

LOCAL

Keller makes theater debut

Mary Grace Keller, a 2003 Kings Mountain High School graduate, made her New York theater debut over the weekend.



KELLER

Keller, an understudy, played the lead in matinee performances of "The Ecstasy in the Light." Her parents Darrell and Pamela Keller of Kings Mountain were in the audience for both performances.

Keller is finishing her second year at The School for Film and Television. She was among 128 students to be admitted from a field of 6,800. The school allowed its second year students to begin auditioning for parts in December. This was Keller's first audition. She will transfer to Aldelphi University in the fall to complete a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

Earlier Keller was the second runner up in sitcom competition for the International Model and Talent Association competition. She attended Barbezoon Acting School in Charlotte and was a cast member in the KMHS performance of "Oklahoma."

Keller's performance this weekend was part of "No Worries," an evening of cabaret and theater. The performance benefitted CureSearch, the National Childhood Cancer Foundation. The performance was presented by the Wait Company and Outback Steakhouse.



Travel counselors Lois Self, left, and Linda Cabiness and Manager Donna Williams are proud of the expansion and renovations at the North Carolina Welcome Center on northbound Interstate 85.

Welcome Center expansion doubles visitor service area

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
Staff Writer

Motorists entering North Carolina may not want to go any further than the newly renovated visitor's center on northbound Interstate 85.

The center recently wrapped up a 10-month expansion project doubling its visitor service area and tripling brochure storage capacity. The wood burning fireplace is now gas. Thermal pane windows replace the conventional glass meaning a warmer, quieter building. The large screen television is connected to cable bringing up-to-the minute weather reports and news.

The center serves as many travelers first impression of North Carolina, according to Manager Donna Williams. She calls her staff of four travel counselors and one maintenance man "ambassadors."

Business travelers typically make up most of the traffic during the first of the week. Vacationing families stop in usually at the end of the week. The senior citizen RV season is in full swing now, according to Williams.

Many folks want advice on restaurants and museums. The Ava Gardner Museum in Johnson County is one of the more popular. Other top destinations include Charlotte, Old Salem, Biltmore House, Raleigh and Durham. The coast's famed lighthouses are on many travelers' itineraries.

Because of the staff's expertise and the

free maps, brochures and other travel guides, fourth-grade students working on a required North Carolina project often visit the center.

The welcome center is a haven for parents traveling with small children. They can come inside, warm a baby bottle and let the little one crawl on the carpeted floor.

Other times staff lend a sympathetic ear with travelers who are on their way to visit a loved one in the hospital or attend a funeral.

"We just sit and listen to them," Williams said. "You don't have two days alike."

Linda Cabiness, who joined the staff five months ago, is studying materials on North Carolina's coast. Her training will continue with more materials on the piedmont and mountains.

State tourism officials and cities and towns from across the state regularly email updates on events. New brochures arrive often.

"We have a lot of reading to do," Williams said. "We have to be familiar with everything in North Carolina."

Travel counselors alert the public to road closings and detours. They'll also assist with making hotel reservations.

The center is one of nine located at interstates along North Carolina's state lines. It's open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days a week with the exception of New Years Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Bennett gets acting break

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
Staff Writer

As a seventh grader at Kings Mountain Middle School Alex Bennett acted in a school production of "The Music Man."



BENNETT

"Something happened. I knew I wanted to be an actor," he said.

Bennett had found his niche on stage though his parents thought it was a phase. By his junior year in high school, Rick and Ann Bennett realized their son was serious. They helped him get an agent.

Bennett started small, starting in a low budget driver's education video for the state of South Carolina. Since then Bennett has worked as a promotional model for Dewalt Tire, working booths at NASCAR races. He's also been selected as a hair model for American Crew.

Last summer Bennett got a break. He played Brodie Jenkins' love interest in a music video.

"I got paid for kissing a beautiful girl on camera," he said.

When school resumed Bennett was a minor celebrity at UNC-Greensboro, even

getting e-mail from strangers. He says that was "kind of good, kind of strange."

Bennett recently auditioned as a background singer for a boy band. Aaron Carter, brother of Back Street Boy Nick Carter, is spearheading the project.

For the past two years, Bennett has studied acting at UNC-Greensboro. Initially he was skeptical of the deep breathing, relaxation and yoga exercises prescribed by his instructors. Practice convinced him differently.

"It makes sense when you realize your body is an instrument," he said.

Bennett would leave acting classes emotionally drained. Instructors pushed students to feel what they were portraying.

"Acting is not acting, it's being," Bennett said.

Though he's taking next year off from school to pursue commercials and soap opera parts in Los Angeles, Bennett remains a believer in education.

"I'm never going to stop taking classes," he said.

Film and Broadway are Bennett's ultimate goals, though getting there could take years, Bennett realizes.

"I could be secure in other fields but I wouldn't be happy," he said.

Photo courtesy Terry Ehrlich



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

These KMMS students promote the CCS Character Trait of self discipline. Left to right, front row, McKenzie Blalock, Ashley Ray, Ashton Orders, Kierra Gardner; middle row Evan Anthony, Angelica Yopez, Brittany Ellis, Terrance Young, Matt Boheler; back row Justin Boyd, Ben Wilson, Rebecca Duncan, Chris Byrd, Taylor Gettys.

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Don Elmore.....Publisher
delmore@kingsmountainherald.com

Gary Stewart.....Editor
gstewart@kingsmountainherald.com

Andie Brymer.....Staff Writer
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