

Children cope with reality through fantasy at Upstairs



The centipede (right) meets the frog (left) in a forest clearing as the class enacts a fable entitled "The Centipede." In their discussion, the frog asks the centipede how he decides which leg to move first.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Jimmy Ciurca, front, heads the centipede as the other students act as the legs.

One-time parish teen group branches into public schools

By Teresa A. Parsons

Growls and snarls echoed down the halls of Adlai Stevenson School 29 last Friday morning. Strains of jazzy music and foot stomping followed. But none of the adults or children passing through the school halls paid much notice to the sounds emanating from Room 107 — it was nothing unusual for Amy McConnell's drama class.

With imaginative assistance from McConnell, 16 students between the ages of 9 and 11 transformed themselves for an hour into bears, squirrels, rabbits, a frog and a centipede that loved to dance.

Most children need no encouragement to indulge in such fantasies. But when you're confined to a wheelchair or need crutches to move around, dancing like a centipede or moving like a woodland creature takes considerably more thought and effort.

About half of the 80 children McConnell teaches at School 29 are physically disabled. The other half are equally inhibited by invisible handicaps, from learning disabilities to emotional disorders. McConnell, a native of Colorado with a background in theater for the deaf, calls what she does in the class "creative dramatic expression." That translates into acting out poems; songs and stories through dance and gestures; taking cultural field trips; and putting on a "show" for parents, teachers and fellow students. In the process, McConnell helps her students become comfortable with their own and others' limitations. At the same time she fosters their self-confidence by encouraging them to try and succeed at new ventures.

"The so-called 'regular' kids learn how to accept handicapped children, and my kids learn to interact with others," said Jeanne Wells, a special education teacher who hands her class over to McConnell once a week. "They're also learning to accept themselves... Most of these kids lack experience, and if they don't have those experiences, they can't learn."

Using the arts to provide learning experiences to young people has always been the aim of the Upstairs Youth Agency, which sponsors McConnell's class. Sister Sheila Walsh and Father David Simon may have taken a different approach when they founded the agency in 1975, but their aim was similar — in Sister Sheila's words, "to give every kid the experience of somebody clapping for them."

Responding to a lack of arts and cultural activities in Rochester for young people, Sister Sheila, Father Simon and the agency's first director, Tony Falzano, obtained seed money from the Diocese of Rochester and the City/County Youth Bureau and began producing musicals. All teenagers were welcome — there were no auditions and no eligibility requirements. With the money raised from musicals, Upstairs offered social, spiritual and recreational activities as well as counseling referrals and a youth drop-in center.

Altogether, Upstairs has staged about 14 shows — the last for the 1984 sesquicentennial celebration at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester.

Meanwhile, the agency had moved gradually from musical productions toward after-school arts programs that would reach more children. City Streets Workshops, located at St. Monica's School, feature jazz classes taught by musician Nate Rawls, dance classes taught by KoKo Kilpatrick, and art instruction with Ruth Hauser. Nearly 120 children are currently involved in the program, which is named for Upstairs' fourth show.

The drama class for disabled students began four years ago at School 29, which serves close to 700 students from all over the City of Rochester. About half are classified as special education students, and many will never be mainstreamed into regular classrooms.

In the past, those children would have been institutionalized, according to Anne Rodgers, the school's special



Tammy McCoy portrays a bear in the dramatic exercise.



Before the class begins the play, instructor Amy McConnell checks to make sure students are following demonstration of the dance.

education cadre. But, in the founding spirit of Upstairs, everyone in the drama class is mainstreamed. Everyone gets to be a star.

Each of the dance routines and stories McConnell teaches has a more subtle lesson as well. Last Friday's story told of a centipede who loved to dance until a frog asked how she did it. Unable to answer this critical question, the centipede gave up dancing in discouragement.

"Did anyone ever do that to you?" McConnell asked her students. "Were you ever trying your best to do something and someone said 'Hey, you're no good at that?'"

"Yeah!" the children chorused, waving their arms in the air.

"How could the story have ended differently?" McConnell continued. "What could the frog have said to make the centipede keep dancing?"

"That is a good dance!" one boy answered.
"That's your assignment for the week," McConnell

charged as the class concluded. "If you see somebody trying to do something and giving it their best shot, but not doing very well, I want you to encourage them."

McConnell has begun offering drama classes to 50 students at School 12 this month as well, and Upstairs director Tom August hopes eventually to expand even further to School 44, Jefferson High School and other sites.

August's goal is to extend both programs to as many children as possible in the city's southwest area. "Any kid who's out on the street, we want to get him interested," August said.

But the problem, as always, is funding. To reach more children, Upstairs needs a larger budget. To attract more financial support, August needs to demonstrate that he's reaching more kids.

They're out there. Of the 32,000 children in Rochester's city schools, over 5,000 or 16 percent are disabled. Fifty-one

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