

# Penfield girl's creativity makes her a celebrity

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

PENFIELD — As the 6 p.m. television show began, Leah Tarantino sat on the living-room couch in quiet and nervous anticipation.

Her mother Georgeann, on the other hand, was not as successful at containing her enthusiasm.

"Leah, I'm so excited I can't stand it!" Georgeann exclaimed from across the room.

Well, after all, it's not every day that your daughter gets to appear on national television.

Family and friends gathered at the Tarantino residence on Saturday, Jan. 21 to watch Leah be featured *U to U*, a weekly children's show on the Nickelodeon cable network.

Leah, 11, a fifth-grader at St. Joseph's School, 39 Gebhardt Road, had submitted a short story, "The Neon Witch," to Nickelodeon back in April and learned in June that it would be shown on *U to U*. Leah, her mother and her father, Ben, then were flown in October to New York City, where Leah was interviewed.

Finally, after three more months of patient waiting, the finished product and Leah's interview were ready to be aired. The segment, which Leah was seeing for the first time, was presented as a "clay-mation" skit involving the use of three-dimensional clay characters.

At approximately 6:20 p.m. on Saturday, "The Neon Witch" hit the airwaves across the United States — and in the United Kingdom as well.

For those who didn't catch the program, Leah's tale centers around Wood-ia, a witch who dresses in bright colors instead of traditional witch's black. Her garb even includes multicolored fake fingernails.

This glitzy get-up angers all the other witches in town, so they shun Wood-ia and mount a campaign to have her punished by the Queen Witch when she comes to town.

Instead, the Queen Witch — who also prefers colorful clothing — appoints Wood-ia her "vice-witch." The black-clad witches are designated as maids who must now wait on Wood-ia.

The story's moral, Leah told her viewers, is that "you shouldn't make fun of somebody just because they look different or sound different."

Leah, whose creative skills also include poetry and illustrations, said Nickelodeon's presentation of "The Neon Witch" contained only a few minor alterations from the original story she wrote back in third grade.

"I took out the part about the big (col-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Leah Tarantino (second from right), a fifth-grade student at Penfield's St. Joseph's School, watches her story 'The Neon Witch' come to life in the form of a 'clay-mation' skit on the Nickelodeon cable network's *U to U* show. Watching the program with Leah (from left to right) are Bryanna Gebby, Alexa Tarantino, Bret Gebby and Gabrielle Tarantino (on floor).



Leah reacts with nervous excitement as she appears on national TV.

ored) wart," Leah acknowledged. Jean Beachley, Leah's fifth-grade teacher at St. Joseph's School, noted that "The Neon Witch" is just one of many fresh story ideas which find their way from Leah's imagination onto paper.

"She's very interested in creative writing. She has a great vocabulary, probably because she's an avid reader," Beachley remarked.

As Leah's family and friends watched

"The Neon Witch" conclude last Saturday, the room broke into spontaneous applause. Seconds later, the Tarantino phone started ringing ... and ringing ... and ringing.

While her mother was asking callers, "Wasn't she great?" "Did you see it?" and "What do you think?" a slightly stunned Leah remained rooted to the couch.

"People all over the United States just watched me. Oh, my God," she murmured.

"Rubbing elbows with the big shots," her 8-year-old sister, Alexa, chirped

## Greece youth group enjoys major pizza purge

GREECE — More than enough supplies were available during this benefit to construct a "leaning tower of pizza."

Yet eating, not building, was on the minds of participants who recently flocked to Holy Name of Jesus Church, St. Martin's Way.

An elaborate pizza-judging contest was held in the church hall in mid-December. The feast included approximately 65 youth-group members and adults who sampled some 39 pizzas.

According to Patrick Donohue, Holy Name's youth minister, the idea for this

activity began quite routinely when some youth-group members began asking a fairly common question: Who has the best pizza in town?

From there, the group decided to organize a contest by asking for donations from every pizza establishment which has at least one parlor operating within Greece's boundaries.

An overwhelming response ensued, with 20 of the 22 businesses donating at least one cheese-and-pepperoni pizza. The pizza pies were presented to a panel of five "experts" from the Holy Name

youth group, who judged all 20 entries in such categories as best crust, cheese, sauce, and pepperoni. An audience poll was also taken to determine which pizza offered the fastest deliveries, friendliest service, best value, and so on.

All leftover pizza was brought later that night to St. Joseph's Villa for the teenage residents there to enjoy. In addition, admission proceeds were put toward the parish "hunger jar," which helps provide food for residents in the Holy Name community.

— Mike Latona

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