



Marty Hennem Life's a stage, and 'everyone matters'

By Shawn Cyr

Marty Hennem has always considered herself a bit of an outsider.

"I'm not a native, and I feel different," said Hennem, who was born in Africa but has spent most of her life in New England. "But I've felt different my entire life.

"That's why I like working with teenagers so much. They feel different."

Born on a mission station in Mount Selinda, Zimbabwe – in an "actual house," she says: "There were huts and chickens and goats and only

running water for an hour a day" – Hennem has dedicated her life to making helping adolescents discover the arts – and themselves.

"She just wove this magic creative web and made everyone feel so welcome and excited," said Nelly Calhoun, who first met Hennem when she attended her Creative Arts at Keene (C.A.K.E.) summer camp when she was 8. "She's so fun, and she just has such a great energy.

"She has a great way of making you feel like you're the only one in the room."

Officially, Hennem is the artistic director of theater and C.A.K.E. at MoCo Arts in Keene.

"My real name is Martha," she said. "It's important to my parents."

Unofficially, she's the daughter of a doctor (her father) and a teacher (her mother) who grew up knowing the importance of community service, and now has occasional trouble saying "no." She's the mother of two children of her own – Taylor, 12, and Mia, 10 – and three adult-age stepchildren. She's the wife of husband Vaughan, who is 17 years older than her and the result of the world's best blind date.

"We are a New Hampshire version of 'Modern Family,'" Hennem, 49, said with a laugh. "We're a Monadnock Region version of that ... a little bit less outrageous, but a little outrageous."

She's the vice president (and former president) of the PTA at Symonds School. She's active in her church, the United Church of Christ in Keene, and several other community organizations. She loves to travel, and to read; she holds a monthly book club at her house. She's hosted both Keene Swamp Bats players and Antioch New England University graduate students. She and her friend Kathy Blair organize a drive every six months or so to collect a shipment of goods – "bikes, soccer balls, everything" – to be sent to the orphanage in Mount Selinda.

"I think what I like most though, is just being with people," she said with a smile that rarely fades off her face. "That's the thing that makes me happiest. I should like to exercise, but I don't. I exercise, but I don't like it."

At MoCo, she organizes and leads an afterschool program, or actually two: one for 8- to 12-year-olds, and another for 12- to 18-year-olds – and she oversees C.A.K.E., a program she founded when she moved to Keene from the Boston area 13 years ago.

"We have students that are incredibly talented, that are really pursuing this as a possible career," said Hennem. "And we have students who are first-timers. And everyone gets a part. Everyone matters."

Everyone matters. Spend a little time with Hennem and it's easy to see that this isn't just a throw-away phrase. It's everything.

"Every time we do a performance, or each time we have a summer camp, you're creating a new community," she said. "You're starting fresh with the importance of making sure that everyone knows they matter, because they do. And that everyone can make it a better place, and they can."

She introduces children and teenagers to the arts – singing, dancing, writing – in a way that inspires everyone from young boys and girls with dreams of international fame dancing in their heads to angst-ridden teenagers who are only at camp because their parents made them go. And more often than not, the people who leave the program at its completion are much different than those who came.

"It's unbelievable," Hennem said. "It really is. The growth of the kid who you know had no self-confidence getting up (on stage), and even the baby steps are just as miraculous."

She's traveling this summer to see a couple of her former students perform professionally. But, truth be told, she's just as proud of the ones who chose a different path entirely. People like Jason.

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"This one boy, Jason, came with his hat pulled down in the beginning of camp and was like, 'I don't want to,'" she said. "Jason ended up being a counselor there. Jason ended up studying music. Jason's now a Marine, but I know that music is going to be an important part of his life forever."

It's no wonder C.A.K.E. has grown from eight staff members and around 30 campers at its inception to more than 30 staffers and anywhere from 130 to 150 adolescents.

"She just has this incredible magnetic energy," said Calhoun, who's majoring in arts management at Emerson College in hopes of one day establishing a career like Hennem's.

In fact, when Calhoun – a Harrisville native who's now 22 years old – was looking at colleges, Hennem assisted her in her search.

"If I ever need advice or if I ever need a mentor or just a listening ear, she's the person I call," Calhoun said. Truth be told, there is one thing Hennem won't profess much allegiance to.

"Laundry is the bane of my existence," she said with yet another smile. "It is such a pain in the rear end. ... I don't mind washing and folding; it's the putting away that I can't stand.

"My house looks like a bomb went off sometimes, and laundry doesn't get done, but who cares?" Maybe she's not so much of an outsider after all.