

# Remembering His Hometown: NFL Player A.J. Epenesa Pays Special Visit To Fourth-Grade Teacher's Classroom

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EDWARDSVILLE - A.J. Epenesa, a defensive end for the Buffalo Bills in the NFL, is a household name throughout Edwardsville and the entire Metro East region.

He was an All-Stater in football, basketball and track and field for the Edwardsville Tigers and attained more fame at the University of Iowa and now the NFL. A.J. also

attended Lincoln School while in the junior high ranks. On Friday, he made a surprise visit to his fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Lora Wagner, at Woodland Elementary.

A.J.'s intent in coming back was to express his appreciation for one of the people who helped mold him. It is a reminder of the profound impact teachers have on the lives of their students. A.J. took the time to speak to Mrs. Wagner's students, take photos and sign autographs, which meant everything to his teacher and the students at the school.

A.J. was in a photo shown above sitting in a Woodland Elementary seat, something the students also will never forget.



Edwardsville High School Principal Steve Stuart remains close with A.J. and the Epenesa family in general. Stuart had not only A.J., but his sister, Samantha, Eric and now his brother, Iose, come through his leadership at both Lincoln and EHS. Stuart spoke fondly about the Epenesa family - led by mom, Stephanie and dad, Eppy. He said they are such good people and they have worked wonders with their children, all success in each of their ranks.

“A.J. has grown into a very caring adult,” he said when he learned of the Woodland visit.

Stuart said A.J. also visited the basketball team this past week after a home game. He may be at the Alton-Edwardsville on Friday night, the principal said.

“I wouldn’t think it is too often an NFL player appears in your classroom or locker room,” Stuart said. “He was on the sidelines and in the locker room when he was home during the Bills’ exhibition season and he has a bye week this week, so he is home again.”

Stuart also spoke highly of kicker Riley Patterson, a member of the Detroit Lions NFL squad. He came back to Edwardsville and spoke to the football team members during his trip. Craig James, another NFL player with the New York Jets, also came home during his bye week, spoke to the Little Tigers, and was on the sidelines during a home football game.

“I think it is wonderful these NFL players from Edwardsville still show they haven’t forgotten their roots and want to give back to the program that helped make them who they are,” Stuart said.

Stuart said Eppy and Stephanie Epenesa always ensured their kids listened to their coaches’ and teachers’ directions and did not look up in the stands at them.

“They did a great job of instilling values in their children,” the principal said.

