

Jesuit's puppets entertain, teach

Julie Bourbon/CNS

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — In Brother Ed Sheehy's office, a fiddler plays on the roof, a graceful rollerblader glides by and a trapeze artist performs to "Stars and Stripes Forever."

There's also a young Asian woman in traditional dress who is juggling a ball on her head as Blessed Mother Teresa counts her rosary beads.

These figures represent just a few of the puppets Brother Sheehy has created over the years.

Once a baker of bread, shaping loaves, he now shapes wood and cloth into puppets that teach and entertain.

"I haven't baked in 40 years," said Brother Sheehy, 70, whose hands come fully alive when they are animating a hand puppet or working the strings of a handcrafted marionette.

In 1970, he saw his first puppet

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show; today, dozens of string, rod and hand puppets take up all of his time. "The rest of my life, I'm never going to have enough puppets," he said.

Fifty-two years ago, Brother Sheehy left St. Peter's Prep School in Jersey City and entered the Jesuit novitiate at St. Andrew's-on-Hudson, which today is the Culinary Institute of America. With a wink and a nod, he will tell you he used to bake bread and decorate cakes at "the CIA."

He coached sports at St. Ignatius School in New York City, where he began teaching arts and crafts. There, he had an attic workshop and delighted in the thought of being the only puppeteer he knew with a studio on Park Avenue.

Four years ago, he returned to St. Peter's Prep, to a ground-floor studio



Todd Plitt/CNS

Jesuit Brother Ed Sheehy of Jersey City, N.J., created this wide-eyed furry green creature for a retreat session with eighth-grade students.

with a sewing machine, traveling trunks, Styrofoam balls, Superman paraphernalia, swatches of fabric and books on puppets and dolls.

In that crowded studio, and in places like Central Park, Brother Sheehy comes up with his ideas.

His puppets move like people move — walking, taking a rest, breathing, doing double takes, hiking

up their pant legs before sitting.

"These are the things that make a puppet real," he said in an interview in the monthly National Jesuit News.

Brother Sheehy has put on shows around the world, affording him a unique chance to learn about puppetry traditions of other cultures.

His is a helping apostolate, visiting schools, nursing homes and retired religious. Once a blind man came to a puppet show; Brother Sheehy let him handle all the puppets afterward.

"It is my apostolate," he said. He would be thrilled if another Jesuit took an interest in writing plays or scenes, not always instructional or allegorical, for his puppets. "Sometimes the message is joy."

In the meantime, he is a man alone with his puppets, performing, creating, entertaining.

"This is me, this is what I do and these are my puppets. It's not so much wood and glue anymore," he said.

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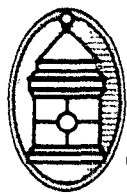
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