

# Youtheatre benefits from educator's original approach

By Emily Morrison

As Sheila Knipper prepared educational materials to accompany last February's Nazareth Arts Center performance of the National Dance Company of Senegal, she brought a personal focus to the educational process. Knipper, who has served since 1984 as educational resources administrator for Nazareth's Youtheatre, once lived for two years on Africa's Ivory Coast while her husband worked there as a Peace Corps administrator.

Her educational package for the May production of Aurand Harris' *The Arkansaw Bear*, the acclaimed children's drama that broaches the sensitive topic of a child's reaction to death, indirectly reflects Knipper's own confrontation with the subject. Among the experts she consulted during her research was a woman who operates a hospice for the dying, a friend who had provided emotional support during Knipper's recent experience with the death of her mother.

When she visited various area elementary school classrooms to discuss concepts dealt with in the play, she took along six of her 10-year-old daughter's toy bears to pass out to participating children, who had already seen the play. As she talked with the children, they hugged and clutched the plushy facsimiles of the play's ursine characters, two talking bears that displayed poignantly human emotions.

"This playwright would have chosen any animal," says Knipper. "Why bears?" she asked the children.

Bears, she concluded as her young pupils began to speak haltingly about death, are comforting. And what Knipper shared with the children during those discussions affirms that educational methods don't have to be conventional to communicate with children. "The kids, I found, were much more comfortable talking about death than most adults," she comments.

Sheila Knipper's involvement with Youtheatre bears the stamp of a personal approach that touches those she teaches in a subtle way. A Nazareth graduate and former English teacher whose intertwined interests in children and theater led her to work with a volunteer group called Nazareth Arts Center Theatre Association (NACTA), Knipper began her association with her alma mater by writing program inserts and play summaries, and devising activities for parents and children to engage in together before the opening of upcoming Nazareth plays.

A member of St. Louis Parish in Pittsford, Knipper collaborates frequently with fellow NACTA volunteers Jane Garvin Keller, a former Mercy High School English teacher, and Cindy Cottone, the Courier-Journal columnist who contributes her scriptural interpretations for children each week in *Bible Corner*. Together, they've written and compiled educational materials for Youtheatre productions of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, Homer's *The Odyssey*, *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Arkansaw Bear*. Knipper, who earned her bachelor's degree in English and speech from Nazareth and a master's in education from the University of Rochester, independently created the materials on the

Senegalese dancers and this past spring's Martin Luther King Jr. Greater Rochester Festival.

Educational materials have included mazes and word jumbles, maps and demographic information, spelling work sheets and vocabulary drills, written projects and play synopses, poetry, language studies and reading lists. And of course, questions from children of all ages, from mythology review quizzes for high school students to "cozy, comfortable, child-sized ... riddles — Just how *did* the camel get his hump? Why *do* kangaroos look so funny? Why *don't* whales eat people? Where *did* writing come from anyway?"

Some of the questions are deceptively simple explorations of universal dilemmas. "Do all things have to die?" read the pre-teaching questions in the educational packet for *The Arkansaw Bear*. "Do you have a choice? ... Can you run away from death? Can you trick death into going away? ... Can you leave something of yourself behind when you die? What types of things can people remember about you after you die?"

In her classroom experiences with more than 600 local elementary school students, Knipper was able to weave such questions into the fabric of the children's own experiences with the deaths of grandparents, pets and acquaintances. "In one case, a teacher was out with cancer; in another, a teacher had just returned to class after a bout with cancer," Knipper relates. "We talked in a very reassuring way about how people could live on in a way after death — in our memories, in the kinds of things they leave behind, in memories, physical mementos, the things they've taught us to do."

"Kids would open up," she recalls. "They'd talk about their memories of people who had died."

In most cases, children who attend city and suburban public schools have come to Nazareth to attend the performances, although *The Odyssey* and *Just So Stories* developed into touring productions staged in the schools themselves. Knipper has led post-show discussions in school auditoriums as well as at Nazareth Arts Center.

To accompany the February 14 Arts Center performance of the National Dance Company of Senegal, Knipper put together a presentation for teachers at the Oxford Gallery, in conjunction with the gallery's annual African art exhibit. She also brought in former Senegalese dancer, musician and stage manager Gjiimo Kouyate, who now has his own company in Washington, D.C. After the Friday morning performance, a productive exchange ensued between Kouyate, Senegalese company members and students of School Without Walls.

"I guess basically what I do is research, write, edit and compile materials from other experts in the area," Knipper offers, when pressed for an unofficial job description. She has drawn on such community resources as the Rochester Museum and Science Center, for scientific data supplied by astronomer Fran Bidy. She has also written program notes for Youtheatre directors, as well as costume and set designers.

Any teacher who elects to bring a group of students to the Arts Center is automatically



supplied with a packet of educational materials compiled by Knipper, whose visits to area schools are underwritten by grants from the Aesthetic Education Institute and New York State Council on the Arts.

Above all, area teachers can expect to benefit from the fruits of Sheila Knipper's unorthodox approach as well as those of her exhaustive research. "As a former teacher, what I like most about this is that I have time to do the research — and then the real fun of presenting the material to kids," she affirms.

Only time will tell what lies in store for Youtheatre's educational resource administrator in the coming year. David Palma, Youtheatre's director for the past 10 years, left his position during the summer to pursue doctoral studies and a growing involvement with the Irish Theatre Connection. When Richard Kalinowski replaces him this fall, the Youtheatre program will be absorbed into Nazareth's theater department rather than remaining a program of the Arts Center.

It remains to be seen what future role Knipper will play in the new scenario. In any event,

if it weren't for such original notions as supplying young playgoers with an opportunity to practice writing friendly letters while their teachers are filling out evaluation forms, Nazareth might never have acquired such comments from youthful critics as the following epistle, dated June 3, 1986:

Dear Mrs. Knipper,

I really liked the play *Arkansaw bear*. The actors, costumes, stage sets, were just great. It was sad and happy fun and exiting (sic). I think your rate is 5\* (5\* is the best!)

Love,

Gary Inzana

Another young admirer wrote that he "belevd the Holle play," while a third, rather lukewarm viewer damned the production with faint praise ("I really didn't like the *Arkansaw Bear*. Then again I really didn't hate it. I guess it was o.k.>").

Ask Sheila Knipper. The seeds we plant today may be the hostile reviewers of the future — or, if we're lucky, they may write, direct or even perform in equally worthy theatrical productions staged for coming generations.

dents from Seton and Our Lady of Lourdes, which will house grades three through six on the building's third floor.

The science lab has been expanded with new equipment. Students can consult a guidance counselor, available two days each week, for career guidance as well as help with discipline and education on drug and alcohol abuse.

Extracurricular activities will include boys' and girls' soccer, softball, basketball and cheerleading, a school newspaper and "memory book," and student government. Schockow describes the commitment of teachers to Seton as "overwhelming."

"They've been in here throughout July and August, helping at night, available at a moment's notice," he said. "They are committed to making it go and willing to do whatever it takes to make it work."

Prior to his appointment as principal, Schockow taught for eight years at St. Boniface School. "I've done all this before," he said. "I'll be drawing on past experience and what I've seen in other schools."

"I would like to see us coming out of here in five years with the reputation of being as good as any other school in the area without sacrificing any of our Catholic ideals," Schockow said. "There isn't anything we couldn't do with the numbers of kids we have. We've got unlimited potential — so much so that I hate to put parameters on it."

## Junior highs

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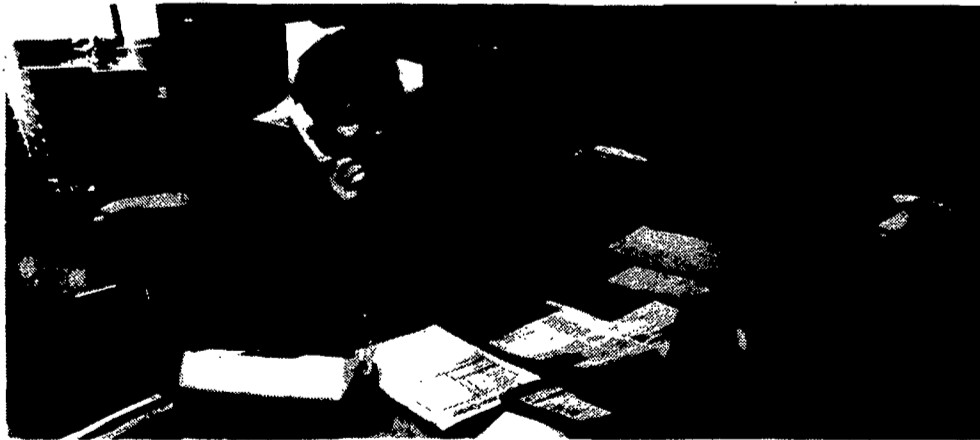
After orientation, students will plunge into academics. "We'll start right away and envelop them," Sister Elizabeth said. "Our teachers really have no time to waste — they're not going to wait around till everyone gets to know one another."

She believes in offering remediation one-on-one rather than identifying groups of students as remedial. "We don't want them in a class where they feel they can't go ahead and excel," she explained.

Blessed Sacrament has a long-established program of outreach to the community. Students visit nursing homes and work at St. Martin's Place, a nearby soup kitchen. "We also respond as a school to the needs of the neighborhood," she said. Students volunteer their after-school hours to shovel walks, deliver groceries and run errands for nearby residents who request assistance.

Seton Junior High is the only suburban regional junior high to date. Because the school was conceived and developed in response to a grass-roots initiative, principal Steven Schockow believes he can count on broad support from parents and participating parishes.

"People took the initiative here. This was asked for, mandated actually, by the people," he said.



Sister Pat Carroll, principal of Holy Family Junior High, catches up on messages. Her office is filled with boxes of material yet to be put away.

The school, located on the second floor of Our Lady of Lourdes School building in Brighton, will open its doors this fall to 86 seventh- and eighth-grade students from Our Lady of Lourdes; St. Thomas More, Pittsford; and St. Jerome's, East Rochester.

"We knew pretty much who was coming by May or June," Schockow said. "But I think after this first year, we'll find an influx of students."

Schockow views the school as a "God-centered" alternative to public schools in the area. Although he considers the program's religious component as primary, academics will be given equal emphasis.

Four reading groups will accommodate students from all three schools, regardless of grade level. "Since students will come from three different directions, with different programs and books, we'll have to pick up where each one left off," Schockow said.

Both Spanish and French will be offered, along with math enrichment and library skills. In line with Regents' requirements, a course covering study skills, technology and home/career skills will be offered once each week. Art will be offered once a week and students will have a choice between instrumental and choral music programs.

Thirteen computers are available for stu-