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Actors with UPS for DownS to perform in Schaumburg production of 'Mary Poppins'

By: Eileen O. Daday



- David Ford (Orland Park), left, Allie Reninger (Schaumburg), Katie Warkel (Streamwood), and Nick Pesce (Deer Park) will take turns playing Bert and Mary Poppins in the upcoming production of "Mary Poppins Jr." at Al Larson Prairie Center for the Arts in Schaumburg. Many of the cast members have Down syndrome.



- Allie Reninger of Schaumburg, left, and Katie Warkel of Streamwood share the title role in a production of "Mary Poppins Jr." that's all about inclusion.



- Life's a jolly holiday for Bert and Mary Poppins, Nick Pesce of Deer Park and Katie Warkel of Streamwood.

Allie Reninger of Schaumburg has appeared in nearly all 12 of the theater performances produced by UPS for DownS and EDGE of Orion. Each year, her directors say, she has grown in confidence and stage presence.

This week, she shares the role of Mary Poppins with Katie Warkel, 15, of Streamwood. And like their namesake character, they are "practically perfect in every way."

"Mary Poppins"

What: Produced by UPS for DownS and the EDGE of Orion theater company

When: 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday, Feb. 7-8; 6 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 9; 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 10

Where: Al Larson Prairie Center for the Arts, 201 Schaumburg Court, Schaumburg

Cost: \$20 per person at the door

Details: www.upsfordowns.org/ups-for-downs-theatre-company

Together, they lead nearly 70 actors -- who are divided into two casts -- who come from across the suburbs, and of whom more than half have Down syndrome.

Principals include Nick Pesce of Deer Park and David Ford of Orland Park, who share the role of Bert; Nate Fitzpatrick of Schaumburg and Garret Anderson of Palatine, who share the role of Mr. Banks; and Rachel Truesdel of Schaumburg and Maggie Sanchez as Mrs. Banks. Performances are Thursday through Sunday, Feb. 7-10, at the Al Larson Prairie Center for the Arts in Schaumburg.

"Thanks to our talented cast, all of Mary's best lessons take on new meaning," says Sandy Pazerunas of Barrington, producer.

"Audiences will leave believing that anything truly can happen," she adds, "and with a greater capacity to treasure one another, and all of life's simplest pleasures."

She and the rest of the volunteers credit Orion Couling, who has directed all 12 productions, with setting the bar high and getting the most out of these young actors.

Couling says the key is to set a long-term vision.

"We start by establishing practices in creating community and confidence," Couling says. "After months of work, it translates to a safe place, where an actor can feel supported while taking a risk."

"These techniques manifest throughout the rest of the year and turn into a real boost to the self-esteem of the actor," he adds. "They come back the following year, ready to take on new challenges."

That clearly was the case with Reninger, whom production officials describe as formerly very shy, that is before she became involved in performing on stage. Each year, she has been cast in larger roles, including landing a principal in "Hairspray" in 2015.

As Mary Poppins, she not only has had to master all of her lines, blocking and choreography, but she hopes to wow audience members with her English accent.

"I want people to walk away with happiness, love and joy -- and to be encouraged to try theater themselves," says Reninger, 25, who recently graduated from Harper College's Career Skills Institute.

Her co-star, Warkel, says the experience has been groundbreaking for all of the actors. While she is a member of the Drama Academy at Larkin High School, she says appearing in an inclusive theater experience has changed her world.

"I love it because, here, everyone is accepted," Warkel says. "It opens your eyes to see that anything really is possible."

Cast members work with Couling for six months leading up to the performances, making the UPS for DownS Theatre Company one of its most popular programs.

"Some of our actors need support and perform alongside their theater peers," Pazerunas says. "Overall, this show is very fast paced and there's a lot more dancing."

The performances bear out the organization's mission, Pazerunas adds, which is to create communities that are diverse, welcoming and inclusive.

"We believe people with Down syndrome should be active and productive in their communities," she says, "where they live, learn and play."

SPORTS

---Daily Herald---02/07/2019

Streamwood holds on against Bartlett

By: Jared Birchfield

Led by Keenon Cole's 21 first-half points, Streamwood jumped out to a 42-24 halftime lead over Bartlett Wednesday night.

The Sabres then had to fight off a furious second half rally to win the Upstate Eight Conference contest in Streamwood, 73-66.

Spurred by the return of Austin Gates, who sat out a part of the second quarter in foul trouble, Bartlett whittled Streamwood's lead to 55-44 after the third quarter. Gates scored nine of his game-high 28 points in the period.

The Hawks also switched up their defense to neutralize Cole, who only made one three throw in the quarter.

"They went triangle and two. They did a nice job of taking (Cole) away," said Streamwood coach Kent Payne.

"I thought in the second half we did a really good job limiting the touches for Cole and (Nicola) Sinik, not giving them easy baskets and forcing the other guys to beat us," said Bartlett coach Jim Wolfsmith. "Then we turned that into our own scores."

Bartlett (6-20, 3-11) continued the rally and pulled within 68-62 with 50 seconds left to play. But that was as close as they would get.

"We got it down to six points and we had the ball," Wolfsmith said. "We took three 3s down the stretch and missed them instead of trying to go to the rim and get fouls so decision making kind of got us down the stretch but I never fault our guys for heart -- they played their butts off."

"We made some good stops defensively late in the fourth quarter," Payne said. "And we hit a couple of key shots down the stretch."

After the Hawks jumped out to an early 3-0 lead Cole responded by connecting on three straight to give the Sabres their first lead of the night, 6-5. Bartlett retook the lead briefly on a Garrett Jurin (16 points) bucket, 7-6. Sinik (15 points) drained a 3 from the right wing to give the Sabres the lead for good. Streamwood. (9-15, 6-7) led 20-17 after the first eight minutes.

"A great start," Payne said. "Our pressure really created a tempo that we like and we kind of played off of that -- some steals and rebounds -- and we got out and ran."

Bartlett hit a scoring drought in the second stanza, only mustering 7 points, all by sophomore Clark Lewis, who finished the night with 14 points.

"I thought the second quarter, we let down attaching the rim. We missed a bunch of layups," said Wolfsmith. "When they got shot blockers like Cole and Sinik, that's going to happen but we got to attack the rim. That changed the tenor of the game."

Although Cole only scored six points in the last half of the game for a team-high 27-points, he made key defensive contributions. In addition to snaring 15 rebounds, the senior blocked three shots. Teammate Jacob Strong scored 12 points.

Larkin names Planz new coach

By: Jerry Fitzpatrick

New Larkin football coach Ron Planz can explain to a high school player exactly what college coaches look for in a recruit.

After all, Planz was a college coach his entire adult life until Wednesday, when he was introduced as the next coach by the Elgin high school.

Planz, 39, spent the last five seasons as head coach at Elmhurst College until what he called "a mutual parting" following a 1-9 campaign in 2018.

He succeeds Jason Aubry, who was hired in December to be the new head coach at Concordia University in River Grove.

Planz said the stability of a high school coaching position made sense for his family.

"I have two young kids and I'm looking for an opportunity to be around them as much as possible," said Planz, who played football at Fenton High School and Carthage College. "There are a ton of benefits to the college game, and there are also some negatives. One

of them is the time you're away from family. This felt like a good time to pursue high school."

Planz also was hired to teach physical education to 150 students. According to Larkin athletic director Ethan Karolczak, the school formed separate committees for the open P.E position and the head coaching vacancy in search of the best candidate for each.

"Hands down, Ron was the number one pick for each position by separate committees," Karolczak said. "He was extremely professional, extremely well prepared, level headed but you can tell he's very passionate about doing things the right way.

"His philosophy on the true purpose of interscholastic athletics and what they do to develop the whole person are right in line with ours. We're really, really excited to have him."

Prior to his stint at Elmhurst, Planz spent five seasons as defensive line coach and special teams coordinator at Division II Minnesota State. That followed a five-year stint as the defensive coordinator at Manchester College.

That was preceded by three seasons as receivers/secondary coach at Wisconsin-Eau Claire, a job he took right after graduation from Carthage.

"I walked off the stage, drove to UW-Eau Claire, started coaching and I've been doing it ever since," Planz said.

The new Larkin coach said he is itching to get started.

"Larkin fits with the kind of high school I went to," he said. "The demographics from Fenton to Larkin really aren't much different, so I feel like I can connect and make a difference in the kids' lives at Larkin."

Fenton is slated to replace West Aurora in the Upstate Eight Conference next fall. Larkin and Fenton are scheduled to meet in the season opener on Aug. 30.

West Aurora's Salter plays big vs. Larkin

By: Jerry Fitzpatrick

Hezekiah "Hezzy" Salter is accustomed to playing against bigger opponents for the West Aurora boys basketball team.

That's because the 6-foot-2, 195-pound senior -- an all-Upstate Eight Conference running back last fall -- possesses the athleticism to play bigger than he is.

When he matches up against opponents in the post his own size or smaller, he enjoys games like Wednesday, when he scored a season-high 23 points and grabbed 6 rebounds in a 66-56 UEC win at Larkin, a team with no starters taller than 6-2.

"They were more my size," Salter said. "I definitely felt like I had an advantage down low."

West Aurora (21-4, 14-0) and Larkin (10-15, 7-7) were tied at 15 apiece after one quarter as the teams each splashed three 3-pointers.

Then Blackhawks coach Brian Johnson ordered the ball inside to Salter, who had not scored in the opening period.

"Coach told us to start playing inside to Hezzy because he was just manhandling people," West Aurora point guard Traevon Brown said.

Salter scored 6 points in the second quarter, 8 in the third and 9 in the fourth to keep the Royals at bay. He made 9 of 14 shots, including 3 putbacks that fueled a 30-18 rebounding advantage.

"He did the same thing in the first game," Larkin coach Deryn Carter said of Salter's 16-point performance in the Blackhawks' 67-57 win in Aurora on Jan. 8. "He's just such a great athlete and he finishes well around the rim. He got us in foul trouble and made free throws."

Larkin gave the UEC leaders a tough time, though. The Royals were within 28-24 at halftime and trimmed an 11-point deficit after three quarters to 47-42 with six minutes remaining, thanks to consecutive 3-pointers from Pierre Black. The senior sank 4-of-9 from long range on the way to 13 points.

Salter answered immediately at the other end with an old-fashioned three-point play. In the next 90 seconds he scored twice more -- including a breakaway dunk that staked West Aurora to a 12-point lead.

"Larkin does a great job of playing within themselves," Johnson said. "They play within their roles, they attack, they kick, they hit the open guy. And when you can't make shots and you're giving up long rebounds and scrambling on defense, it's a recipe for bad things. We just tried to calm it down a little bit and get it in the post a little bit more."

Freshman point guard Damari Wheeler-Thomas scored a team-high 14 points to go with 3 assists and junior Jashon Johnson-Neals added 13 points for Larkin.

Brown scored 13 points for the Blackhawks, who have won two straight games and 12 of 13.

"We're definitely coming together more as a team and trusting each other," Salter said. "We're definitely picking up on those little things we were lacking at the beginning."