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COMMUNITY



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A special touch

Children's Theatre offers sensory-friendly shows

by **MISSY SCHROTT**
Special to the Citizen

On a Saturday afternoon in August, Becky Ricker, a mother from Cumberland County, loaded her car with her 12-year-old daughter Hailey, Hailey's best friend and her teacher and drove 50 miles to Henrico County for a performance of "The Golden Goose" at Virginia Repertory's Children's Theatre at Willow Lawn.

Hailey has a chromosome

disorder that renders her non-verbal with difficulty walking, but for Ricker, the long drive would be worth the trip. This particular performance of "The Golden Goose" promised to be a "sensory friendly" one - a rare evening of theater in the Richmond area catering specifically to children with special needs.

Once at the theater, Ricker was heartened to find there were elevators in service as an alternative to the daunting

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Contributed photo

Virginia Repertory's Children's Theatre offers sensory-friendly performances, such as this performance of 'Pooh Corner,' geared to children with special needs.

Lighting up the night



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The 11th annual Deep Run High School Marathon Dance - a 27-hour event - raised \$174,688 for 12 Virginia nonprofit organizations, increasing the total amount raised by the event to more than \$1.9 million. The dance ranks second nationally in fundraising for such events. Nearly 370 students checked in on Friday night, March 17, and danced until Sunday, earning funds from donors who had pledged support. Proceeds will benefit: Boys to

Men Mentoring Network of Virginia; Church Hill Activities and Tutoring; Full Circle Grief Center; Gracie's Guardians (Richmond Animal League); Hope for Families; Keep Virginia Beautiful; Making of Miracle Stories Animal Rescue of Virginia (MOMSVA); OAR of Richmond; Piedmont Search and Rescue; The Cameron K. Gallagher Memorial Foundation; The Sophie House; and Wintergreen Adaptive Sports. For details, visit marathondance.org.

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Theatre

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flight of stairs. When the doors opened at the top, they were greeted with smiling faces, wide-open spaces and a relaxed atmosphere.

After they had been walked to their seats, and the lights dimmed, an actor came onto the stage with details of the performance. The lights and volume were adjusted to be less harsh, there would be no intermission, and if a child needed to get up and leave for any reason, he or she was welcome to do so and continue watching the performance on televisions in the lobby.

Despite these precautions, Ricker said Hailey sat through and enjoyed the entire performance, something she never would have been able to do without the alterations that had been made.

"We had never gone to a play before. Never," Ricker said. "I'm so thankful that they're doing this because without it, none of these kids would be seeing a play at all."

'Able to be themselves'

Since enjoying that first performance of "The Golden Goose" in the summer, Ricker and Hailey have gone to every adapted performance the theater has offered. In April, the mother-daughter duo plans to bring Hailey's entire class from Cumberland to see the sensory adapted performance of "Beauty and the Beast."

Virginia Rep, a nonprofit, professional theater company in Richmond, has been holding sensory friendly performances since its 2015 productions of "The House at Pooh Corner" and "The Velveteen Rabbit." Adaptations vary show to show, but often include shortening performances, eliminating intermission, lowering sounds, allowing empty seats between patrons, and keeping house lights on during the show. Virginia Rep partners with autism specialists at The Fashion School so they know how to best serve their audiences.

"We have learned from autism experts that every child is different and that providing a flexible, welcoming experience is probably better than trying to anticipate every single thing that might trigger a reaction," said Susan Davenport, director of communications for Virginia Rep. "We don't want to over-adapt the show so that the experience is too watered down."

Davenport said she had first realized there had been a need for sensory friendly performances when she had seen some parents having to take their children out of the theater in the middle of shows. She said several other theaters across the country were making special adaptations for audience members who needed it.

"If it's just a regular movie or performance," Davenport said, "parents are very conscious if their child is vocal or becomes agitated. They become worried that they're disturbing the rest of the au-



Contributed photo

dience."

To compensate for this, Virginia Rep limits its sensory friendly performances to small audiences of children with autism or other disabilities and their families and friends. The performances are also completely free.

"This way, they're just able to be themselves, and their caregiver is not worried about interrupting someone else because everybody else there is in the same boat," Davenport said.

After each performance, Virginia Rep reaches out to parents to ask about their experiences.

"It's really moving," she said. "We've definitely had parents just be kind of emotional about how nice it was for their child to be able to do this."

In a marketing meeting, Davenport said her box office manager had told the department about a parent who had called to register her child for a performance: "The mom started crying, and so our box office person started crying, then we started crying just hearing about the story in the marketing meeting."

'They can't wait.'

Ann Griffin, a retired biology teacher from Collegiate School, arranged for her grandchildren to attend an adapted performance of "Croaker - The Frog Prince Musical" last spring, to pass on her love for theater. She said her 10-year-old autistic grandson, Will, and his 8-year-old sister, Susana, were thrilled after they saw the show.

"The first time they came back from one," Griffin said, "they called me, and they were both trying to talk in the phone at the same time. They had had the best time."

"I think that a lot of times you worry about them not being able to participate and do things with the other children, but, boy, they can sure do it when they're at that play," she said. "It's just wonderful, and I'm so grateful. I don't know who makes that possible, but they are an angel."

Griffin said her grandchildren were planning to attend the coming sensory adapted performances at Virginia Rep this spring and summer.

"They just, they can't wait. They've been singing the songs from 'Beauty and the Beast,'" she said.

Megan Tatum, a 23-year-old actress

from Chester, Va., has been featured in several of Virginia Rep's performances, including "A Christmas Story, The Musical," this past December.

"A lot of times, it's very interesting for an actor to kind of hear people talking in the audience or yelling," Tatum said, "but a lot of times, for children and different audience members that need those sensory adapted performances, that's how they show that they're having such a good time."

When she is not acting, Tatum uses her bachelor's degree in kinesiology to work in-home with children who have special needs. She said working in that environment has made her realize those kids' desires to have a "normal night out."

"The fact that we could really bring that to them and give them a place that they feel safe, and they feel like they can really enjoy theater and enjoy the arts is

just a wonderful thing," Tatum said. "I would absolutely recommend it to anyone."

'A world of difference'

Brandon McKinney, 14, was the lead in "A Christmas Story." He said that if every production had sensory friendly adaptations, more people would be affected by shows' messages.

"It was cool to be able to do something for people who can't come and see the normal show," McKinney said, "so other people have experiences with what we're trying to put on for the community."

Becky Ricker said she hoped that other organizations would see what Virginia Rep was doing and offer their own adapted forms of entertainment for children.

"Hopefully places will come out of the woodwork and start doing this," she said. "Any ideas can be great. It just makes a world of difference."

Acting workshops planned

Virginia Repertory Theatre teachers will present acting workshops for children ages 3-5 at the following libraries: Glen Allen - Mar. 28 at 11 a.m.; Libbie Mill - Mar. 29 at 10:30 a.m.; Gayton - Mar. 30 at 3:30 p.m.; and Varina - Mar. 31 at 10:30 a.m. The hour-long workshops will complement VA Rep's upcoming Children's Theatre production of "Beauty and the Beast." Registration is required.

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