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WEDNESDAY'S WOMAN

Van Zile uses puppetry to educate, inspire youth

By ANDREW CRITCHELOW THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE

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Katie Van Zile, a 2011 graduate of John Hardin High School, serves as a puppeteer for Kentucky Kids on the Block, which does educational programming for children throughout the state.

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Getting to know Katie Van Zile

Family: Her husband, Josh.

Pets: Two cats, Hermia and Lysander, and her retired service dog, Apache.

Favorite television shows: "Law & Order Special Victims Unit," "The Muppet Show" and what she called trashy reality TV.

Favorite films: "The Muppets," "Juno," "I, Tonya," "When Harry Met Sally" and "Clueless."

Favorite plays/musicals: "Spring Awakening," "How I Learned to Drive," "The Wolves" and "Fun Home."

Favorite music: Punk and showtunes.

Growing up in a military family, Katie Van Zile spent her early childhood in Germany, where there weren't many options for children's television shows in English. However, she was able to watch "The Muppet Show" and "Sesame Street."

As it turns out, these shows left a major impression on Van Zile. She now works as a puppeteer for Kentucky Kids on the Block, an organization designed to provide educational programming for children throughout the commonwealth via puppet shows.

Although Van Zile is studying theater at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, much of her passion and talents in the performing arts emerged while living in Hardin County.

Van Zile's father retired from the Army while stationed at Fort Knox. A 2011 graduate of John Hardin High School, Van Zile has appeared in several Hardin County Playhouse productions.

Favorite food: Spicy food.

Van Zile's first HCP production was "Jesus Christ Superstar" in 2014. From there, she also performed in "Legally Blonde the Musical," "Bye Bye Birdie" and "Spring Awakening."

"'Spring Awakening' is my favorite musical of all time," Van Zile said. "I was the female swing, which meant that I covered all of the female roles, which was amazing because I wanted to play them all anyway."

In addition to the experience she gained through HCP, Van Zile also attended the Governor's School for the Arts in 2010 with a focus on creative writing.

"It was a life-changing experience that exposed me to so many new art forms," she said. "That's where I first became interested in musical theater, but I was pretty introverted and I didn't start performing until I was 21."

After high school, Van Zile spent a few years trying to find the right educational path. Before deciding to pursue theater, she went to art school on a fashion photography scholarship, attended music school and studied speech-language pathology.

She holds an associate of arts degree from Bluegrass Community and Technical College in Lexington and is set to graduate from WKU with a major in theater and minor in performing arts administration next year.

At WKU, she has performed in productions such as "Aglaonike's Tiger," "Medea," "The Most Massive Woman Wins" and "The Revolutionists." In several productions, Van Zile has had the opportunity to use her musical background by playing clarinet and flute on stage.

"I've learned so much from the younger students I get to perform with," she said. "Being a nontraditional student can be isolating, but WKU's faculty and students have been so kind to me."

Van Zile has worked with Kentucky Kids on the Block since March of last year. Puppeteers with the organization use life-sized puppets to educate children on a range of topics. The organization currently addresses 18 different topics through its shows, such as accepting differences in others, mental health, bike safety, first aid, child abuse prevention and substance abuse prevention.

"The puppets bring children to a teachable moment. The kids really believe they're real," Van Zile said. "They even invite the puppets to their birthday parties."

The first Kids on the Block program originated in 1977 when special education teacher Barbara Aiello used a puppet to help students understand a classmate who had cerebral palsy. When children began to raise their hands and ask the puppet questions they were afraid to ask their classmate, the inspiration to form the first Kids on the Block puppet troupe emerged.

Kentucky Kids on the Block was formed in 1985 when co-founder Jamie Gaddie Higgins took her daughter, Heather, to a Spina Bifida Association Christmas party where the Nashville Kids on the Block troupe were performing their "Accepting Differences" program. Heather, who had spina bifida, reacted positively to the show and Higgins reached out to her friend, Alice Krummer, to form a puppet troupe in Bowling Green.

Through her role with Kentucky Kids on the Block, Van Zile regularly travels throughout the state. She said so far this year, she has performed for students in 45 different counties throughout the commonwealth.

On a typical day, the troupe performs anywhere from two to six programs, most of which are 20 to 45 minutes long. Van Zile also has to help set up and tear down the stage setup and sound system for each performance.

"My arms are pretty strong these days," she said.

Upon learning the art of puppeteering for her job, Van Zile said one of the most difficult aspects was mastering the intricacies of lip-syncing. She said her background in speech-language pathology was useful in learning this skill.

Van Zile said another challenge has been dealing with postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, a condition that affects blood flow.

"Standing up and putting my arms above my head can cause me to faint if I'm lax with my medication and treatment," she said. "So I have to make sure to take care of myself so that I can continue to do the job that I love so much."

In addition to working as a puppeteer, Van Zile also serves as marketing professional and in-house script developer for Kentucky Kids on the Block. In these roles, she manages the organization's social media accounts, handles graphic design, develops marketing plans and edits and develops new puppet shows. She recently developed a new cyberbullying program for the organization.

"I love that my words can inspire children to be kinder in their everyday lives," she said.

When Van Zile was first hired, she was tasked with expanding the organization's child abuse program, which addresses physical abuse and sexual abuse in an age-appropriate context, empowers children to say 'no' to an abuser and empowers them to report abuse. She said as a result of the program, several children have disclosed abuse in their life to teachers and have gotten the help they need.

"There's a Q&A portion of our show where children can talk to the puppets directly and the questions and comments they have always stay with me," Van Zile said. "I know that what I'm doing is making a difference and helping children out of bad situations."

Earlier this year, Van Zile had the opportunity to bring her talents in writing and engaging with children back home through the Hardin County Playhouse. Van Zile wrote "The Sisters Grimm," a children's theater production staged in August.

Based on the Brothers Grimm fairytales, the show is set in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic and follows two sisters as they tell each other popular fairytales while stuck at home. The show was performed entirely by local children and was staged at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College's Science Auditorium.

"I think the most rewarding part of the experience was seeing how it brought families together," Van Zile said. "After the isolated year we had, it was so nice to see small kiddos performing their hearts out with their friends and family in the audience supporting them. When you're producing a show that no one has ever heard of, you worry about people actually showing up. But 'The Sisters Grimm' has been our most successful production in a while."

Van Zile also serves as a board member for HCP. She said one day, when her arms aren't too tired from puppeteering, she hopes to run her own community theater.

Until then, Van Zile said she continues to find great rewards engaging with children throughout the state while pursuing a life-long passion.

"I have traveled all across this beautiful state and met so many sweet kids," she said. "...It's very meaningful to connect with people through the medium of puppetry who might be uncomfortable talking to me otherwise."

Andrew