

Precision performer

Pursuing her desire to dance leads Grand Island native to Rockette gigs

By Carol Bryant

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NEW YORK -- If you close your eyes in Radio City Music Hall during its Christmas Spectacular, you'll hear just single taps.

But open your eyes, and you'll discover that 36 Rockettes, including Grand Island native Karen Mettenbrink-Kasteel, are dancing. She uses Karen Kasteel as her stage and legal name.

Kasteel is performing for the second year at Radio City Music Hall and has been a Rockette since 1997, when she started performing with the group in Las Vegas.

"We are 36 individuals. We're all working as one. That's what you hear with the tapping," she said. "One of the most amazing things about being a Rockette performing at Radio City is getting the opportunity to perform on one of the greatest stages, and most stunning, in the country.

"To hear 6,000 people cheering for us each and every show gives me chills. No matter how exhausted I am, even if it's the 19th show of the week, those 6,000 audience members keep me going."

The Rockettes have starred in the Christmas Spectacular for nearly 70 years. The nine-scene show starts with a video tribute to the Rockettes' 75th anniversary, then displays a 3-D film of a ride through Manhattan on Santa's sleigh. The show progresses from the Rockettes appearing in "The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers" to the final scene, "The Living Nativity,"

Kasteel, 31, graduated from Northwest High School in 1988. During high school, she wasn't a cheerleader or drill team member because she wanted to focus on dance lessons. She did participate in show choir, musicals and A Cappella singers.

"Growing up, a lot of people thought I was absolutely crazy for thinking I would go off and be a dancer in New York," she said. "I always had a dream. I wanted to make it happen. If you want to go out and do something, you can make it happen."

Kasteel earned a degree in dance at Oklahoma City University in 1992. One hundred people were accepted into the program, and 11 students, including Kasteel, graduated. A lot of the others came from larger cities with very strong dance programs and had taken lessons daily. Kasteel's skill level was behind what other students had.

"I really had to focus on gaining the background there. They trained us very rigorously," Kasteel said. "My technical level increased tremendously.

"Choosing a career in dance is very tough. They want to make sure you're ready for it. They don't baby you at all. Their technical training is some of the best in the country. I soaked it up like a sponge."

When she was auditioning for parts in college, others stumbled with the Mettenbrink name.

"It just didn't ring," she said.

Because dancing is so competitive, she wanted a name that people would remember, so she chose Kasteel.

After college, Kasteel's first job was with Norwegian Cruise Lines. Destinations included the Panama Canal, Costa Rica and Mexico.

"In those two years, I traveled so much," she said.

Kasteel then moved to Las Vegas, where she appeared in the dinner show "Conga" and auditioned for "EFX," which starred Michael Crawford, famous for performing in "Phantom of the Opera." Kasteel also worked with magician Lance Burton.

She joined the Rockettes' "The Great Radio City Spectacular" in Las Vegas in June 1997 and continued there until July 2000. She then auditioned for the Rockettes' Radio City Christmas Spectacular and was selected to perform in New York with them in 2000 and again this year.

The New York show has two casts, each with 36 Rockettes. Each cast performs a maximum of four shows per day.

"As a dancer, you stay in shape year-round," she said.

Her cast began rehearsing for this year's show on Nov. 6. They rehearsed from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. six days a week. Their first performance was Nov. 21. Since then, most of her time is spent at work, and she has one day off weekly.

"Most of my days off are spent resting," she said. "Because it's so physically demanding, you don't want to tire out your body. Your body really needs as much sleep and rest as you can get."

Kasteel has to audition for the Rockettes annually and keeps her life open for other performance possibilities.

"You have one life to live. If an opportunity comes along that you want to take advantage of, you should do so," she said.

When Kasteel was young, she watched the Rockettes perform on TV during Macy's Thanksgiving Day parades. When she was a senior in college, she knew other students who auditioned for the Rockettes.

"I love the beauty that we create. When you see the precision, there's this beauty to it. I love knowing that I'm part of that. The other thing I really love is the kids out there. It reminds me of being little," she said. "When I'm in the rehearsal hall, we have a lot of photos of the legacy of the Rockettes. I've met former Rockettes. I think I'm carrying on their tradition."

Kasteel's mother and sister, Amy, watched her in the Christmas Spectacular this month.

"Last year, Dad came, too," she said.

Kasteel is one of two former Grand Island residents who have performed recently with the Rockettes. Becky Berstler has appeared with the Rockettes in Branson, Mo., and Chicago and is now appearing on Broadway in "42nd Street."

"We both danced with Billie (Anderson)," Kasteel said. Berstler also attended Oklahoma City University and got tips from the older Kasteel when she was planning to attend college there. Kasteel saw Berstler perform in "42nd Street" this month.

"She's very talented. She's worked so hard," Kasteel said. "She came from the same background I did. She's really made a name for herself."

After this year's Christmas Spectacular concludes, Kasteel plans to return to Las Vegas, where she owns a home and will start work as a real estate agent.

"I would like to continue working with the Rockettes and performing with their Christmas Spectacular on a yearly basis," she said. "Dancing and performing have been my life. They are my heart and soul as well as my passion. No matter what happens in my future, I will always dance. I simply can't imagine life without it in some way or another."