

October 17, 2001

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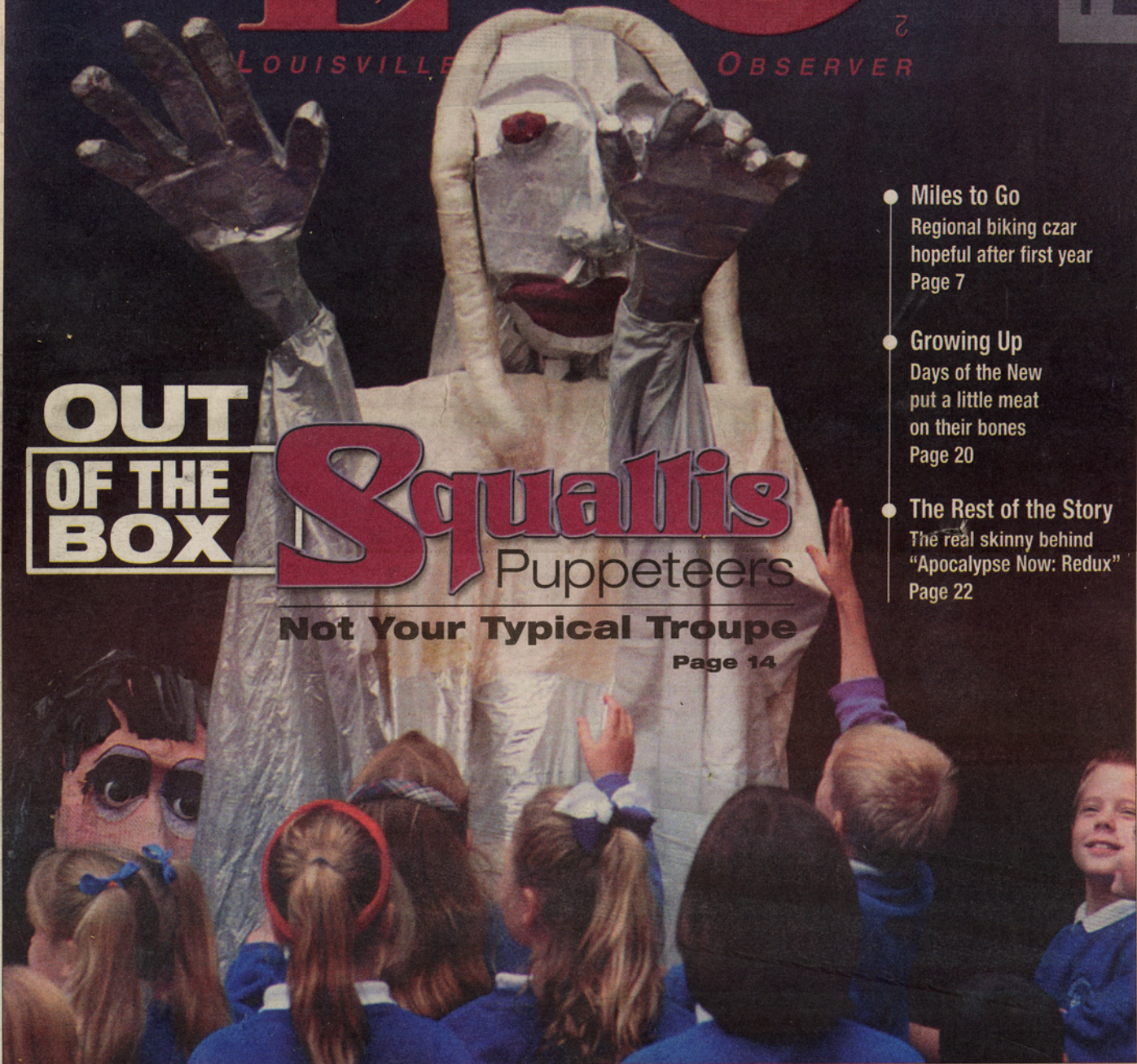
**OUT  
OF THE  
BOX**

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# Out of the box

**Squallis Puppeteers aren't your typical troupe**



Pan as he appears in the Squallis production of "Pandora."

**T**he invitation to last month's American Civil Liberties Union benefit promised a puppet show. But the guests, mostly older professionals and families, were not prepared for the Squallis Puppeteers' presentation of "Pandora."

According to the Greek myth, Zeus gave Pandora to Epimetheus, along with a box in which each god had placed something dangerous. Although warned that she should never open the box, Pandora does, and unleashes misfortune on the world.

The Squallis Puppeteers' "Pandora" is a subtle commentary on the misogynistic ideas underlying the myth. By changing the narrative's perspective, the troupe suggests that males — in the form of the half-man, half-goat god Pan — are at least partly responsible for the downfall.

Squallis' Pandora is an 8-foot puppet costume with a frame made of PVC piping, which an actor wears on his or her back. Pandora is curious about the large cloth box, but so is Pan, who is portrayed by a costumed actor on stilts. Pan hovers behind Pandora, and vocalist Suki Anderson, backed by a funky group of white-clad musicians, speaks for him. "Open the box, open the box. You know you want to open the box."

From the side of the stage, Artemis of Ephesus, Zeus' daughter, watches as Pandora finally succumbs to the pleading and her own curiosity. The

door of the box swings open and a pair of lips appears. They dance around the stage until a dragon chases them off. Pandora manages to tame the dragon, but several frogs come out of the box, dancing in the fountain in front of the stage. These are followed by vines, Cerberus, the three-headed dog, and then Hades, god of death, in the form of a skeleton puppet propped on someone's head. Finally, a "Hope" chorus, comprising all of the puppeteers, comes out of the box encouraging everyone in the audience to clap and sing.

The crowd at the ACLU benefit laughed at the antics on stage. But many of them left wondering, What does it all mean?

Not exactly a question one usually asks after a puppet show.



The Squallis Puppeteers are a semi-professional troupe whose work is mainly aimed at adults. Nora Christensen, one of the group's founders, said the imagery in "Pandora" was inspired by the occasion, which was specifically a benefit for the ACLU's Reproductive Freedom Project. The goal, Christensen said, was to make people think.

"We had definite ideas of what it was about, but we like to leave it open," she said. "It all sounds kind of funny when you put it in words, because it is what the people see in it."

Leslie Millar, a member of the ACLU's Reproductive Freedom Project Committee,

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Story by  
**MICHAEL L. JONES**  
Photos by  
**BRIAN BOHANNON**

# We are creative women who collaborate in order to gain multiple levels of insight.

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recruited Squallis for the ACLU benefit, because she thought the group was politically in tune with the event. The puppet troupe, in turn, got her to play Artemis — complete with a white robe, mask and several balloons strapped to her chest to represent breasts. Millar said the production surpassed her expectations.

"At the end of the performance, when we do the 'Hope Chorus,' we thought we'd have to clap and motivate the crowd, but we didn't," she said. "The audience was way into it. I know there were some things that (the Squallis Puppeteers) wanted to do differently, but the occasion was for children and adults, so there had to be a lot of layers of meaning. I think the troupe is incredible."

Until recently puppetry has been associated with children's entertainment. But the Squallis Puppeteers are a local manifestation of an increasing openness in the United States toward a more socially conscious, radical puppet theater.

"In other places, puppetry was always done sometimes for adults and sometimes for children," said Bobby Box, an associate producer at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta.

"In America," Box added, "the kid's puppetry part took off and the adult's didn't. In a way it's like animation, which has predominantly been thought of as something for kids. But now you have movies, like 'Shrek,' which also appeals to the adults taking those kids to the movies. So, the kids might laugh at one thing and the adults laugh at another."

Box said he's observed a similar change in puppetry. Over the last 20 years, he said, there has been increased interest in adult puppetry, especially among young troupes like the Squallis Puppeteers.

The Center for Puppetry Arts is offering nine adult shows this year and hopes to do at least 12 next year. This year's adult shows have included a puppet version of the opera "Carmen" and a group of socially conscious vignettes by Australian Richard Bradshaw.

"When I talk about adult puppetry, sometimes people think I'm referring to sex or violence," Box said. "It may still be PG, but it deals with things kids might not be interested in. The kids might get bored and you never want to have a bored audience."

Box said much of the interest in adult puppetry can be traced to "Muppets" creator Jim Henson. Although Henson made his living from children's shows, he also made experimental films with puppets during the 1960s, and he wanted to enable others to tackle serious themes using the discipline. So in 1982 Henson started the Jim Henson Foundation to promote and develop the art of puppetry in the United States. The foundation is the only grant-making institution for puppetry in the country. It also produces the biennial Henson International Festival of Puppet Theater in New York City, which attracts some of the top puppeteers from around the world.

The 2000 festival included performances by adult-oriented puppeteers such as Chicago's Red Moon Theater, which did an adaptation of "The

Hunchback of Notre Dame"; Los Angeles' Janie Geiser, whose "Night Behind The Windows" is set in a world where the borders between life and death are blurred; and Hong Kong's Tang Shu-wing, whose "Millennium Autopsy" dealt with genetic engineering.

"The Henson Festival has created a huge audience for adult puppetry in New York," Box said. "There are also similar things going on in California and other parts of the country. I think people are more accepting of it now. When we started doing adult puppetry in the early '80s, there was a huge prejudice against it."

Jim Lasko, artistic director for the Red Moon Theater, said he believes young artists are attracted to puppetry because it involves a greater connection, almost a partnership, between the audience and the performer. Lasko said puppetry asks more of the viewer than television or film, where the sense of realism makes the audience more passive.

"I think, in general," Lasko said, "realism tells you what it wants you to know and in puppetry you have to really engage as an audience member in the creation of the event. It's your work to do, as an audience member, to bring the puppet to life. All that is happening on stage is that a person is manipulating an object. It's up to the audience member to give that life. I think it's really exciting to people. It's ultimately more demanding, and I think people are tired of being dumbed down to."



Christensen said the major motivation behind the Squallis Puppeteers is a thirst for thought-provoking, political theater. Christensen, 25, is the only professional puppeteer in the Squallis troupe. She makes puppets for youngsters and works with children at the Speed Art Museum.

She founded the Squallis Puppeteers in 1996, with her sister Carrie Christensen, 29, who works as a conflict-resolution counselor, and their childhood friend, Jessica Myers, 28, who builds pipe organs for a living.

Squallis shows usually fall into three categories: big productions like "Pandora" and last year's "The Crowning," which dealt with mid-wifery; the children's shows, which the Christensen sisters and Myers do by themselves at area

schools; and "The Happenings" — short performances and puppet parades, which usually occur at indie rock shows.

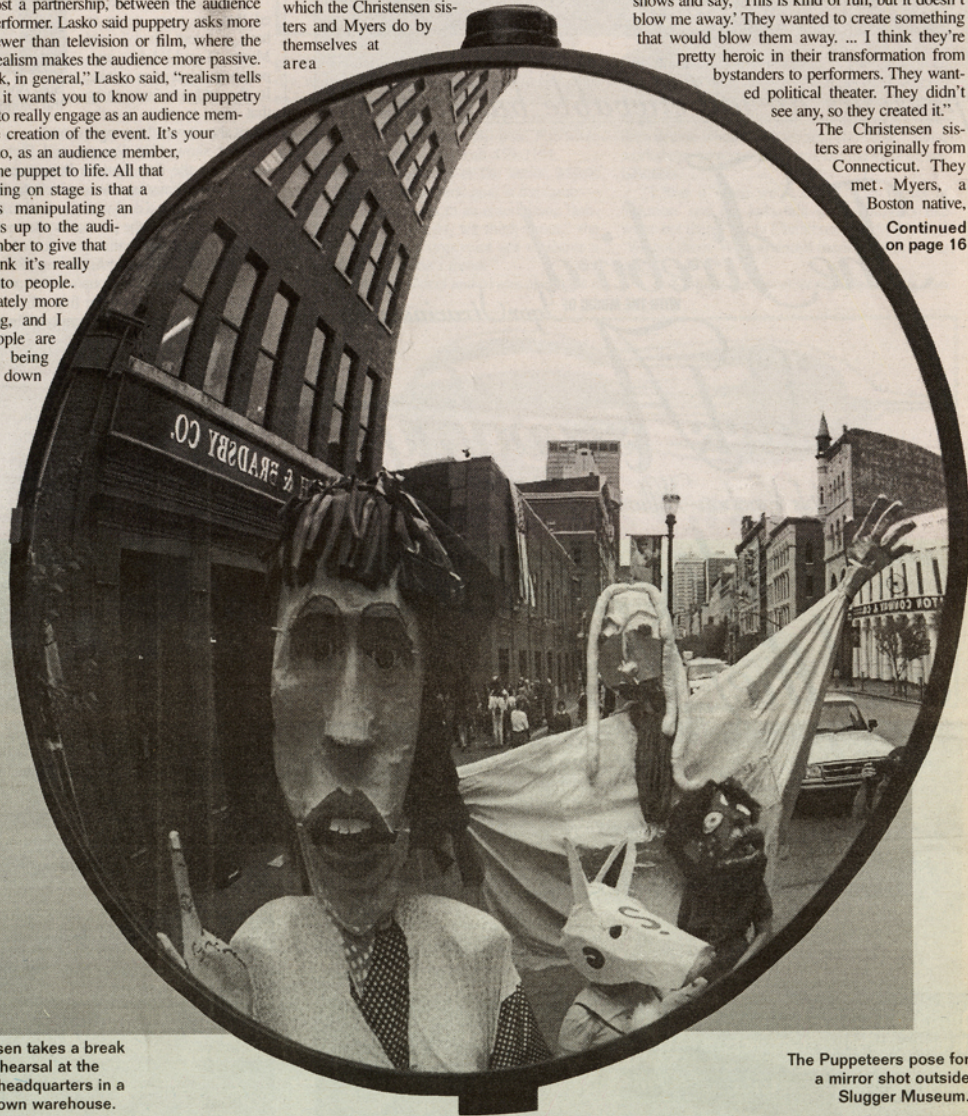
The women summed up their ambition for the Squallis Puppeteers recently in a Kentucky Foundation for Women grant application: "We are creative women who collaborate in order to gain multiple levels of insight. Puppetry is an art which combines moving structure, drama, music, digital imagery and film. ... The performances that result from our collaborations are expressions of our feminism. Our subject matter comes from our interactions with the world around us. We have no desire to rehash the standard puppetry fare ('Jack and the Beanstalk,' 'Punch and Judy'). We develop original work because we have something to say."

Darrick Wood, who co-writes the music and plays guitar at Squallis shows, said the Christensen sisters and Myers embody the "do-it-yourself" attitude.

"It seems to me that they were a really demanding audience," said Wood, 30. "They'd go to shows and say, 'This is kind of fun, but it doesn't blow me away.' They wanted to create something that would blow them away. ... I think they're pretty heroic in their transformation from bystanders to performers. They didn't see any, so they created it."

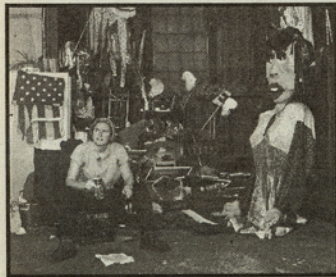
The Christensen sisters are originally from Connecticut. They met Myers, a Boston native,

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Carrie Christensen takes a break after a rehearsal at the troupe's headquarters in a Germantown warehouse.

The Puppeteers pose for a mirror shot outside Slugger Museum.



# Squallis



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at a Quaker retreat when all three women were in middle school. They all ended up attending Earlham College, a Quaker institution in Richmond, Ind., where they met Wood and Suki Anderson, who also sings and co-writes music for Squallis shows.

In 1994, Carrie Christensen convinced Myers and Anderson to move to Louisville with her. "It was only going to be for a year or two," Carrie said, "but we got sucked in."

The three women shared an apartment in the Highlands. Nora Christensen and Wood, who dates Carrie, soon followed the others to town.

The early puppet shows were borne out of boredom.

"Suki (Anderson) decided that we were going to have a talent show," said Myers. "I said I'd do a puppet show, kind of as a joke. In the end, the only thing that came together (for the talent show) was the puppet show."

That show, "Dr. Passgas and Pigboy," was technically the first Squallis Puppeteers production. It was a Faustian tale in which the friendless Dr. Passgas made a deal with the devil to turn a pig into a boy. "Really, the plot came after making the Pigboy puppet and realizing it didn't look like a boy, but a pig," admitted Anderson, 28.

The next step in the group's development came in 1996, when it put on the first official Squallis Puppeteers' show, dubbed simply "The Chicken Show." Like most things with the Squallis troupe, the show developed not from planning but from inspiration.

At the time, Anderson, Myers and Nora Christensen were working in the kitchen of the now-defunct Sugar Doe Cafe, where Carrie Christensen was a waitress. "We were sort of scratching each other's eyes out," Carrie said, "living together and working together. Plus, I was a waitress, so you had that wait staff and kitchen tension."

The women in the kitchen had to prepare a lot of chicken. To break the monotony, they started pretending the frozen bird cadavers were puppets. Eventually, they developed a scenario about a chicken growing up in a factory farm.

After they decided to do the chicken show at the Sugar Doe, Myers came up with the group's name. She said a friend asked her what she would name the troupe if it was a punk rock band. Myers said, "Squallis Pups."

"A Squallis pup is a fetal shark," Myers said. "It was a pun we couldn't pass up. Plus, we really are ferocious."

"The Chicken Show" featured some music by Anderson and Wood, but it also had the most dialogue of any of the Squallis productions. The troupe soon decided that words weren't the most effective way to keep an audience's attention.

"We really hardly ever use dialogue," Carrie Christensen said. "We want to do it through music. No one wants to watch a puppet give a long speech."

Anderson and Wood said their approach to writing for Squallis is to always make the music



Suki Anderson, left, and Nora Christensen relax after a romp around the Slugger Museum's bat, while the puppets rest against the glass.

funky. Anderson said it's easier to compose applied music because the form is already suggested by the script.

"It's weird because when you write music for a puppet show, you're writing for a scene," she said. "The plot is already there. The emotion is already there."

Wood said he would probably not be performing if it wasn't for Squallis. He said playing for the troupe is more liberating than it would be if he was simply playing in a band.

"When you're an artist, you're supposed to express something inside of you," he said. "This way, I can play music without people looking at me. It would be hard for me to play if it wasn't in a show."

The Squallis Puppeteers seem to inspire other people. For instance, "Pandora" involved 18 people — musicians, actors and puppeteers. Twelve of them were volunteers, who got involved after seeing past Squallis shows.

Wood said that although the three founders act as a nucleus, the troupe works like an art collective, where everybody's ideas are considered.

"They have real faith in the group process," he said. "They need the ideas. It's the anti-rock star thing. They want to make people a part of what happens. ... That's probably why it'll take us six months to do a show we can do in two weeks. But it makes it more interesting and fun."

Carrie Christensen said bringing collaborators

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Darrick Wood has a little fun taking a midwife into stalled traffic outside the Highlands Kroger during the Belknap Neighborhood Fall Festival.

# Squallis



Nora Christensen, Jessica Myers and Carrie Christensen founded the Squallis Puppeteers after moving to Louisville seven years ago.

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into the mix keeps the Squallis shows more exciting and pushes the performances in unexpected directions.

"At this point," she said, "we're getting along so well that we invite other people in for tension. We have people come to volunteer who say, 'I haven't picked up scissors in 10 years.'"

Myers said it's important to have an open mind when dealing with so many collaborators. She said the idea for the skeleton puppet in "Pandora" came from one of the volunteers.

"I didn't think it would work," Myers said. "But he did it anyway, and it turned out to be one of the best parts of the show."

Squallis took a major step toward legitimate theater when it presented "The Crowning" at the Kentucky Theater last year. The production, partly funded by a \$1,000 encouragement grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, was loosely based on Nora Christensen's experiences giving birth to her 2½-year-old daughter, Stella. Nora wanted to use a midwife, but learned that the practice was discouraged by the medical community.

"Jess and I were Nora's birth coaches," Carrie said. "We learned a lot about what goes on between the OB-GYN and midwife communities. If you're on Medicare, (hospitals) try to make you have the baby as quickly as possible so you can get out of there. It was a scary reality."

Nora did end up using the midwife, but found that she had fewer options for post-pregnancy treatment because of it. That's when the idea for "The Crowning" came. "It had to be said," she said. "It's crazy."

Except for a performance at an art opening in

Chicago and their big productions, the majority of the Squallis Puppeteers shows have been opening for indie rock groups. They have performed with Retsin, the Shipping News and Driver Jim. And in many ways the puppet troupe does resemble an indie rock band, especially when it comes to abiding by its principles. Last week, they did a "Dragon Parade" at the Belknap Neighborhood Fall Festival. The parade went through the parking lot of one of the sponsors, the Kroger Co., but the puppet troupe wanted to make it clear it wasn't working for Kroger and refused to do anything inside the store.

"(They're) always takin' on 'The Man,'" Anderson joked. "They are more political than anything else. It's not that they don't want to go with the flow. It's that they have real concerns."

The Squallis Puppeteers are slowly becoming a professional troupe. They now have a warehouse in Germantown that they use as a workshop to store props and rehearse shows. The Dr. Passgas puppet, which is now their George W. Bush Jr. puppet, is there waiting to be called into action. The troupe also has a Web site, [www.squallispuppeteers.com](http://www.squallispuppeteers.com), and plans to set itself up as a non-profit organization. For now, the troupe has formed a partnership with Artswatch, a local non-profit arts organization, to provide a performance space for local artists at St. John's Evangelical Church on Market Street.

But as much as they love doing puppetry for adults, the Squallis founders realize that children are where the money is in puppeteering. And children love the puppet troupe, which was demonstrated last week when it appeared at the Louisville Slugger Museum. The upcoming Squallis show, "Flora and the Fauna Box," is the



group's first large-scale production aimed primarily at children. The show, which deals with endangered species, will be performed at the Louisville Zoo on Oct. 21 and from Oct. 26-30, twice a day, at 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. For more information on these shows, call 459-2181.

No matter the audience or the venue, Myers said, the Squallis Puppeteers' goal is the same — to raise serious questions in an entertaining fashion. "A lot of stuff we do, we think it out," she said. "But I think it's important not to shove a message down someone's throat."

The Christensen sisters and Myers also have a

conflict-resolution workshop, "The Wheel of Solution," which they perform at local schools and libraries. The three women use hand puppets to act out various scenarios and they let the children decide what the characters should do. These workshops provide their own unique kind of satisfaction.

"I love it when we're doing 'The Wheel of Solution' and the kids talk to the puppets like we're not there," Nora Christensen said. "It's like, 'We got them. We convinced them to think it was real.'"

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