

Speaking of Talent

Debbie McGladdery keeps festival and students talking

Aboriginal cultures have their oral traditions, and so does the McGladdery clan.

The speech arts festival this week has a lot of entries from sisters Anne and Kerry, who both do well year after year. They obviously have the influence of their mother, Debbie McGladdery, to spirit them along. Debbie had the influence of her mother's elocution lessons to inspire her, and her mom learned it from her grandfather. That ma's Anne and Kerry, and even reluctant brother Gordon, the fourth generation speech artists of the family. (And that's just on mom's side!)

Debbie is now influencing a chunk of the younger generation. Prince George's premier speech arts coach has 101 students in her stable, and close to all of them are entered in the festival. She has been privately teaching here for the past 10 years, and before that in the school system.

Were it not for Debbie McGladdery, said one festival organizer, there likely would be no festival at all. Instead PG has the largest known speech arts festival in Canada with 750 entries.

"I don't think Prince George realizes what they've got here. It is probably the least elitist of the arts, so it is kind of a crime," Debbie says in a moment of oasis from festival mayhem. She credits the late José Smith for establishing speech arts dominance in the city, and now the children of José's students are filling up the program.

"The festival is the highlight of the year for a lot of these students," Debbie says. "To have that moment in the spotlight, and know they will have people listen to them, and look at all their work, well that is so important to them. You always see



McGladdery: 'You could put a straw man in the chair, for some of these kids, and they would still perform their hearts out and improve.' JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

improvements being made. You could put a straw man in the chair, for some of these kids, and they would still perform their hearts out and improve."

Speech arts is a little industry for some of these youngsters. Names have come to wide public attention like Catherine Higgins, Alana Hawley, Kathleen Greenfield, Amanda Glover, Carla Parsons, Geoff Duck, Vanessa Bloomfield, Kerry McGladdery and lots more coming up through the ranks.

This year is one of the best ever for new four and five-year-olds coming into the fold, and for established talent in the 10 to 14-year-old range. It will be a strong local contingent going to the B.C. Festival of the Arts later this spring.

This year there are also growth areas in the French component, the Shakespeare component, and by breaking down the poetry component into several sub-sections there has been a much broader group of entries there as

well. There are now over 50 categories to enter, from Canadian Poetry to Bible Reading to Dramatic Scene and everywhere in the neighbourhood.

Students taking private lessons can progress like piano or violin students through a series of Grades. Teachers like Debbie, Kathy Bloomfield, Margaret Keane, Anna Pickett and others work to improve their students, but also keep them entertained with interesting literature.

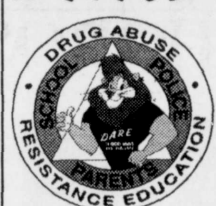
"They choose what suits them. I take the standard lyric style, then see what looks good for them when they let their own personal style play into it. It might be the same poem over and over again, if you're the teacher, but they always come out differently," Debbie explains.

"They are always so cute, but then they grasp that the poem is interesting and if they practice it and say it a certain way, then people will respond to it. It varies, but it's usually around 13 or 14 that they realize the piece and

its relationship with the audience."

The PG Speech Arts & Drama Festival takes place at UNBC until May 8. The Honours Performance is May 14 at 2 p.m. at First Baptist Church.

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4 Gladiator	18A	1:00	4:30		8:00	
5 I Dreamed of Africa	PG	12:40	3:15		7:25	10:00
6 Frequency	PG	1:05	3:40		7:15	9:55
7 Gladiator	18A	12:15	3:30		7:00	10:15