



A hands-on approach



Bruce Weaver keeps alive the art of ventriloquist

**STORY BY DERRICK EK
PHOTOS BY ERIC WENSEL**

After so many years together, Bruce Weaver can't help but use the phrases "we" and "us" when he refers to himself

and his puppets, such as Sheldon, Sparky, Aunt Gabby or Edgar J. Woodley. Might seem a little nutty perhaps, but that kind of blurred reality is the mark of a good ventriloquist.

"The hardest part," Weaver says, "is being able to have a conversation with yourself, and be two separate people at the same time. It's something you really have to keep working at."

Weaver, 57, is a ventriloquist from tiny Knoxville, PA., about 30 miles southwest of Corning. As far as he knows, he's the only ventriloquist in the area. He has been honing his craft since age 10, when he got a Jerry Mahoney "dummy" for Christmas. A couple of years later, Bruce and Jerry were performing in schools, churches and libraries around town.

Weaver wound up teaching at an Elementary school in Westfield, Pa. For 35 years, retiring this June. His act was always a crowd pleaser in classrooms and assemblies, and he began moonlighting as a children's entertainer.

In the early '80s, he graduated from the Maher Studios School of Ventriloquism and went "pro," booking gigs all over the Twin Tiers. He now has a van full of props, is always dreaming up new material and has assembled a cast of roughly 20 characters.

"Most of them, I look at the figure and imagine what kind of personality they would have, and then try to come up with the voice," Weaver said. "It's not really that easy. The best way to do it is to actually have a character in mind before you buy a figure or a puppet to use."

Like many ventriloquists, Weaver's show is mostly a comedy routine, and not just deceiving the audience by throwing voices.



Pictured above, Weaver wows his young audience during a recent show at the Savona Free Library

While much of his routine is scripted, there is always room for improvisation. Last week, while performing his new "Dragons, Jesters, and Wizards" show at the Savona Free library, Stewart the

Dragon blew a plume of smoke in the air. It accidentally set off an ear-piercing fire alarm and brought the show to a screeching halt.

"It's given us a new line," Weaver said. "Now when I do the thing with the dragon, he always looks up at the ceiling. And I say, "What are you looking for?" And he says, "Smoke detector." Sometimes you can't explain what's funny. But it gets a laugh.

Some of Weaver's sidekicks have been spotted in public over the years. Once Edgar J. Woodley ordered up a meal at McDonald's

"The lady behind the counter, she never batted an eye," Weaver said. "Edgar talked to her, gave her the whole order, and she said 'Is that all?' And Edgar said, 'you must talk to a lot of dummies here,' and she rolled her eyes and said, 'You have no idea.'"

Another time back in late 60s, Weaver was buying some new clothes for Jerry Mahoney at JC Penney's. After paying the bill and walking out to the parking lot, he set Jerry down, unlocked his car and took off. Weaver was five miles down the road before he realized that Jerry wasn't with him. When he returned to the parking lot, Jerry was gone.

"I flagged down a cop and said, 'I've lost my dummy,' which must have sounded a little strange, so he put me in his cruiser," Weaver said.

The police officer had no idea how to deal with the situation. Just then, though, a call from the dispatcher came over the radio about a lady who had found a suitcase with some kind of valuable-looking puppet in it.

Each summer, Weaver travels to the Vent Haven ConVENTion, which draws about 400 or 500 ventriloquists to Fort Mitchell, Ky. to celebrate their art form

and share tricks of the trade. There are open mics, merchandise galore, and appearances by vent legends like Jimmy Neslon and his dog Farfel.

Nearby is the Vent Haven Museum, with a collection of 700 eerily silent characters whose ventriloquists are now retired or passed away, such as Charlie McCarthy, sidekick of famous vent Edgar Bergen.

On October 30, 1938, Bergen's radio show aired opposite Orson Welles' infamous "War of the Worlds" broadcast, which sent the American public into a panic, thinking aliens were invading Earth. Because so many people were tuned into Bergen's show instead, he has been credited with helping to prevent even more hysteria. However, some people listening to Bergen that night switched stations and tuned in during the middle of Welles' broadcast, missing the disclaimer in the opening credits. They heard a "reporter" frantically describing the utter annihilation of earth at the hands of space aliens.

Gone are the days when ventriloquists appeared regularly on the Ed Sullivan Show on CBS, the epicenter of American pop culture at the time. But the craft is still "very much alive" Weaver says, and he plans to carry on the tradition in the Twin Tiers as "long as I can."

"I like to make kids laugh," Weaver said. "I like to make adults laugh, too. I just get a good feeling if it seems like the audience is blown away and they had a good time."

Bruce Weaver's next show is scheduled for 10 a.m. August 3 at the Mansfield (Pa.) Free Public Library.

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