

This owner is ruler of a popular puppet regime

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"She takes ordinary items and turns them into something extraordinary," said Anne Robe, a kindergarten teacher at Clear Springs Elementary School in Minnetonka. "It's amazing how she can hold the attention of 45 young kids."

Anne Miller, a kindergarten teacher at Rice Lake Elementary in Lino Lakes, agreed, saying: "With her voices and her body movements, she sort of wraps the kids around herself."

It might not be work to Gartland, 51, but it surely is a business — albeit not what you'd call a gold mine.

"I average about \$40,000 a year, and I've done as much as \$50,000," said Gartland, who charges \$140 for a 45-minute show. "But last year was kind of slow; I grossed only \$32,000."

Nevertheless, it's still better than she did in 12 years of teaching kindergarten and preschool and it's a welcome supplement to her husband's salary as a Lutheran minister.

Merlajean and her puppets have been residing at the Gartland home in Long Lake, but they'll soon move to Lakeville, where her husband, Steve, is the pastor of a new church.

The Parading Puppets grew out of Gartland's search for new, more-interesting ways to engage her preschool classes. One day she spotted a book on finger puppets at the public library, took it home and made a handful of puppets — literally.

"I made one for each finger — a hen, a pig, a duck, a cat and a mouse — for the story of the Little Red Hen," said Gartland, who debuted the act in

front of her class of 3-year-olds. She was amazed by the reaction.

"They were mesmerized," she said. "And when I was done, they still sat there without a sound." Most parents of preschoolers will recognize that as a genuine miracle.

The kids didn't stay mesmerized for long, however. So Gartland headed back to the library in search of new characters for her stories, ending up with a book on clothespin puppets and adapting some of them to a story of the Three Little Pigs. Later she added stick puppets and expanded her storytelling roster.

The classroom project became a business in 1987, when, for a project in a license-recertification class, she brought a dozen puppets to show other teachers how they could

be used in the classroom. After class, she was swamped with requests to give shows and demonstrations at schools around the metro area, and a business was born.

Gartland tries to gear her shows to the audiences, which can range from toddlers to sixth-graders, offering a variety of themes ranging from insects and food to love stories and fairy tales to parent-and-child stories. She also has shows designed for Halloween, Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day.

And a big part of the attraction: "I always try to include puppets the kids can make themselves," from paper bags or scissors, oatmeal boxes or milk cartons, she said. How does she keep all the material straight?

"I have a great memory for songs

MERLAJEAN'S PARADING PUPPETS

Business: Uses puppets to tell stories to children at Twin Cities-area schools, day-care centers, libraries and churches

Founded: 1987

Executive: Merlajean Gartland

Headquarters: The Gartland home in Long Lake until later this summer, when the family is moving to Lakeville

Website: www.mjpuppet.com

Employees: One

2005 revenue: \$32,000, down from an average of about \$40,000

and stories," Gartland said. "I'm not so good at remembering to drop off the dry cleaning or pick up the kids."

Dick Youngblood • 612-673-4439 •
yblood@startribune.com