



Features

Davis children perform annual Nutcracker show

📅 December 25, 2019 👤 Allyson Kang 💬 0 Comments 🎯 Alicia Joo, Ann Smalley, Christopher Sortor, Daphne Roe, Jen Smalley, Kellen Smalley, Maya Sortor, Peyton Schoen

PHOTO: Audience members gather at the Veterans Memorial Center Theatre on Dec. 11 in support of the young performers

Devoted director brings Nutcracker full circle

By Genna Olavarri,

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The theatre breathes life. Teen leaders step in for absent groups and flounce across the stage. Stage manager Christopher Sortor jogs back and forth from flipping the music on the phone at the corner of the stage to wielding grumbling power tools.

A large, iridescent, purple plum stands in the back, adjacent to a low-set painting of a mountain range sweeping the back wall. Little kids bustle with excitement and energy. And this is just the rehearsal.

With less than a week until the show opens, the Davis Children's Nutcracker is in crunch time on Dec. 5. Director Ann Smalley, settled in the center of row E, is nearly as excited as all the children. She directs kids on where to go and what to do from her seat, commanding, yet kind and personable.

She is invariably positive, saying please and thank you to everyone. She applauds and exclaims the phrase "wild applause" each time a dance finishes, then moves on.

Thirty years ago, Smalley was a parent volunteer with the production.

The City of Davis invited her to step in as director. She replied,

“Yeah sure.”

At the time, her son, Kellen Smalley, and daughter, Jen Smalley, were both in the production.

Kellen Smalley was playing Fritz one of those early years. On the last night, he dressed up as Santa, burst onto the stage and said, “Uh-oh! Wrong house!”

Each year, the Nutcracker cast continues the tradition of playing a joke on Smalley.

Another year, on the final night of the run, the elegant Sugar Plum Fairy sat in her throne with her hair in curlers, reading a magazine. Smalley was shocked to see her dignified lead out of costume and instead with slippers on her feet and a wad of pink bubblegum in her mouth.

“At the time I was like ‘oh my goodness!’” Smalley said. “[But now] I look back on it very fondly.”

Jen Smalley remembers her mom stepping into the role of director around the time she aged out of acting in the play. As a teen leader, she loved that the other kids saw her mom in the same way she did.

“She is the kindest, most loving, most accepting person I’ve ever met,” Jen Smalley said. “And I’m not saying that just because she’s my mom.”

Many people have been touched by Ann Smalley’s kindness and dedication to the program. Smalley cares deeply about the production and everyone in it, which is evident in the way she recalls everyone’s names.

Sophomore Alicia Joo went to her preschool, Ann’s Nursery School, from which Smalley has since retired. On the first day 10-year-old Joo came to the auditions for the Nutcracker in 2014, Smalley remembered her and called her by name.

“She makes everyone feel valuable,” Joo said.

Sophomore Paige Carlock was a cast member for four years and a volunteer for two years. When Carlock would come into

rehearsals on sleepy, winter afternoons, Smalley would always ask her how her day was or how she was doing whether she was a little cat at age eight or a 14-year-old volunteer.

New kids make the production a bit different each year and Smalley adapts the show to the interests of each group. She tries to make it relevant by adding popular dances and music.

"I had to tell her to maybe not have the clowns dab [a couple years ago]," sophomore Dean Fulks said.

While Smalley benefits the program, the production has also helped her.

Three years ago, her husband suddenly passed away from cancer at age 65. "He was my best friend," Smalley said. "[He] always supported me."

"It was devastating," Jen said. "[He] was such a big-presence... [Now] there's a hole." While the family banded together to support one another, the Nutcracker also helped to alleviate some of the anguish. "[It was] a light in my grief," Ann Smalley said.

The Nutcracker is more than just a show for the Smalley family. "[It is] ingrained in my family's blood," Jen Smalley said.

Now, Ann Smalley's grandchildren are doing the Nutcracker. In fact, Jen Smalley's daughter played Clara in last year's production just as she had done when she was younger.

"It's fun to see it come full circle," Jen said.

A Small-ey History of the Davis Children's Nutcracker



1977: The first Davis Children's Nutcracker production opens

1988: Ann Smalley's daughter, Jen Smalley, plays Clara

1990: Smalley directs the production for the first time

1991: Smalley's son, Kellen Smalley, plays Fritz

2016: Smalley's husband, Tyrus "Ty" Wilson Smalley, passes away

2018: Smalley's granddaughter, Emma Withrow, plays Clara, following in her mom's footsteps

2019: Smalley's grandson, Owen Withrow, plays Fritz, the same role his uncle played

