

Puppet Power

Regina Marscheider's performances bring happiness and healing.

Gertie, a homeless woman, draws up her bedraggled self and belts out "Amazing Grace" with such sweet power that audiences weep. Vinnie deLuca, a lounge lizard, sports enough swagger to rival Elvis. Don Pepperoni, the world's oldest godfather, could soften even Tony Soprano. Crystal Dish, gussied up in feathers, rhinestones, and silk, line dances in teal suede boots.

"She has better and more comfortable shoes than I've ever owned in my whole life," cracks Regina Marscheider of her puppet creation. "And she sings, which shocks the heck out of me."

Crystal's and Regina's singing talents are one and the same, so don't let Regina's modesty fool you. The owner of Spectrum Entertainment in Virginia Beach also claims she barely knows sign language, speaks little besides English, and is not a dancer. Yet her puppets readily reveal these talents under her skillful command.

Born in Berlin and raised in Queens, Regina moved from New York some 20 years ago with husband Ed and their four children. The family searched for a view of the ocean and a stable economy. They found that and more in Virginia Beach. "This is truly home," says Regina.

Magic on 10th Street

Regina's madcap studio on 10th Street resembles Geppetto's workshop. Just as that puppeteer's Pinocchio became a real boy, Regina creates marionettes that seem to live and breathe.

Animal, plant, or mineral—almost



"I'm the youngest of six," says Regina Marscheider, explaining her exuberant personality. "I've always had to jump and dance so people would know I was there." You can't miss her when she's performing with one of her life-size marionettes.



PHOTOGRAPHS: MELI MCKINNEY SMILE

At Regina's programs, youngsters focus on the puppets, not the puppeteer pulling the strings. "I think everybody who comes in here turns 5 immediately," she says.

anything imaginable—resides among the 400 or so puppets and props. Regina often fashions her creations from trashy beginnings. In her magical world, recycled plastic bottles, discarded carpet padding, furniture foam, and secondhand clothes become puppet people with personalities and creatures with character.

Boxes of balloons, boas, and bows sit next to gloves, glasses, and glues. Friendly little carps and Eli the eel rest near Charlie the horse. A 9-foot wolf, used in a Virginia Symphony production of *Peter and the Wolf*, has a face described by one first grader as "fierce but friendly." Cancan dancers,

tourists, clowns, bingo queens, and janitors crowd next to all manner of zoo and barn animals.

Ed provides the robotic magic of eyes shutting, ears twitching, and clams slamming after he finishes his day job at his real estate firm. "I'll say, 'I need a box that a clown can come out of, and when I cross my eyes, the lid will open and the clown will pop out,'" Regina says. "He's like, 'Okay, when do you need it?'"

When she's not on the road with a puppet show, Regina spends 80 to 90 hours a week in the crowded studio. The Marscheiders' children often drop by, bringing along Regina's



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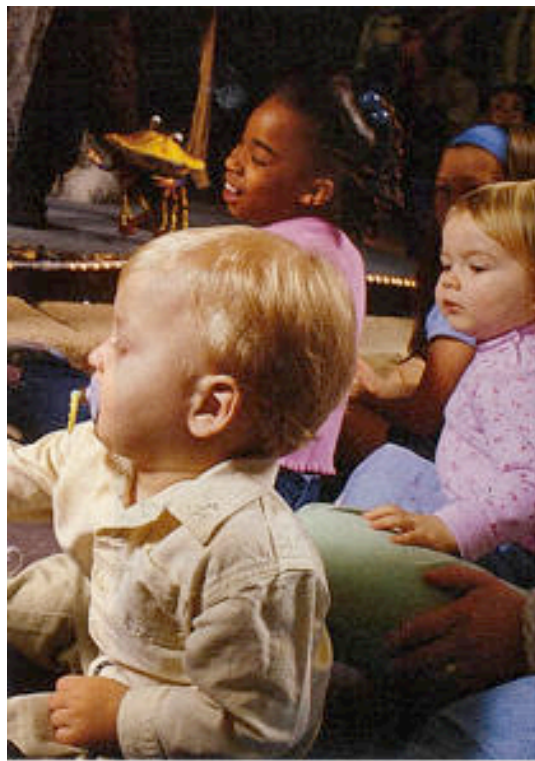
Regina Marscheider

five lucky grandchildren to this incredible playhouse.

Happy Birthdays and Horseplay

Many locals recognize Regina as the woman who threw the best birthday party their child ever celebrated. She recalls a recent encounter with a strapping 6'4", 18-year-old stranger who picked her up and hugged her, saying, "Hi, Mrs. Marscheider. Remember me? You did my birthday party when I was 5." Merchants call on her to add pizzazz at their celebrations. Regina obliges, sometimes strategically placing a bush-covered person who breathes, sneezes, and hugs unsuspecting customers.

Once, after a tough day at the office, she grabbed Charlie the horse, called for an employee to join her in



the van, and screeched off in search of fun. Putting on the full Charlie regalia, she galloped into a local restaurant—batting his eyes, twitching his ears, and spewing water each time he neighed. The patrons howled.

“Just as the horse was walking out of the restaurant, I pulled a little lever, the tail went up, and out fell some foam horse puckies,” Regina says. “There was a little kid at a nearby table who said, ‘Mommy, I don’t think those are meatballs!’ The restaurant owner comes running out after us, and I’m saying, ‘Hurry up; let’s get into the van. He’s either loving it, or we’re going to be arrested.’” The owner ended up telling them to “gallop in anytime.”

The puppeteer readily mixes slapstick with educational programs. In one show, discarded plastic six-pack rings threaten a sea turtle, but sea horses save the hapless creature. Another calls for a puppet to shed his hair in unity with children undergoing cancer treatment.



Regina created Simon for an Emmy-winning program to prevent child abuse.

Powerhouse Regina also serves as entertainment producer of Beach Street USA every summer on Atlantic Avenue in Virginia Beach from 8 to 11:30 a.m. daily. “I provide all the entertainment on the boardwalk from 4 to 7 p.m., seven days a week, throughout the summer as well,” she says. Along with her own puppets, she brings in a variety of performers including magic acts, costumed characters, balloon and face artists, musicians, jugglers, mimes, and dancers.

Simon Says

About 16 years ago, a teacher at one of Regina’s puppet programs presented her with a new kind of challenge. The instructor asked the puppeteer to design a program that would reach sexually abused children.

The task daunted Regina. “I’d had a wonderful childhood. I have four kids, so it was appalling to me,” she says. Nevertheless, the request started a five-year quest for information.

She talked to doctors, counselors, social workers, politicians, and even convicted sex offenders. Then she prepared an in-service training workshop for teachers and a safety net of police officers and social workers who could accompany her in schools. Next, Regina wrote and designed “Knock Knock...Who’s There?” a program centered around a puppet named Simon.

“He has antenna ears so he can tune in to kids everywhere,” says Regina. “We made him green because we didn’t want him to have any color. The purple hair makes him fun, and kids adore him.”

Simon gives kids pointers on how to tell, whom to tell, and what to do if the person they’ve told doesn’t listen. The program won an Emmy for best educational documentary and is sanctioned by Crime Stoppers International.

“It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever

done in my life,” says Regina, uncharacteristically quiet as she talks about her work with Simon. “I sacrificed time with my family. It was rough for us financially because every penny went into the program. My kids said, ‘Go for it, Mama.’ They understood because we’re going to leave a mark as a family. We have reached out, and we’re doing something.

“This was not something that I chose—this was something that chose me,” Regina continues. Then she pauses and looks around the studio and its wonderful creations. “A lot of healing has gone on in this place. Puppets have a real power to do things. We’re not just doing puppets for entertainment—we’re touching lives.”

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON



PUPPETS ON A STRING

For more information about Spectrum Entertainment or workshops with Simon, contact Regina Marscheider, Spectrum Entertainment, 633 10th Street, Suite 104, Virginia Beach, VA 23451; (757) 491-2873 or www.stopabuse.com.