



Entertaining: Maureen Schiffman entertains the little ones with one of her many puppets.



Puppet magic: Maureen Schiffman and her puppet "Coco" tell children about two holiday traditions.

Puppeteer blends holiday traditions for kids

BY MARY LOU SONG
STAFF WRITER

Coco the monkey hums a song into his kazoo, innocently glancing at his "partner" Maureen Schiffman who is humming along with her own kazoo. He looks at the children, sitting on the floor, watching him.

Then while Schiffman isn't looking, Coco blows his kazoo loudly in her ear. Schiffman covers her ears and pulls away — and Coco grins.

The children scream with laughter, pointing and teasingly scolding, "Coco!"

The antics are part of a puppet show called "The Traditions of Christmas and Hanukkah," written and performed — with the help of her puppet Coco — by Schiffman at the Farmington/Farmington Hills Community Center on Tuesday night.

"It's about sharing the holidays and learning about each other's festival of lights," Schiffman said of the show.

The show is filled with puppets, music and magic. Schiffman tells the children about Hanukkah and Christmas. She sings



Enjoying the show: Cydney Seigerman, 2, and brother Evan, 4, enjoy "Coco's" puppet antics.

about sharing and caring. And sometimes she is the kind of silly performer that kids love — disappearing into a snake puppet or whirling the gangly legs of a feathery yellow ostrich puppet over the children sitting on the floor.

From the laughter and the squeals, the dancing and the clapping, parents know that the

children are having fun. "I liked it when Coco did that trick and played that in her ear," said 4-year-old Jim Morris of Farmington Hills.

Fun with a point

But for some, the show is a learning experience that applies to real-life situations. Two-year-old Cydney Seigerman

and her 4-year-old brother Evan of West Bloomfield are Jewish, and they have a Catholic nanny, Jules Powers.

"We thought it would be a good idea to go," Powers said. "Their mom bought me a Christmas tree to put in my room and my mom is sending me Christmas presents. They didn't understand why they couldn't have a tree, so we thought, hey."

Mary Carol Haering, a Farmington resident, said, "We've seen Ms. Maureen a lot of times. We also have a couple of friends of Jewish heritage, and we thought this would be a good introduction to that."

Haering's 2-year-old daughter Kelsey rewarded Coco for the entertainment. After the show, Kelsey gave Schiffman a candy cane and said, "This one's for Coco."

Christopher Booth, 3½, was visiting his grandparents who live in Livonia. Christopher, who lives in Santa Ana, California, said he liked the Hanukkah candles skit and the skit where "the snake that got that girlfriend."

Joyce Booth, Christopher's mom, said she brought him to

see the puppet show because she wanted to expose him to different holidays.

Puppeteer career

But Schiffman says she has written more than 100 puppet plays and songs about holidays and themes. She began her puppet career in the early 1980s as a volunteer at a nursery school, making puppets and playing the guitar for children. When a friend asked Schiffman to entertain children at her son's birthday party, puppetry became a career.

Now Schiffman works out of her home in Novi, performing at birthday parties and schools. She has also made a video.

"I love to play with kids," she said. "This is just an extension of that. It's nice to have a job that you enjoy. It's not work for me. The work for me is typing contracts, setting up shows, doing bookkeeping and promotions."

Schiffman says puppets and puppet shows are a good venue for helping children build self-esteem.

"She's good, she's animated and she has a good rapport with the children," Powers said of Schiffman, less than halfway through the show. "Usually by now, the kids are nuts, they're all over the place."

Building self-esteem

Schiffman invites children to participate in the skits — holding marionettes or rod puppets, ringing bells or singing. The downside of the interactive puppet shows is that not all the children can come on stage to help.

"I can feel their frustration," she said of the children. "They always want to be up there with me. But I've always felt that any child that comes up on stage is getting good self-esteem."

She says children relate best to animal stories.

"Then they won't think it's about them," she said. "If you use animals, they don't think about something subjectively. They think about a story objectively and they learn a lesson. They're learning about life in a fun way."

Lesser charge pleaded

A woman charged with insurance fraud pleaded to a reduced charge of obtaining money under false pretenses less than \$100.

Dionne Leslie Weathers, 25, of

Detroit, had been charged with defrauding an insurance company with a phony claim of an injury for \$1,250. In an agreement with prosecutors, Weathers pleaded to

the lesser charge and will be sentenced on Jan. 14.

The original charge is a felony; the reduced charge is a misdemeanor.

Project benefits residents

Though a few months away from completion, Farmington's ongoing \$13-million Sewer Improvement Project is already inadvertently paying dividends to some residents.

According to a study by city engineers, Orchard, Hiltz, and McClement, the root of basement flooding at the Bel Aire Subdivision has been discovered and rectified since the sewer separation program began two years ago.

With this year's rainy summer, that's saying something.

"This has been a side benefit of the project," said City Manager Robert Deadman. "We have been looking for a solution for years to the flooding problem at Bel Aire."

By monitoring five flow meters installed around the subdivision, including ones on the outlet pipes on Grand River and Mooney

Street, engineers found a marked decrease in water depths after gaging rainfalls from a trace to more than an inch coincided with improvements made to the city's sewer system.

In one instance, engineers found one inch of rain raised the level in the metered manhole by only two inches. A surcharge of 90 to 100 inches usually cause basement flooding.

The separation at Mooney Street has provided more capacity to handle runoff, according to Deadman. The Grand River outlet is expected to be separated as soon as the retention basin portion of the project is completed early next year.

Meters for the study were the same ones used during the development stage of the Sewer Improvement Project.

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rials involved. The additional cost will be in the restoration work for the removal of asphalt and concrete.

A similar problem of connected basins has also turned up along Mooney Street where smoke testing was hindered by undetected sewer traps, which were installed to quell septic odors. The situation there is being evaluated.

Deadman said smoke testing is

the most practical method of testing and added oversight like this are not uncommon on extensive work such as the sewer improvement project. More undiscovered catch basins could turn up, he said.

"I'm just glad we discovered this before we got into the certification period," Deadman said.

The \$75,000 for the correction will come out of the state revolving

fund, which is still within the loan amount budgeted for the project, Deadman added.

The project was initially supposed to be completed this month, but has been delayed another two months. The delay was caused by the removal of contaminated material at an old landfill site where a wastewater pumping station was being built along Nine Mile Road.

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