

Nicolet School students learn about puppets from Paynes

By Brian Roebke
Editor

Puppets can be a great learning tool for children, and first and second graders at Nicolet School in Kaukauna had an introduction to puppets recently.

Next week, the students will be attending the touring puppet show, "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," at the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center.

So the students know a little bit about puppetry, Dave and Cassie Payne came to the school to teach them about the basics of puppetry.

The Paynes showed the students several different kinds of puppets, including rod puppets, shadow puppet, and marionettes.

"We give them a brief overview of the different styles and there's more, but it's hard to fit everything into such a little time," Cassie said.

They aim to take some of the mystery out of puppet shows, but not entirely.

"We try to do that," Cassie said. "We try to keep that spark alive in there."

Dave said it's very interesting when he works with puppets, espe-

cially around young kids.

Once, they were doing a show for Vacation Bible School with theme music from the movie, Jaws.

"We had just a shark fin on a paint stick and the children were very afraid," Dave said. "So I had to always reassure them that I was protecting them from the shark and even after we had done this three days, there were still students who came up at the end and they asked, 'is there a real shark back there?'"

There are many people who love puppetry and Dave thinks it's a great learning tool. "I've never found anything better in terms of if you want kids to retain stuff, puppetry is amazing," he said.

Payne said there have been major studies by big companies in Europe about puppets teaching math and science, with amazing results.

Dave said his work with puppets began in 1995 with his Eternal Love church's youth group.

Payne is a full-time teacher at Fox Valley Lutheran High School and his co-curricular assignment is director of the Fox Folks Marionette Troupe.

His daughter, Cassie, joined in the church group in 1997 when she was old enough to join. "As soon as I helped with the first show I said, 'this is it, this is what I'm going to do.'"

She graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran College, majoring in theatre and English.

"I wanted to stay close to home so I could still have a hand in our puppet troupe, and then I came back and established 'Hands to Grow,' two years ago and this has been my puppet life every since," she said.

She hopes to make it a full-time job someday.

"Every year has been amazing," she said. "More things open up all the time."

Last year she was the artist-in-residence at the Environmental School in Appleton and presented at



Dave Payne of the Fox Folks Marionette Troupe talks to Nicolet School students about the stick puppet he's holding.



photos by Brian Roebke

Cassie Payne shows an Indonesian shadow puppet to Nicolet School students, who will be going to a puppet show at the PAC next week.

several child care and teacher conferences.

In addition to performing puppet shows, the Paynes build puppets, and offer workshops for people who want to become puppeteers.

Cassie says she'll see kids who remember her shows from the past.

"They'll say, 'you taught us about Joseph and his coat of many colors, and we were there like three years ago,'" she said. "They remember that, and you just go, wow."

Cassie's favorite puppet is the lovable, "Violet," who was adopted while at the International Puppet Conference when she was about 13 years old.

She had been saving to buy a puppet and kept her eye on Violet at a booth the entire week she was there. "The last day I went up and said, 'I really want this puppet,' and she knew I was looking at it, so she gave me a really good deal," she said.

Ten years later, Violet is showing some signs of wear-and-tear, but

she's a crowd favorite.

"I named her after the lady who I bought it from, so that's why she's yellow and violet at the same time, and she's been my little buddy ever since," Cassie said.

Cassie has enjoyed developing the puppet's personality. "She's a very nervous girl, and she likes to read. She's three, and she can be very outgoing. She loves to sing and dance and all that crazy stuff."

Violet is often used with young kids. "We found out the hard way when we did our first preschool show," Dave said. "If you just bring puppets up, some children will be afraid of puppets and when you have three screaming kids in the front, for the rest of your show, it doesn't really matter."

He said they didn't prepare the students, so that's why he now asks the kids to invite Violet out from behind the curtain. "That way they're expecting her, and we've never had that same problem," Dave said.



Dave and Cassie Payne hand out puppets to second grade students at Nicolet School in Kaukauna recently. The students had the opportunity to use the puppets during a song.

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