

MIGHTY WIND

Storyteller's yarns knit people together

By ELIZABETH VOSS, Special to *The Oakland Press*

The children break into giggles as Karen Czarnik puffs up her cheeks, expands her chest, opens her arms wide and blows onto them as hard as she can.

Czarnik has become the arrogant Wind in her story, "The Wind and the Sun," and clearly her students are enjoying the tale. Storyteller and musician Czarnik, 42, especially loves to work with children such as these, giggling at Walled Lake Community Center one recent evening.

"I love the energy of the kids," the Walled Lake resident says. "Kids are such a wonderful audience. They're so generous. They're so willing to be with you instead of just being a quiet audience."

Children often attend her classes because they want to be a star, because they love writing, they want to learn the language better or they are shy, she says.

Isabelle Rosales, 7, of Walled Lake falls into several of these categories, her mother, Teresa, will tell you. "She loves to write stories," Teresa says. "I thought it would be fun for her to learn about storytelling. And it gives her self-confidence. She's a shy little girl."

Czarnik also offers classes for children and families in Farmington Hills. The classes boost confidence and are good for children involved in theater as well as those with no experience performing, says cultural arts programmer Rachel Timlin of Hamtramck.

"A special thing about her storytelling is it can involve whole families," says Nancy Coumoundouros, supervisor of cultural arts for the city of Farmington Hills. "That's an important thing that is lost these days."



Professional storyteller and musician Karen Czarnik plays the role of a gust of wind blowing through her story. (Oakland Press photos/JOSE JUAREZ)

driving home in the dark from her family's summer cottage, and listening to storytellers on the radio.

In junior high, she started taking drama classes. Her father was in charge of the children's skits for their neighborhood block parties. When she was 14, she took over her dad's job, making props and backdrops, writing scripts and directing the children. In high school, she played leads in every one of her school plays.

She attended Western Michigan University and earned a bachelor of arts in public relations with minors in journalism and theater. After graduating, she worked in public relations, then sold real estate.

"I was trying to be a reasonable grown-up, but I found it stifling and difficult being detached from my creative side," she says.

When her children, Kevin, 14, and Shannon, 11, were young, she read to them, and found herself putting down the book to tell the story. She remembers being enchanted by a storyteller in her son's preschool class, and began learning more about the art. She joined the Detroit Storytelling League, Northlands



Czarnik tells her animated stories to a group of children in Walled Lake.

Czarnik likes to find good yarns, particularly folk tales, and re-write them to reach particular audiences. Often folk tales have a lesson or moral — for instance, "The Wind and the Sun" is a cautionary tale about the dangers of being a braggart.

"Stories connect us," she says, because they show us we are not so different from people from other countries, other cultures and other times. "It's exciting to me that I can tell a story that was told 200 years ago and it still has the same value as it did then."

Czarnik fell in love with performing as a little girl growing up in Redford Township. Her father, Leon Bonnici, who lives in Livonia now, introduced her to theater by taking her to plays. She performed in summer camp. She remembers



Erin Bianco, 14 (left), is a class volunteer in Walled Lake. The children — Andreea Giurgiu, age 8 (from left), Emma Silak, 6, and Isabelle Rosales, 7 — give thumbs-up to a story they've just heard. (The Oakland Press/JOSE JUAREZ)

Storytelling Network, the Paint Creek Folklore Society and the North Oakland County Storytellers. She participated in storytelling and comedy workshops. She learned how to play the dulcimer and autoharp so she could incorporate these folk instruments into her storytelling. At the same time, she volunteered to read books and later tell stories in her children's classrooms and at the Walled Lake Public Library.

"The best practice is on an audience," Czarnik says. "I eventually grew in confidence. Five years ago, I started getting paid to do this."

In her business, Story Rhythms <www.storyrhythms.com>, she brings storytelling to children and adults. She offers programs, workshops, classes and camps in public and private settings. She teaches through park districts and festival workshops; performs in schools and libraries; and entertains at birthday parties, block parties, coffee houses and more.

Karen Giglio, 43, who grew up with Czarnik, invited her to perform for her daughter's third birthday party at Generations Together daycare center in Dexter. The center also has an older adult program, and seniors were invited to watch Czarnik's performance.

"The grandmas and grandpas were stomping their feet, and the little ones crawled up into their laps," says Giglio of Dexter. "With 3-year-olds, it isn't that easy to keep their attention. But Karen did."

Debbie Barnes, 40, of Walled Lake has seen Czarnik perform for children in her fifth grade daughter's Girl Scout troop, her daughter's Walled Lake elementary school, and in the day-care center she owns, Annie's Children's Center in Saline.

"She's just fabulous," Barnes says. "She holds the kids' attention. She engages them the entire performance. They are just mesmerized by her abilities."

Czarnik is happy to be a storyteller and believes she has found her true calling.

"I know I was intended to be in this professionally," she says. "I think God has a path for each of us to follow. I'm fortunate that I was listening."



STORY RHYTHMS

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