

Bend father of 3 takes an active role in family's theater activities

BY DAVID JASPER • The Bulletin

Many parents back their kids' hobbies and activities, providing time, transportation and other support. When it comes to being involved in their kids' theater activities, Randy and Amy James take it to another level of involvement. On stage and backstage, community theater is a family affair for the James family of Bend, with all five of its members sometimes involved in a show.

"It started because my husband and I have always loved theater," Amy said. "We did a lot of performing in our youth, before we had kids. ... It had been a while. So kind of our kids are the ones that got us into it."

Amy in the Seattle area and Randy grew up in Cave Junction, where he'd been active in school productions and church pageants as a kid.

"You grow up in Southern Oregon, there's not a lot of opportunities for the arts," he said. "That's probably one of the things that motivates me for our kids. You grow up in a town of 1,500 people in Southern Oregon, a significantly more conservative part of the state, the arts aren't going to get spent on; it's people focusing on being able to eat and keep the lights on."

The two met in college at George Fox University, a Christian college in Newberg, where Amy had been roommates with Randy's sister. Amy took classes in music and theater, but Randy, who was a couple of years ahead of her in school, did not.

"Coming from an economically deprived area, when I went into college, I was very focused in terms of focusing on what I needed to do to get there, graduate, and not go back to Southern Oregon," he said. "Very purposeful. That was one issue, and the theater community at Fox, at that particular time, was a little closed off."

The two married in 1997. After Amy earned her master's degree in teaching, they moved to Bend in 1999, where they became active in theatrical dessert performances at their church before beginning their family. The James family is father Randy, mother Amy, daughter Katey, 14, and sons Casey, 17, and Tucker, 9. Randy, who works for Lucidly, a software and coaching education company, and Amy teaches at Oregon Family School, a charter school in Bend.

The first real hint of their family's future theater commitments came in 2012, while aboard a Disney cruise, which had a talent show that was open to guests. Katey, who was 6 at the time, wanted to participate.

"She has been a budding performer her entire life," Amy said. However, "We hadn't signed her up for it. We didn't realize that was a thing we had to do, and so she was very upset with us."

Instead of attending the talent show, the family ended up



Submitted

Members of the James family during the 2016 presentation of "The Little Mermaid" from TMP.

going to see another on-board show, which happened to feature professional singer Susan Egan, who originated the role of Belle in the 1994 Broadway musical adaptation of "Beauty and the Beast," among other credits.

The determined future thespian, however, was still not happy.

"Katey, sitting there, having no idea who this person is, was just completely irritated that this woman got to sing on the stage, and she was denied her opportunity to sing on the stage," Amy said, imitating Katey's folded arms and indignant stare.

"She's had an innate desire to stand in front of people and have them watch her perform since, I think, she could walk and talk," Randy said.

Afterward, the family approached Egan, and Katey took the opportunity to sing a song for her.

"And Susan turned to me and she's like, 'You have to get this girl in community theater.' I was like, 'OK!'" Amy said.

At first, they couldn't find anything she was old enough for, but an opportunity came when Katey joined the cast of "Wizard of Oz," an August 2014 show that featured adult

and some 40 youth performers, staged by the then-new Thoroughly Modern Productions.

They saw other parents involved in the show and were inspired to get involved themselves. Before long, Amy auditioned for the next TMP show, "Beauty and the Beast" in early 2015, and Randy crewed its summer 2015 show, "Peter Pan." Older son Casey had meanwhile gotten involved at BEAT Children's Theatre.

Eventually, they established a rule that they had to do the same shows.

"We got tired of doing the back and forth thing, so we were finally like, 'Hey, we've all got to do the same show, and so (Casey) ended up doing a show with TMP,'" Amy said.

Tucker being a bit younger than his siblings, "The Addams Family," a 2018 production at 2nd Street Theater in Bend before it shuttered, is the one show the entire family has appeared in together.

"It was super fun to (have) the realization, 'This is the first one we've all done!'" Amy said.

The COVID-19 pandemic over the past year-plus has, of course, put a damper on the family's collective efforts.

"We've been framing this last year as a time for refining, training and exploring new skills over performing," Amy said. Katey stayed active with dance, and will have her first live performance in over a year. Casey stayed active in theater at Redmond Proficiency Academy, and Tucker is enrolled at BEAT Children's Theatre this summer.

She's been working with Ellipse Theatre Community, a production company launched last year, to develop future projects and establish its infrastructure, and Randy's using this time to evaluate the time he has available to commit to theater, and what projects he wants to invest time in.

Where their kids take theater in the future is unwritten. Randy has a feeling that Katey, at least, will always stay involved.

"I'm 100% convinced that whatever Katey does, theater is going to be part of her life for the rest of her life, in some fashion," he said.

"The point ... that is for me, the most interesting in terms of being a parent and watching your kids go through theater, is how differently they interact with it."

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