

Their stitched stars leave many in stitches

Puppeteers are performers, artists and mechanics

By SU BACON
Special to The Star

Audiences often laugh at Mary Susan McCrae's work.

And that's exactly the response McCrae wants. It was, after all, laughter that got her hooked in the beginning.

The year was 1973, and McCrae was 16 when she first entertained an audience with a puppet show.

"It was just such a thrill to hear people giggle and laugh," McCrae recalled. "I knew right then that I had to do this the rest of my life."

McCrae went on to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree in technical theater and then performed with production companies in Arkansas, Massachusetts and New York before settling in Kansas City. McCrae opened her own business, Clement McCrae Puppet Co., in 1986.

More than 200 characters are stars in her shows. They range from a Charleston dancer in a flapper dress to a washboard player in a hillbilly band to a trapeze artist in a circus to a French poodle from a four-dog pack.

"I love being able to change characters without having to put on makeup or funky costumes," McCrae said.



Puppeteer Mary Susan McCrae relaxed for a few minutes before a recent performance at Park Hill High School. JIM BARCUS/The Kansas City Star

A puppeteer's job is to entertain, and McCrae uses a variety-show format to give her audience a positive, uplifting experience.

Yet, professional puppeteers are more than performers. "You have to be an artist, mechanic, carpenter, seamstress and inventor," McCrae said. "You're constantly solving problems such as how to make the knees work and heads turn or find the most effi-

cient way for a puppet to pick up a picnic basket."

Puppeteers create their shows from concept to curtain call. They write scripts; design and construct puppets; backdrops and props; sew costumes; pack and haul their equipment; and set up and tear down sets.

As self-employed business owners, they also market and manage their puppet companies.

PUPPETEER

- Income potential: \$3,000 to \$5,000 annually
- Full-time average: \$30,000 annually
- Top dollar: \$150,000 annually

Information resources

- Puppeteers of America Inc., No. 5 Cricklewood Path, Pasadena, CA 91107 (612) 724-5739
- www.puppeteers.org

Their business takes them on trips to fall festivals and other events on the weekends.

"Puppeteers are a lot like musicians — you're never going to have a weekend off because that's when you make all your money," Hansen said.

The Hansens have full-time jobs and operate the puppet business part time. Beginning puppeteers should be prepared not to make much money, Hansen said. "It takes a long time to get established," Hansen said.

Hansen is newsletter editor for the Puppetry Guild of Greater Kansas City Inc.

The local guild is chartered by Puppeteers of America Inc., a national nonprofit organization.