Her dummies are no dummies

BY SALLY BAIR Staff Correspondent

Debra Harnish loves people and really enjoys making them happy For twelve years she has been fulfilling her goal of entertaining people with several close 'friends' who are actually dummies Debra is quick to point out, 'My dummies aren't dumb - they're pretty sharp "

If you've been going to many farm banquets in this area chances are you may have met Debra and her friends because she has been busy on the banquet circuit

The daughter of Mr and Mrs. Raymond Harnish, Debra is a ventriloquist and has perfected a performance which is both unique and entertaining. With the aid of her principal dummies - Kelly, a boy, Coconut, a monkey, and Huggie Hug 'Em, a thing of uncertain lineage - Debra can make audiences forget their troubles and have a very good time.

Debra, 22, tailors her performance to the group, which makes her one-half hour show a lot of work for her, and great fun for the audience. She says, "I like to read the audience. I ask the person who calls for names and a little about the group I do have a good memory. When I use people from the audience I get people with me right off the bat."

Ask where she gets material, Debra states, "I collect jokes I have a whole trunk of jokes and sometimes I come across real gems"

Despite her volumes of material, Debra does not work from a script She said, "I do better if I don't My program is me All my dummies are exaggerated parts of me People notice that and feel it I have a general framework of my best material but half my program is ad-libbing"

She stresses, "You need to be unique That's what makes it different and that's what makes it successful I'm in control, and I'm in contact with people That's what I like You learn a lot about yourself"

Debra's program changes with the audience, but there's one message she always includes "I always have something Christian in it. That's because my programs are personal, and an extension of myself." A member of Rancks United Methodist Church, Debra says she turns down groups who don't want the Christian message along with the program

Debra learned ventriloquism when she was 12 years old and requested a Charlie McCarthy dummy for Christmas Despite her parents' skepticism, Debra recalls, "I



One of the audience's favorite, Huggie, Hug 'Em, is doing just as his name suggests. Though she says it's of uncertain lineage, audiences seem to respond favorably to the cute little guy.





Debra Harnish, New Holland, uses Kelly (left) and Coconut the Monkey to help her in her ven-

It was several years before Debra met another ventriloquist, but she just kept working at it until she had the voice perfected "I had no lessons I just practiced in front of the mirror"

She taught herself to use her voice differently, but she says that's all her talent is I just use my body differently I use the same technique as a singer uses in proper singing. It doesn't hurt my throat, but I do use it a lot more, just like a public speaker would. It feels so natural to do it I don't have to think about not moving my lips"

Debra points out that words for the dummies are formed with her tongue and she compensates in her throat "I can feel where it tightens for different voices," she states

Debra also points out that she is not throwing her voice No sound comes from the dummy I just create an illusion "That, of course, is why many times magicians and ventriloquism go together

She says the voice and the personalities of her characters develop as she works with them "Their movement and the way they look determine part of it. The voice just comes along, and becomes defined after I have used the character for a while"

Debra says she is just as surprised as her parents and others that her act has grown and she continues to have an interest. She remembers, "I was shy. At first I kind of hid



No ventriloquism act is complete without a Charlie McCarthy-type dummy and Debra is no exception. Debra, an accomplished seamstress, makes clothes for her dummies as well as gives them life.

triloquism act. Says Debra, "My dummies aren't dumb - they're pretty sharp."

behind the characters, but I've changed a lot. Some people who see me now say, 'I can't believe you is the same person'"

Her act has changed a lot too Her first program was a 10-minute Christmas program for which she was paid \$3.00 But she says, "I never thought about making money at it. It just grew every year I must turn down more because every year it gets busier. I never advertise "She adds that she did 30 Christmas programs before December 23 this year

At this stage, Debra averages about three shows a week, with January and July being slow times for her She tries to limit her appearances to within a 100 mile radius for ease of travel. A friend often drives Debra who likes to arrive in time to get to know the group before performing. She never eats, however, because a full, stomach is not conductive to a good performance.

She is appreciative of her parents' support, noting, 'They hauled me around for years They encouraged me by helping, but they didn't push, and I appreciate that It was always my thing and I took the telephone calls. I was free to do what I wanted to do "

A 1977 graduate of Garden Spot High School, Debra says her ventriloquism never affected her grades, but it did limit her outside activities. She said her friends always accepted what she did. 'They thought it was neat,' she states.

Debra, who grew up on a dairy farm near her present home, counts farm audiences as one of her favorites, and she says she enjoyed the large number of bookings she has had from them. She adds, "I like all my audiences, but I like groups best where people all know each other. They laugh and I don't have to work as hard I draw a lot of energy from an audience."

She spent one year working on a children's program with WGAL-TV, an experience which was valuable, but one which was not her-favorite because she had to play to the television camera and not to the audience.

Debra especially enjoys kids' programs, and she often includes several extra dummies for them. She sees her show as a learning tool, saying, "They remember a lot more when a dummy says it."

For anyone who has seen Debra perform, they may remember that there is always someone talking, either Debra or one of her dummies. Sometimes she has two dummies interacting, which means that she is talking non-stop for one half hour, a rather strenuous exercise

At one point in her program, Coconut clears his throat before singing She says this is strictly for her benefit, although it always gets laughs. This part was included one time when she wasn't feeling well and had a tickle in her throat Rather than break the rhythm of the performance, she included the throat clearing and it is now a standard part of the act.

Debra says the only physical ailment which affects her performance is a head cold because when she's talking she must breathe through her nose. When that nose is stuffy, she's in trouble, so she trys to avoid colds.

Singing through the dummies takes more air than singing normally, according to Debra, so at one point Huggie takes a little breath after singing That, too, is for Debra to catch her breath

Debra claims to enjoy ventriloquism because 'I like doing different things I am a creative person''

She is just learning to ski and likes roller skating. She also plays the piano, organ and guitar. She is an accomplished seamstress, and makes her own clothes and often makes clothing for her characters. She said she tries to color coordinate them when they make an appearance just because "it's prettier."

Debra would not hesitate to encourage young people to go into ventriloquism and would gladly offer tips, but feels
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