

# Puppets Raise Kids' Consciousness of Disabilities

by Cale Kenney

**F**or a one-woman operation, Paula Johnson shares her office with a lot of people.

They're lined up in the corner of her cubicle in Aylesworth Hall, Colorado State University, like a softball team posing for a championship picture.

"Meet Mark Reilly. Mark has cerebral palsy; that's why he's in a chair. And this is Renaldo Rodriguez who's blind, and this here is Brenda Dubrowski. Brenda is a little overweight. Scott Whittaker here has asthma, and this is Valerie Perkins. She has spina bifida. Brian McDonald has epilepsy and Nguyen Huy Nam is currently different; he is Vietnamese."

Paula, Colorado State University extension office's Handicap Program Coordinator, points in each of her introductions to a smiling three-foot-tall "kid" dressed in jeans and skirts, jumpers and shirts, and shoes and sneakers. These are "The New Kids on the Block," a troupe of puppets who raise handicap consciousness in the state of Colorado, and are a part of a national program that uses puppets to help teachers mainstream handicap kids into the community by teaching school children and adults about disabilities.

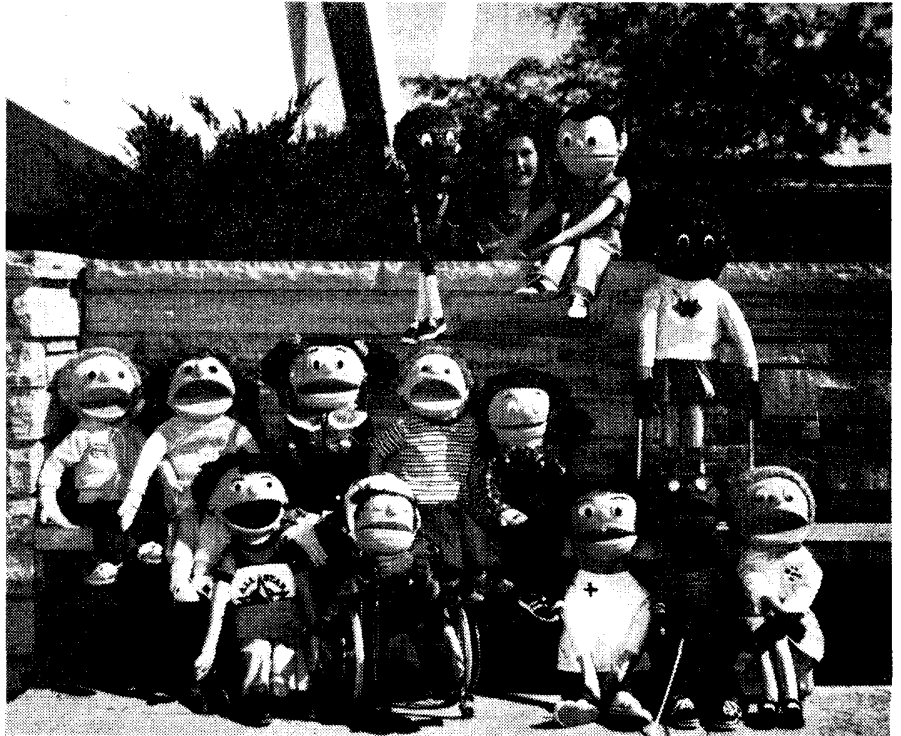
"Does anyone know why Renaldo has a cane and dark glasses?" asks Paula after setting up a skit between Renaldo and Brenda. Paula's assistant De Anne Monsma, a senior in CSU's OT program, operates the other puppet. Brenda has asked Renaldo the time. He checks his Braille Watch, and then in response to her curiosity explains what Braille is and how it works.

While Brenda listens, the audience learns.

The children raise their hands. "He's blind." Renaldo nods his puppet head and tells them that if they would like to ask questions, he would be glad to answer. He then asks Brenda to point out any student who raises a hand.

"The girl in the pretty pink dress in the back," says Brenda, and a shy first grader smiles delightedly at the compliment before asking Renaldo how he knows what clothes to put on in the morning.

"Well, my mom sews braille tags on all my clothes," he explains, and then a flurry of hands shoot out from the audience to ask about shopping, going to school and knowing which food to eat off his plate.



"The thing the show has taught me—besides what a great tool puppets are for teaching—is just how sophisticated and sensitive these young children are. They are so smart. They ask such good questions," says Johnson.

**S**ometimes their maturity is a little scary. After a skit with Ellen Jane Petersen, the developmentally disabled puppet, one little girl asked, "Does your mother feel guilty that you were born retarded?" And sometimes the

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children get so wrapped up in the puppet's character that they forget all about the puppet's disability, which makes Paula forget. Ellen Jane explains to her audience that she is slow and it's hard for her to learn com-

plicated things—"that's why I'm the helper, and he's the veterinarian," she tells them after saying that she helps a veterinarian work on dogs, cats, snakes, etc.

"What kind of snake do you have? How many different snakes do you work on," a few boys in the reptile stage ask.

"I dunno," Ellen Jane says, and Paula explains after the show that sometimes she has a hard time staying in Ellen Jane's character and not answering the more complex questions.

"What is Down's syndrome," one child asks after Ellen Jane's stuttering memory retrieval of the name of her particular disability.

"I dunno," says Ellen Jane. "But ask your teacher, she'll probably know."

If the teacher doesn't know, Paula doesn't leave her hanging. As part of her job as Handicap Program Coordinator, Paula passes out a teaching manual called "What's It Like...?" explaining all about handicaps. Additionally, she published a monthly newsletter which features information about a different disability or about some issue concerning disability and education.

Johnson is a natural for this job. She's compassionate and committed and brings an almost childlike love of people to her work. Carrying her puppets down the hall past a cue of three-foot people, she greets them naturally -- "Hi kids." "Hey, I know that show!" one of the kids says. Paula smiles. She insists that the only reason she could ever get up in front of a group and perform is that she is anonymous, hidden behind the large puppets. But she seems so at ease in her roles as the different characters. She is loud and positive for Renaldo, and for Mark, she lips, even pulls a "wheelie" on stage to the audience's delight, and she tries hard for Ellen Jane.

"The puppets are so great because the kids will ask the puppet questions that they might not ask the real person. And the puppets provide good role models for people with disabilities. Some of the questions the puppets answer are good answers for handicapped kids to give," she says.

The education program is designed specifically for elementary aged school children. Even college kids are fun, she says. "I like to give the show on campus because those are our future professionals. It's good for them to become more aware of disabilities and to know that there are these kinds of programs available."

Johnson, who has a Master's Degree in Family Life Sciences: Human Development from Montana State, was brought into CSU's extension office to bring more children into the 4-H program and to assist 4-H in mainstreaming handicap children into the community. In 1979 she first saw Barbara Aiello's "Meet the New Kids on the Block" program in Washington, D.C. The next year she decided to bring the "kids" to Colorado. Her student assistant belonged to a sorority and organized the Greeks on campus to hold a fundraiser to buy the puppet troupe, which costs around \$2800. In May of 1981 she gave her first presentation, and since that time has been booked months in advance. She is helping an agency on the Western Slope get their own puppet group.

While this is only part of her job as Handicap Programs Coordinator, "Meet the New Kids on the Block" has made Paula Johnson stand out. She doesn't look like an administrator when she walks into a classroom with her assistant, dolls thrown over their arms and carrying a huge garbage sack of stage props.

The program is funded in cooperation by the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado State University Extension.

Through the program, Paula has presented her show to over 90,000 individuals.

**A**t UNC's model "lab school" in Greeley 60 youngsters scamper to their spots on the floor in front of puppeteers Paula and DeAnne. In the front row are a dozen or so deaf children. Two deaf interpreters flank Paula and DeAnne, but at least three of the deaf children ignore Paula's message through the interpreters. Like most who respond mainly to visible cues for lack of the auditory, they have anticipated the action by scoping out the stage. They have spied the

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wheelchair puppet under the curtain-draped table. While they wildly sign and mime their discovery to the others, Paula

tells the audience that this puppet show will be different from others they have seen. The puppeteers won't hide, she says, and the puppets are like children, dressed in real children's clothes, and they are handicapped.

"Do you know what a handicap is?" After a mass acknowledgement followed by Paula's explanation, the show begins and the children are open-mouthed with awe as the different skits are enacted. This show will only be 40 minutes since younger children have a shorter attention span. Only five of the sixteen puppets are used. When the show is over lab school teacher Janine Huckaby tells the children what a good audience they are and a few stay behind to talk with Paula and De Anne.

"My favorite part of the job," says Paula, "is to watch the faces of the children. And afterwards they have a chance to come up to talk with us. One little girl said to me, "This is your job? You mean you get paid for this? What do I have to study so I can do what you do?"

Career counseling is only part of Paula Johnson's job. The biggest part of her job is bringing handicap awareness to our future teachers, doctors, nurses, architects and businessmen. ■

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