

Vaudeville revival troupe might last longer than Vaudeville

By Burt Constable | Daily Herald Columnist

The notes Lindsay Fischer's mom sneaks into her school lunch aren't the typical syrupy messages of pride and love meant for a third-grader. But Lindsay isn't necessarily your typical third-grader.

"I put Groucho Marx quotations in her lunch box," says Gail Remer of Arlington Heights.

"I really like those movies," Lindsay, 9-and-a-half, says of the old Marx Brothers films of the 1920s and '30s. "I just like the jokes."

Not only does she appreciate Vaudeville humor, the fourth-grader-to-be has performed in 49 shows herself throughout the suburbs with Dickinson's Little Vaudeville.

"I like singing, dancing and acting," Lindsay says. "I like performing and doing all the acts. That's what makes it fun for me."

What has made Vaudeville fun for 169 girls and boys during the last 15 years is energetic and passionate founder Donna Dickinson. A former professional ice skater, the Arlington Heights mother of two started Dickinson's Little Vaudeville as an outlet for her two creative kids, Louis and Casey.

Dickinson's stepfather, Bill May, made the props and rigged up the sound system. Her mother, Rose, made all the costumes. Her one-man stage crew, music coordinator and full-time supporter is husband Charles, a writer.

And Donna Dickinson?

"I try to be like Mr. Rogers," she says. A blonde pixie who always wears her trademark scarf (a habit she picked up from her days of performing in chilly ice rinks), Dickinson stresses the positive while teaching kids to perform everything from dance and violin to magic and juggling.

"This is your stage to do your thing," she tells her current troupe of 22 kids, ages 4 through 13.

"It's not supposed to be for grown-ups."

Dickinson's group performed its first show on Aug. 2, 1993, for the senior citizens at the Lutheran Home in Arlington Heights. Louis Dickinson, then 10, did a dead-on Harpo Marx impersonation, while Casey Dickinson, 7, did an adorable pantomime dance to the Vaudeville song "I Don't Care."

A friend of the Dickinson family, I mistakenly figured that show was a passing lark, instead of a lifelong passion. Since that day, Dickinson's Little Vaudeville has performed free shows and charity benefits in churches, tents, park districts, restaurants, retirement homes and other venues in 19 suburbs from Libertyville to Lombard, and as far away as Indiana.

Unlike so many kid activities, Vaudeville isn't about gearing up for contests, competitions or the big game.

"It's fun and you don't have to be talented," Donna Dickinson says, smiling before adding, "but talent is appreciated." Joe and Darla Lucero of Hoffman Estates say their three daughters have learned more than how to be performers. "Donna gives all the kids an opportunity to shine, as well as make friends and have fun," Darla Lucero says. "It's a little family." The Luceros' 5-year-old twins, Rachel and Sophia, joined the troupe two years ago because big sister Abigail, 7, was having so much fun. "It's given her (Abigail) a confidence, poise and excitement about doing something other kids don't do," Lucero says.

At the end of each show, Dickinson has the kids go into the audience and shake hands. "You have to go out and personally thank them for coming to the show," Dickinson says. Friday, in celebration of their 100th show, Dickinson's Little Vaudeville will put on a variety show at 7:30 p.m. at South Middle School, 400 S. Highland Ave., in Arlington Heights to benefit the Wheeling Township Food Pantry. The show is free, but audience members are asked to bring nonperishable food items to donate.

Helping less fortunate people also teaches these kids a lesson, notes Remer, who took her daughter to the food pantry so she could see the good that comes out of each performance. Dickinson teaches at Miss Delilah Studio of Dance in Palatine, at The Arcada Theater in St. Charles, and at the Prospect Heights Park District. For information about shows or about becoming a performer, call Dickinson's Little Vaudeville at 847 632-0890.