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Last curtain call

Kelly Hafen | Posted: Friday, June 25, 2004 12:00 am

Founder of Nibley/s children/s theater program moves on

A college degree in theater, a young woman with a couple of kids and an ambition to create something incredible is how Jessie Datwyler began directing Nibley/s Children/s Plays.

This is her 22nd year directing the play, and her last 77 at least her last play in Nibley.

"Nibley has been very fortunate to have her spear-heading the Children/s Theater all these years," said Sandra Larkin, who is currently assistant director of the Children/s Play. "I doubt it would exist here if not for her."

Datwyler, a 6th- and 7th-grade English and reading teacher, is moving to Smithfield after this year/s production of "Robin Hood." She can/t decide if she wants to take on the commitment of starting a Children/s Play in Smithfield; she said she/s too old and doesn/t know if she has enough energy to keep directing.

Larkin will take on directing when Datwyler leaves, because according to Datwyler, "she is young and has the energy to do it."

Luckily, the program won/t have to change much 77 it has been running for so long, the kinks have been worked out.

Datwyler/s husband, Scott Datwyler, said, "She started this, but she/s been training people to carry on when she/s gone. That is what a good leader does."

Datwyler started the Children/s Play, which is held in conjunction with Nibley Heritage Days, because she was looking for something she could do with her children.

"I was a young mom and wanted my kids to be in the play," said Datwyler. "I volunteered to do it just because I thought it would be fun."

By directing the play, Datwyler was able to put her college degree to use and be a "stay-at-home mom" at the same time.

The first play, "The Selfish Giant," was produced with just over 10 children. Datwyler said she probably just asked neighborhood kids to be in the play. She also remembers passing out a lot of fliers. The production was made with no outside funding; the stage was borrowed from another city and the costumes were made by the parents.

"We started with nothing," said Datwyler.

After years of productions 77 "Jack in the Beanstalk," "Cinderella," "Alice in Wonderland" 77 the annual play began to grow in size and city interest, now attracting an audience of 200 to 300 people.

Raelyn Schenk, who sits in the audience year after year to see her own children, said, "She (Datwyler) has unbelievable energy and patience. It won't be the same without her. She/s just so great with the kids."

Schenk said her husband was in the play when he was a kid. Now her kids are in it every year and they "absolutely love it."

This year, 91 kids, ages 5 to 14, are involved in the play. Some are actors or actresses, some are in the orchestra, some are stage crew and some are in charge of the scenery.

"Everyone that wants to be in it, can be in it," said Datwyler.

Some of the children don't want to be on stage, said Datwyler. The 10-member orchestra is the perfect place for them, she said; that way they can still be involved by playing a violin, cello, harp or another instrument.

"Not everyone wants to play baseball," said Scott. The play provides those children with other opportunities.

To Datwyler, the children are the most important part of the program.

"The children benefit the most," Larkin agreed. "Children come out of their shell just because of this."

Larkin said Datwyler makes every child feel like their part is the most important part and is sure to make each child feel special.

"Each kid feels important and has a positive experience. And it helps their self-esteem," Datwyler said.

"The kids are the most important thing. That is what I care about."

Larkin said Datwyler has made the arts in Nibley "something unique and wonderful." Volunteering 80 to 100 hours for this production, Datwyler said she is always thinking about the play.

"I basically don't have a life for the month of June," said Datwyler.

She starts auditioning for the play as soon as school gets out, then practice starts immediately and goes for two weeks.

"That way it doesn't take up their whole summer," said Datwyler.

But the kids love it, even if it takes up part of the summer. They credit their love to Datwyler/s love and concern for them.

"When you see the play, it/s a wonderful piece of art," said Kylie Sampson, who plays the Duchess this year.

Shelby Rudd, who plays Ellen, said Datwyler makes the play fun because she knows what she is doing and doesn't lecture.

"I think she might miss it," said Shelby.

It isn't just Datwyler/s time and thoughts that keep the program advancing. After being presented the

Utah Volunteer of the Year Award, Datwyler used the \$1,000 awarded by the program to purchase a piano.

Datwyler said she also learned how to apply for grants to help the program. There are 77 grants that are matched by the city. These grants helped finish Nibley's amphitheater, which had been "promised for years and years," said Datwyler.

But Datwyler refuses to take the credit for the success of the program. The whole community is involved in making the play a reality, she said. Someone writes the script, someone publicizes the event and there are lots of different committees involved.

"Lots of moms and dads are helping. Dads set up the scaffolding and moms bring the kids to practice and help make the costumes," said Datwyler. "We have hundreds and hundreds of volunteers."

Datwyler said everybody has to be committed and dedicated to the Children's Play, or it wouldn't happen. She believes her part is small when compared to everyone else's efforts.

"I just basically organized it, but it's everybody's group thing."