



Puppet power

*When they talk,
kids listen*

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STAFF WRITER

Shirley Lagattuta was recently widowed and looking for part-time work. Little did she know that attending a training workshop given by the Monmouth County Park System would lead to seven years of puppeteering.

"When I realized it wasn't a class about how to make puppets, I had to do some soul searching (before making such a commitment)," said Lagattuta, of Holmdel Township. "But I believe in it so much that I've stayed with it."

Lagattuta is one of three members of the park system's chapter of The Kids on the Block, a Maryland-based company that creates puppets and writes educational scripts for children and adults about disabilities, social concerns and medical and educational differences.

Lagattuta, the mother of six grown daughters and grandmother of five, has her scripts memorized and manipulates the puppets with ease. The 52 different hand-made characters are designed to be performed in the ancient Japanese "bunraku"



Puppeteer Shirley Lagattuta, of Holmdel, and "Mandy" show how to say goodbye in sign language during a meeting of the Monmouth County Human Relations Commission in Freehold Township.

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MICHAEL GOLDFINGER/Staff Photographer

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style. Puppeteers wear black and hide behind the 3- and 4-foot-tall puppets, who stand on a black stage.

Visiting schools and community groups as a puppeteer has been enlightening for Lagattuta. At one performance, a little boy asked the puppet what it felt like to be called name.

"It was a touching moment because he wanted to know how the puppet felt as if it were a person," said Lagattuta, who performs for

students of all ages and community groups, sometimes as often as six times a month.

As part of a program marking October as Disability Awareness Month, she and some of her puppets — including "Mandy," who is deaf — performed skits exploring various disabilities during a meeting of the Monmouth County Human Relations Commission in Freehold Township.

When the puppets talk, kids listen, Lagattuta discovered.

"I was reluctant in the beginning to learn the (substance abuse) script," she said. "I didn't know if I wanted to face the older ones not being attentive or mocking it, but I was amazed to have their total attention. It's a 45-minute long show

and they were into it the whole time. The message comes across because the children are engaged in puppetry and are willing to listen."

The Kids on the Block concept was born 20 years ago when Barbara Aiello, a Maryland special education teacher, created a puppet character with cerebral palsy to demonstrate what it would be like to have a disabled child in class.

But when she put the puppets away to answer questions, one pupil said he'd rather talk to the puppets, according to Diana Degan-LaFon, director of program development for the company in Columbia, Md.

That sparked Aiello to start the

business, which was later taken over by her partners.

Pupils in kindergarten through fifth grade at Wayside Elementary School, Ocean Township, were recently treated to a week of shows on a variety of topics.

Alexandra Kamenel, a fourth-grader, learned about blindness, among other disabilities.

"I learned that people can have different problems, but you should treat them the same way," she said. "Being blind doesn't mean you're dumb, it just means that you can't see."

There are currently 25 active groups in New Jersey, and more than 1,600 in all 50 states and 30 different countries. But because

the shows are so well-received, more new members are always needed.

The company offers two regional training sessions per year and are available for training sessions.

Kits, which vary in price depending upon the topic, come with props and scripts, as well as an instructional video. For instance, the mental health program, which comes with five puppets, five scripts and educational materials, costs about \$1,800, Degan-LaFon said.

For information about becoming a puppeteer, call Anne Simon, therapeutic recreation supervisor, at (732) 542-1642.