

Puppets

TEXT BY RICHARD ROSENGARTEN/PHOTOS
COURTESY DONNA KATZ AND RITA HERMAN

On a bright November day, before the winter got too serious, Donna Katz had a glint in her eyes. Spread before her were the fruits of her labor. She flipped through a heavy three-ring binder. There was the picture of the woman in the sun costume, there of Amy from Homekey Street. Another page. The magic of theater, captured images of children learning, overcoming obstacles and disabilities. Katz's home, nestled in Squirrel Hill, receives the sunlight through a large window pane. The pages of the photo album shined beneath the glossy laminate as the sun gleaned off the polished table, but none were brighter than Katz's smile, which grew with each page of the album.

Last year, in late October, Katz and her partner Rita Herman (of Pitt's class of '58) dazzled hundreds at the Technology and Learning (T+L) Conference in Seattle, a forum where educators nationwide came for workshops and to consider new educational tools and products for purchase. Katz and Herman showcased their product, Keyboard Town PALS, an interactive DVD that teaches children to type in one hour. KTP has been long in the making. Even longer, it seems, in the launching. But Katz and Herman, ages 63 and 72 respectively, are as patient as they are enthusiastic. Both have helped turn an inspired idea and a backyard puppet show into a masterpiece of theater and creativity.

"To teach them the 30 keys on the keyboard - that was our intention," Katz said.

"PALS" stands for the Purposeful Associative Learning System. It describes the associative teaching techniques Katz and Herman use in KTP. Puppets, live actors, rhyme, mnemonic, and songs teach children mastery of the keyboard - they learn proper fingering as they watch the video and type the letters.

Visit KeyboardTownPALS.com and give the program a try. You'll discover Keyboard Town, a colorful wall panel with doors arranged like the keys on a keyboard. Puppets pop out of each one and introduce themselves, each representing a letter. Children follow the story of Keyboard Town, and as they meet each resident, they learn a new key.

"Questions, questions, questions!" shouts Qbert, the wizard puppet that pops out from behind the letter Q. Each puppet is different, and each - like the zebras that come out of the letter Z - will make sure you remember where your fingers go. The pairs of letters typed with the same finger, are twins.

The style and humor of the production come from Katz's and Herman's cultural experiences of nearly three quarters of a century. The puppets pop out of the doors of Keyboard Town much like in the late '60s-early '70s hit show "Laugh-In" - abruptly, with something funny to say or sing. The celebrity voices and musical numbers recall how the cartoons of yesteryear familiarized a generation with classical music, how the early Disney movies abound in sharp adult references. Children today might not know who Woody Allen is (gasp), but the figures imitated are iconic for a reason. When something's good, it's good. Jimmy Durante is the semicolon. The period is JFK.

The fact that KTP is overseen by the former production team of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" comes with little surprise, no less than that the flawlessly delivered celebrity voices are those of Jeff Bergman, the elusive voice actor for Bugs Bunny and countless other classic Warner Bros./Hannah Barbera cartoons.

It was from modest beginnings that Katz and Herman acquired their all-star cast. The story has its beginnings in a loss, when Herman's husband Emil passed away at the close of the millennium. Searching for a new direction, Herman sought work at the Falk School, where the faculty were having trouble teaching a girl with Asperger's syndrome how to write.

Herman accepted the challenge, armed with 30 years of teaching experience, ready with purpose and her imagination. All traditional methods were failing. "I brought some puppets thinking, you know, let's make this a little more interesting," Herman said. After four fifteen-minute sessions with Herman, this child was typing the lyrics of Disney songs and her feelings about her recently deceased grandfather.



It dawned on Herman that typing was a vehicle for creative expression as much as writing and it only took her an hour, collectively, to teach the girl with Asperger's how to do it. "We discovered that the computer is a good friend to the child," Herman said.

Until her recent remarriage and move to Botson, Herman lived in Squirrel Hill. At the time she was teaching the girl with Asperger's, she had no cable, no internet, used her rotary phone occasionally. She did have Katz, a fellow educator and friend of 30 years. Herman called Katz to ask for help writing e-mails and contacting a few people to talk about her idea to use puppets for typing instruction. Soon the two of them were plotting, formulating plans that would turn Keyboard Town PALS into what it is today. "We always had a cause," Herman said. "This time it's ours," said Katz.

