

Puppets with a purpose help kids tackle challenges

■ Hampton woman, sister travel statewide delivering Kids on the Block messages

by Kurt Johnson

When sisters Brenda Daum and Charlotte Andrews put on a puppet show, their message is powerful and their approach direct.

Kids on the Block, a full cast of colorful four-foot characters, give them a unique format to talk to young people about serious issues. Each puppet has a name, a bio suited to the topic of the day, and a well-researched script designed to help young audiences see things from a different perspective.

"You kind of get into their character," Daum said. "For the program on kids with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), you talk faster. Then you talk slower for the kid with Cerebral Palsy. They all have their own story."

The women say it's an effective way to open kids' eyes about the dangers of bullying, for example, dealing with disabilities and a wide range of other real-life issues.

"Kids actually open up and come talk to the puppets as though it's really them," said Andrews, who lives in Hamp-

ton. "The little kids hug them and just open up. It's not like talking to an adult, they think."

That openness allows the women to speak frankly, though in a somewhat playful tone, about topics that can be devastating for kids.

"We had one incident where this little girl had just been diagnosed with diabetes and she wasn't taking her snacks because the kids were mak-

ing fun of her, wondering why she was eating all the time," Andrews recalled. "So the school called and asked us to come let the kids know that it's responsible for her to eat. She wasn't eating her snack in front of kids and it was causing trouble, so

now they understand why she needs to."

That's just one of many examples the two women shared of what they admit has become a powerful, therapeutic form of communication for them as well. The presentations always end with time for questions and answers, and the women follow up as needed with communication even after they are gone.

"We have 35 different topics

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Charlotte Andrews



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Charlotte Andrews of Hampton, back left, and her sister, Brenda Daum, display four of the many four-foot puppets featured in the Kids on the Block educational puppet program. Some of the puppets are valued at more than \$1,000.

schools can look at and decide what program they would like us to present," Daum noted. "Bullying is the most common, by far.

"Online bullying is an issue with the older students and it's a growing problem," she added. "We give them some guidelines and ask them some questions so they know how to deal with it."

Puppets named Brenda, Eddy, Melody and Claire come to life with candid chatter about how to deal with being harassed, and that it's not something to be ashamed or embarrassed about. The lesson goes on to offer helpful do's and don't's -- Don't delete hurt-

ful messages from your phone, for example. Show them to a teacher, an adult, or the police.

"Kids on the Block provides the scripts, then I do my research to add talking points," Daum explained. "I need to be in tune and learn more about bullying, autism, or whatever the topic might be so I'm always reading different articles or going to workshops."

Somehow, hearing a message from a fuzzy, fun-looking puppet lightens the mood and lets kids focus on the message rather than the messenger, Andrews noted.

"One girl said she has autism and didn't understand why she acts the way she

does," she recalled. "But now, she understands a lot better after we (and the puppets) talked to her about it."

Another little girl said the program about dyslexia given in her school changed her world.

"The puppet show helped the other kids understand about dyslexia... Your show changed my life," she wrote in a testimonial.

The topics are broad, by design, and sometimes cross generational lines.

"One of the lessons is on stroke, helping kids recognize and deal with stroke symptoms they might see in a grandparent," Daum said.

Other topics include medical concerns like cancer, diabetes, Down Syndrome and epilepsy; substance abuse issues like smoking and drugs; and other important topics like behavioral and cultural diversity.

Sister time

The two sisters travel throughout the state giving presentations, typically 30-60 minute sessions targeted to kids in pre-school through eighth grade. Their work is underwritten by the Elk's Benevolence Committee in Nebraska.

"Kids on the Block is actu-
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Kids on the Block puppets from left, Brenda (gets bullied), Jen (has dyslexia), Melody (talks about bullying and safety) and Eddy (has a brother with autism) travelled more than 14,000 miles last year and appeared in more than 152 shows before almost 20,000 students.

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ally an international program," Daum said. "Here in Nebraska it is sponsored by the Elks organization, which has taken this on as a state project."

Daum has been involved with Kids on the Block for more than 25 years, traveling statewide from her home in Cozad. As program director, she spends a great deal of time working from home, sending out mailings to more than 700 public and parochial schools, responding to feedback and coordinating presentations to try and schedule several at a time

in various areas of the state.

"I'm on the road three to four days a week," she said during a recent stop in Aurora after back-to-back presentations in Ord and Fullerton. "Today we did one program on safety, then one on autism and finally one on bullying."

Andrews has been aware of her sister's work, and joined her on the road about three years ago. The two grew up in Bancroft and have remained close over the years.

"I help with cleaning and organization," Andrews said. "This is really a win-win situation and it's also a chance for

'Kids on the block provides the scripts (about more than 30 topics), then I do my research to add talking points.'

Brenda Daum

us sisters to work together."

The women who make the puppets come to life enjoy the feedback they get from schools and children, as do the sponsoring members of the Elks organization.

"Every year I'll get a let-

ter or a note from some of these young people who have gathered information from the puppet show and realized that is what's happening to them," noted Rick Walter, state chairman of the Nebraska State Elks Benevolence Commission. "When we hear things like that it makes it worth every cent we put into this every year. We could very well be saving a life in those situations."

For more information about Kids on the Block, contact Andrews at 402-694-8689; Daum at 308-325-2697; or Walter at 308-870-2340.