

# The Sacramento Bee

## The white gloves are off

Today's Junior League women, who stage a rollicking kids show, are more likely to roll up their sleeves than they are to sip tea

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Published 9:53 am PDT Friday, March 14, 2008  
Story appeared in SCENE section, Page K1



*Gail Avery Halverson, in costume after a Junior League staging of "The Tale Spinner" at Hiram Johnson High School, gets audience approval from Elizabeth Montoya, 7. Photo by Randall Benton*

Members of the Junior League of Sacramento have no trouble leaving the ladylike behind.

Lately, they've been brandishing swords, jumping around in jumpsuits splattered in day-glo paint and otherwise raising a ruckus onstage in the theater of Hiram Johnson High School.

The song-and-dance routines are part of an annual free theater program that about 15,000 area elementary school students saw this season, which ended March 7. It's an annual tradition with a long run: at least 60 years. (Exactly which year in the early 1940s it started is unclear.) More than a million local kids over the decades have clapped and sung along.

This year's production – "The Tale Spinner" – worked its magic on an audience of about 650 students on a recent weekday morning. The community at large is invited to come to a free performance at 2 p.m. March 16. Elementary school kids – and their parents and adult friends – will not be disappointed.

The original musical lasts just about 40 minutes, but it is packed with plot twists, pratfalls, musical numbers and funny lines. One of the high points comes when several pirates take their

sword fight through the aisles, after singing, "We're fearsome buccaneers, we sail from far and nears."

The show spotlights an educational message disguised as entertainment – that reading is a great way to have fun, especially when the power goes out.

The production also spotlights the enduring role of the Junior League, which has played much more than a bit part in the creation of institutions and landmarks of Sacramento, from Fairytale Town to the Child Abuse Council of Sacramento. It also shines a light on how far the organization has evolved from its somewhat clubby roots.

"It's no more white gloves," says Paula Mumm, right after taking a bow for "The Tale Spinner."

She is dressed as though to underscore the point, in long shorts and T-shirt – her costume for playing a young boy, which she pulls off with persuasive goof, swagger and video-game skills.

Once upon a time, the Junior League was a rather cliquish affair. Membership was awarded by invitation only and restricted to women under 40. Meetings were strictly weekday events, as members generally didn't work outside the home.

Today, membership is open to all women 21 or older. Most members work, some are retired. There are about 300 active members and 600 women who support it from the sidelines as "sustainers." They are a diverse group by many measures, including ethnicity, career and pastimes.

President-elect Becky Johnson Sabin has Hupa and Karuk Indian heritage and spent early childhood years on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation in Humboldt County. Today, she works in corporate communications for Teichert Construction-Teichert Materials. For fun, she runs ultramarathons, with more than a dozen races from 50 to 100 kilometers under her laces.

"It's a great training opportunity," Sabin says of the league. Members learn about budgeting, business plans and how nonprofit boards work, preparing them for lives of being in charge. Sabin says it's hard to find a local nonprofit board that hasn't included former members of the local group.

Among those who moved from the group to become leaders in business and public life locally are Rep. Doris Matsui, public relations executive Jean Runyon, restaurateur Lina Fat and Muriel Johnson, who went on to become a county supervisor and then director of the California Arts Council.

Johnson, who joined the league in the '60s, said she quickly learned that it was not a club of women taking it easy.

"Some people thought they all eat bonbons or something. I always thought, 'Where did they get this idea?' I've never worked so hard," she says.

Johnson said the league gave her a welcomed break from caring for four young children at home. For Johnson and others taking time off to raise kids, the league can be a way to keep a résumé up to date.

Johnson says it was also just fun, especially when she played a tango-dancing big bad wolf in a production of "Little Red Riding Hood" for the league's annual children's theater project.

Julie Bugatto, president of the local league, says the group is working to lose the ladies-of-leisure image.

"We're going through a branding campaign to get over the connotation that we're just ladies who lunch," Bugatto says. She has fielded plenty of misconceptions: That you have to wear pearls to be a member, and that the group is some sort of ladies' auxiliary organization supporting Little League.

"I certainly have made fun of the connotations myself," she says. But she points out that the group has always been about concrete community benefits, including essential start-up support for the Sacramento Children's Receiving Home, one of the local league's first projects after it was formed in 1942.

"They had the social and political will to found a children's shelter," says David Ballard, CEO of the receiving home. It was co-founded by the Rotary Club and the Junior League in 1944. The home, with 88 beds, serves about 1,700 children a year.

Ballard says the league remains very involved in supporting the home.

"They aren't just a service group in name only," he says. "They really walk the walk."

And they talk the talk, loudly and clearly, when it comes to their children's theater productions, including recruiting just the right people to help, from the ushers, who are members of the California Retired Teachers Association and can manage any number of squirmy kids, to director Tina Cole, whose show-biz credentials include being a member of the "King Family Singers" and playing Katie Miller Douglas from 1967 to 1972 on the TV sitcom "My Three Sons."

Cole, who lives in Sacramento, has directed the children's theater productions for more than 10 years. She knows well that the Junior League actors aren't shy about sharing their suggestions on stage.

"I do love their ideas, but I have the final word," Cole says with a laugh.

The actors, who as league members are schooled in being in charge, seem happy to take orders from Cole.

"None of us has any pretenses about knowing more than Tina," says Anne McMurry, who plays the princesslike Tale Spinner herself. McMurry, an attorney who is currently not practicing, joined the League in 1992 and is now a sustaining member.

The role gives McMurry a rare chance to act the part of a fancy lady of leisure, dressed in haute girly fashion, from glittery crown to flouncy gown.

"I love the hugs," she says after the show as kids line up to give her a squeeze. "Plus, I get to wear pink."



*Audience members Calee Verwoest, near left, and Pedro Montoya, both 7. Photo by Randall Benton*



*Paula Mumm makes a convincingly goopy boy for "The Tale Spinner." Photo by Randall Benton*



*Annemarie Gowan portrays the former planet Pluto in "The Tale Spinner," photo by Randall Benton*



*Tina Cole, photo by Randall Benton*

## **THE JUNIOR LEAGUE, PAST AND PRESENT**

The Junior League of Sacramento is a chapter in an international organization that started in 1901 when a 19-year-old New York City debutante, Mary Harriman, gathered a group of young women to help impoverished immigrants living on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Early highlights of league efforts included prodding a board of education in New York City to provide free lunches for students in the 1910s. During the Depression, leagues opened nurseries for working mothers, and birth-control clinics.

**The Junior League of Sacramento was formed in 1942. Highlights of its projects, by decade, follow.**

- **1940s:** Co-sponsors the creation of the Sacramento Children's Receiving Home and starts the Children's Theatre program.
- **1950s:** Originating sponsor of Fairytale Town and the Junior Museum. Annual rummage sales raise money for projects.
- **1960s:** Establishes the Sacramento Regional Arts Council, the Crocker Art Gallery docent program, and assists in preservation of Old Sacramento.
- **1970s:** Originates the Child Abuse Council of Sacramento, the Cystic Fibrosis Clinic and the Sacramento Valley Eye Bank.

- **1980s:** Works to establish the Sacramento Regional Foundation to support nonprofits in the area.
  - **1990s:** Collaborates in creating the Crisis Nursery. Develops literacy tutoring and after-school programs.
  - **2000s:** Offers support, including grants, to the Child Abuse Prevention Councils' Family Cooperative Project and other programs, including Women Escaping a Violent Environment, the WIND Center for homeless youths, and the Senior Safe House Project for victims of abuse. Collaborates in developing life-skills training for young adults leaving foster care. In 2007, the league celebrates its 65th anniversary and reprints its 1991 "Celebrate!" cookbook, with more than 400 recipes. (It costs \$26.95; available at [www.jlsac.org](http://www.jlsac.org).)
- If you want to help:** Learn about joining the Junior League, fund- raisers, donations or purchases, at [www.jlsac.org](http://www.jlsac.org) or (916) 921-1096; events line: (916) 437-1649.

### **Who's in the Junior League**

- Membership is open to all women 21 or older.
- There are about 300 active members and 600 women who support from the sidelines as "sustainers."
- Most members - 71.4 percent - are married or live with a domestic partner.
- 81.3 percent are 40 or younger
- Most are moms, but 44.6 percent have no children
- Almost all, 94.6 percent, have a bachelor's degree; 31.2 percent have an advanced degree.
- 82 percent are employed; 18.9 percent of those are self-employed.

### **A few notable past members of the Sacramento Junior League**

- U.S. Rep. Doris Matsui • Public relations executive Jean Runyon
  - Restaurateur Lina Fat
  - Muriel Johnson, now director of the California Arts Council, who became a member before being elected a county supervisor
- Sources: The Association of Junior Leagues International Inc. online at [www.ajli.org](http://www.ajli.org); the Junior League of Sacramento

### **THE TALE SPINNER**

**What:** Free community performance of the 2008 Children's Theatre project of the Junior League of Sacramento. Written for students in pre-kindergarten through third grade. Words and music by Gail Avery Halverson, directed by Tina Cole, musical direction by Kenna Shelton.

**When:** 2 p.m. March 16

**Where:** Hiram Johnson High School Theater, 6879 14th Ave.

**Information:** [www.jlsac.org](http://www.jlsac.org) or (916) 437-1649