

BUGS IN THEIR EARS

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NEWPORT - When Katie Latimer tells a story, she uses the entire performance space, as if the whole room is her stage.

Through careful gestures, her body helps create the atmosphere of the story. Her arms arc and wave as if to create the imaginary objects. She creeps like a spider. She floats like a bubble. Her large and vibrant eyes totally engage her young listeners.

At age 15, Katie Latimer is already considered a professional - professional storyteller, that is.

It sort of happened by accident, said Latimer, who placed first at the 1998 National Young Storytellers Olympics in Tennessee.

The Storytelling Olympics, held annually on the East Tennessee State University campus, allows young storytellers to flex their muscles. Latimer said that most of the contestants started their careers in storytelling as young as 4 years old.

"When I won I was so shocked. Other kids were upset because they had prepared for so many years," she said.

Latimer, who lives in Hope Valley, has been telling stories to both young and old audiences for only three years.

Katie's regal yet casual style comes from her mother, Kiki Latimer, who was influenced by Winifred Caldwell, a now retired communications professor at the University of Rhode Island.

"Wini just gave me a real love for expressing literature in the oral tradition and I passed that on," Kiki Latimer said.

A lot of work goes into structuring Katie's performances, her mother said. Once Katie has chosen her story, she practices ways to represent the piece, often with the help of her mom.

She has to find each character's voice, the right movement for the right moment, and ways to set the mood for the story.

"It's been a lot of fun," said Kiki Latimer, who has a degree in oral interpretation from URI. "She works hard on her stories. We spend a lot of time trying to get a certain image to come across in her story."

Yesterday, as part of the Newport Public Library's 1999 Summer Reading Program, Don't Bug Me, I'm Reading! Latimer was invited to share her talent with children ages 4 and older.

The program was established about 20 years ago by Melody Allen, a library program specialist for the Rhode Island Office of Library and Information Services.

This year's statewide reading program, which started last month, is designed for children 4 to 11. Communities have different themes for their programs, which are sponsored by area libraries, the Office of Library and Information Services and local McDonald's restaurants.

In registering at their local libraries, children agree to read a certain number of books. For 30 minutes a day - a minimum of two hours a week - children must read a book of their choice.

They are then eligible for incentive coupons or special prizes, such as coupons to Roger Williams Park Zoo, the Providence Children's Museum and South County Museum.

Parents with preschoolers and kindergartners can also participate by reading to their children, which earns them coupons and prizes, too.

LATIMER'S SPRITE-LIKE appearance energized the library's King Room as she told the story of Andy the Ant, Sebastian the Spider, Henry the Worm and many others in her Bubbles and Bugs performance.

Through audience participation, Latimer drew in the crowd of about 60 children and adults into a world where bugs aren't the things that go bump in the night but are the heroes and heroines.

She opened the show with an ode to insects called Bug World, which she made available to the children and parents on printed bookmarks. The fast-paced poem started the momentum that grew for the rest of the performance.

Latimer's enchanting movements kept the children's attention. They imitated her moves and even some key phrases such as All worn out!, What happened, Henry? and many more.

"I liked all the stories," said Melissa Edmonds, 9, of Newport. "I liked the one about the hole in the wall and the ant."

Andy Ant, who sounds a bit like the character played by Adam Sandler in *The Waterboy*, tries to get a snowflake arrested for making him slip, causing an incredible chain of events.

"She was funny," said Sarah Sechrist, 8, of Elmira, N.Y., who was partial to the story about Henry the Worm, who swallowed various animals from a snail to even the storyteller. "It was good."

"I thought she was great," said her mom, Cindy. "I was amazed."

The locals also found the storyteller to their liking.

"She was really good, to me," said Jacalyn Vincent, of Newport. "I liked how she kept the kids involved."

LATIMER WAS TURNED ON to storytelling by Don Kirk, a storyteller from Ashaway who saw some potential in the shy kid, as she referred to herself, when she enrolled in drama classes.

Kirk loaned her an audiotape of Jay O'Callahan's *Tulips*, a story about a mischievous little boy named Pierre who decides to play a trick on his grandmother, only to be tricked himself.

Since then, *Tulips* has become her signature piece. In fact, her business card (yes, business card) has a picture of the flower.

Tulips is not Latimer's sole work, she uses many other resources. "When I'm looking for a story, I look for something unique, she said. I get them from people {and from books} and adapt it in my own way."

This isn't Katie's last summer performance. "It's one of eight shows I'm doing this week," said Latimer, who will be performing 37 shows throughout the summer, including Edgar Allan Poe's *A Telltale Heart* at the Jonnycake Storytelling Festival in Peace Dale.