

Features



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal

Bill O'Brien, left, Susan Quinlan and Dennis Smith, members of Sunshine Too, perform for students at Our Mother of Sorrows elementary school in Rochester. The troupe, which consists of staff members from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, teaches deaf awareness through skits, songs and poetry.

Locally based theatrical troupe acts as international envoy for the deaf

Since 1980, the actors of the Sunshine Too! theatrical troupe, have traveled across the United States — and soon the Middle East and Europe — to perform in schools and colleges, at meetings and national conferences.

The six professional performers who comprise the troupe — which is based at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology — are accustomed to touring and the theatrical lifestyle, but they regard themselves as more than just actors.

"They're ambassadors for the deaf," explained Sunshine Too's outreach coordinator, Jim Orr. "The basic premise behind (the show) is to promote awareness of deafness and deaf culture in an informative but entertaining way."

The performers — three deaf and three hearing — create this awareness through a series of skits involving story telling, mime, dance, signed mime and song. Although the performances entertain their audiences, the presentations touch on the deeper themes of self esteem, acceptance of others, appropriate behavior and fear as both a positive and a negative emotion.

In addition to performing, the actors conduct workshops, lead discussions and encourage audience participation and interaction. During a typical performance — such as the one the company recently gave at Rochester's Mother of Sorrows School — the

characters in a skit might ask audience members to suggest solutions to problems the performers are facing. This helps the audience to begin to understand the actions of others better, Orr explained.

"What we try to tell our audiences is that everyone is special in their own right," Orr concluded.



Gary Palumbo, 9, repeats the signs given on stage.



Dennis Smith recites a poem in sign language for the students.



Fourth graders Bethany Hilton, left, and Amy Cellura learn to do the hand jive.