Putting "Angels" in the Spotlight

As a little girl, DeAnna Pursai used to play on the sidelines while her sister, Angel, rehearsed with The Jesters, a drama group for young performers with disabilities, at the University of St. Francis in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

"There was a lot of electricity and excitement in the air," recalls Pursai, who was so inspired by those rehearsals that she went on to volunteer with the theater troupe – coaching actors with their lines, offering support and helping her sister.

Today, the San Jose mother of two is drawing on that experience to launch a Silicon Valley version, named – in honor of her sister, who has Down syndrome – Angels on Stage, a Theatre Troupe of Children with Differing Abilities. A former special education teacher, Pursai predicts that the group will prove "a safe stage for kids of all different abilities.

"I saw what happened when they focused on their abilities," she says. "It was marvelous." Pursai, who says she talks with her daughters about what disabled kids *can* do, wants the Angels to experience similar triumphs. How?

By using the same strategy as The Jesters' founders. "We'll build the script on what we can do with the children who show up," Pursai explains. "There will be a lot of different ways of expressing the story. Heroes can use wheelchairs, for example. Kids with physical disabilities can still have gorgeous voices. When kids realize that they're free to do what they can, the results are amazing."

She has spent the past two years working towards this goal, and it came to fruition last month with a fundraiser. Pursai hopes to raise $15,000 before the troupe begins rehearsals on Oct. 4 for their first show, "The Wizard of Oz."

For more information, contact Pursai at 408-394-6816, deanna@angelsonstage.org or see angelsonstage.org.

– Loureen Giordano

The Jesters of the University of St. Francis, a theater group of differently-abled kids, inspired the newly forming Angels on Stage, a group for ages 5 to 22.

ing their parents to sit back and enjoy a performance in the main playhouse. The Saturday workshops run during San Jose Rep matinees. Kids explore elements of theater, act out scenes, play games and make crafts. Recent activities focused on the themes of memory and mystery during a recent run of "Tranced."

Piemme calls the program "the best kept secret in San Jose." It's open to kids ages 6 to 12 and costs $10 per child, with reduced packages available. While reservations are requested, children can drop in as space allows. Staffing keeps teacher-child ratio low and no preparation or volunteering is required.

• **Willow Glen Children's Theatre** (WGCT) combines theater workshops and an original play performance—with a twist. Performers actually help create the middle of the script as they improvise scenes. Sound complicated? Not at all, says Director Gavin Coffing, who has composed nearly 60 plays for more than a generation of kids, developing a unique part for each.

"I just expect people to be as good as they can be," Coffing explains. "But you have to draw it out of them … It's a collaboration" born of acceptance.

Kids like Amy Shackelford, who at 10 was "extremely" shy, are drawn to the improvisational style because "I could be myself and have fun." Amy, now 26, is currently a WGCT staffer. "We don't reject anybody." The staff (all WGCT veterans) and Coffing take a firm stand against any gossip or elitism.

"Theater should be fun," Coffing says. "It's not helpful to have theater that demands too much." He is flexible with rehearsal schedules and asks for a $65 fee. No costume fees, no volunteer hours. Parents do pitch in—of their own volition.

• At **Roberta Jones Junior Theatre (RJJT)** in Santa Clara, kids ages 8 to 18 get a full theater experience from audition to performance in the sparkling new Mission City Center of the Performing Arts. "It gives the kids a taste of a real theater," notes Director Kevin Cornelius. Children don't need an acting resume. "We get all levels of experience and ability."

The "no stars" program is inclusive; all who audition get a part. Cornelius instills in his cast what he learned from founder Roberta Jones: "Every child belongs here. No matter what role, they're all equal."

Another bonus: kids do the tech work, operating the lights and sound and doing backstage tasks. Parents pay $51 or $66 per child, depending on Santa Clara residency, and must spend five hours per child helping.