get ye ef you don't watch OUT!"

**Q: The 7:30 a.m. breakfast is pretty early for many people. Are there any other opportunities for Eastside and Hancock County residents to see your performance?**

**A:** If you can't make it to the breakfast, you can still catch me Tuesdays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Indiana State Museum, 650 W. Washington St., Indianapolis. I'm easy to find — as you can tell by my authentic 1890s suit!

★ Call Star reporter Bill McCleery at (317) 444-6083.