

Project has strings, but the kids love it

By MARY ENGELS

RENALDO RODRIGUEZ IS QUITE a guy for a puppet. Although blind, he can still play baseball, checkers and ride a bike. How does he do it? Well, he tells his secret to about 1,000 elementary school kids a week as he journeys throughout the five boroughs as a part of a puppet education show called "The Kids' Project," being sponsored by the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

In addition to Renaldo, there are three other disabled puppets, who look more like the famous Muppets in size and appearance. They are Mandy, who is deaf; Ellen Jane, who is mentally retarded, and Mark, who has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair.

Puppeteers Marion Dwyer and Lollie Abramson put on quite a show for third and fourth-graders each week in an attempt to teach children about various disabilities.

Work out of S.I.

The girls, whose base of operation is the Staten Island Developmental Center, make up one of six companies that visit schools across the state. They usually perform in the five boroughs.

According to Dwyer, "One of the main goals of the program is to show non-disabled children that being disabled never stopped anyone from being good classmates or good friends and shouldn't keep a person from living a satisfying life.

"The show also aims to make youngsters see that they shouldn't make fun of anyone who has a disability any more than they would like someone to make fun of them."

The puppeteers performed recently at PS 19 in Port Richmond. They worked in the school library in order to create a

personal feeling between the children and puppets. Watching the byplay was an education in itself.

'Bicycle built for two'

The youngsters asked Renaldo how he could ride a bicycle. "That's easy," he said. "My mom got me a bicycle built for two. My friend steers and I ride."

Mark Reilly, the cerebral palsy puppet, was asked how he got around. "With my cruiser," he said, pointing to his wheelchair. "The only trouble is there are some places I can't navigate it because people don't think of the handicapped when they build buildings."

Puppeteer Dwyer said, "The response by the youngsters is usually great. Sometimes we get wild questions, but the important thing is we are getting the message across through a medium the youngsters relate to, a puppet show."

The idea originated with Barbara Aiello, a special education student for 15 years and a teacher of the handicapped for nine years. For the last four years she has conducted workshops to prepare teachers for the new federal and state laws mandating that handicapped children must get as much of their education as possible in regular classrooms with children who do not have handicaps.

Since Aiello believes that "children will talk to puppets more readily than to adults," she decided that the answer to the "don't stare" syndrome is a show that tells children quite the opposite: come look, ask questions and learn.

The Staten Island puppeteers said they would like to continue the program during the summer months. "We are available for libraries, camps, youth groups or organizations that might want us to put on this show," said Dwyer. Contact them at the Staten Island Developmental Center or write to Kids' Project, NYS Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 44 Holland Ave., Albany, N. Y. 12229.

DAILY NEWS, SUNDAY, MAY 15, 1969



Cast of "Kids on the Block" with puppeteers Lollie Abramson (left) and Marion Dwyer.

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