

ATHENS BANNER-HERALD



Kelly Lambert/Staff

Magician Keith Karnok puts on a magic show for children recently at the Athens-Clarke County Library. Karnok, a University of Georgia professor, also is a professional magician and ventriloquist.

HE'S A MAGIC MAN

Professor uses act to show kids the importance of reading

By Chris Starrs
Correspondent

Watkinsville resident Keith Karnok is perhaps one of the University of Georgia's most decorated professors, receiving more than 25 honors, including the prestigious Josiah Meigs Award for Excellence in Teaching.

But Karnok, who has taught in UGA's College of Agriculture for 26 years, has an intriguing side

occupation that in many ways is an extension of his work in the classroom.

Karnok, a professional magician and ventriloquist, often is a guest for shows at local libraries.

"Most of the shows I do have a theme, like 'Say No To Drugs,' reading, attitude, history and even agriculture," said Karnok, who refers to himself as an "Edutainment Specialist." "I try to build tricks around the common theme,

which is where the teaching part comes out. It's a good combination.

"I really get into the reading shows because it's critical, especially for young people, to understand the importance of reading. I show a lot of different books and do tricks related to those books. At the end, the kids are always interested in looking at the magic books. It's fun and educational."

The author of more than 275 articles related to his scientific field

and two children's books, Karnok recalled that he was bitten by the magic bug at the age of 12.

"It's been a hobby I've always enjoyed," he said. "A friend showed me a trick and it intrigued me, which is how it usually works. Some people see a magic trick and they think it's just a trick. But for others, like me, it triggers something that makes you want to get involved. I guess that did it for me."

Today's aspiring magicians can

learn the craft through a number of media, but Karnok's education came primarily from reading books, periodicals and observing fellow conjurers. He's still learning new tricks through his association with the International Brotherhood of Magicians, the Society of American Magicians and Kidabra, a group devoted to magic performances for families.

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Kelly Lambert/Staff

Magician Keith Karnok reads from a book during a recent performance at the Athens-Clarke County Library.

PROFESSOR LIKES TO INCORPORATE MAGIC DURING HIS CLASSES from Page 1

Karnok — who with his wife, Melanie, has four grown children and three grandchildren — said magicians have taken advantage of 21st century technology to enhance their shows, but he added the fundamentals still rule the bottom line.

“The basics and principles have always been the same,” said Karnok, who has performed hundreds of times through the years at schools, libraries and parties. “Sleight of hand and misdirection have not changed. Technology has changed — a lot of magicians are utilizing technology and electronics, but you’ve got to know the basics first and it’s the basics that people still enjoy the most.”

Although he’s been interested in magic for most of his life, Karnok didn’t start ventriloquism until about five years ago, when he began

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picking up on the idea that folks didn’t want to see magic shows involving live animals (like the rabbit coming out of the hat).

“It seemed to me that rather than going that (animal) route, I’d try something different,” he said. “I took a home-study course four or five years ago and have put in a lot of practice. I’ve gotten

to the point where I think I’m pretty decent, and I’ve got a long way to go, but I’m getting better.”

Karnok’s primary ventriloquist character is a sassy bird named Vern, who generally makes his appearance near the end of the show. Karnok said he’s developing other characters, but added it takes time to create the persona and — more importantly — the voice for a new personality.

“I’m still developing Vern, but my goal is to have two (puppets) going at once, with me being the mediator,” he said. “It takes a lot of time and a lot of practice.”

The veteran professor was quick to point out that he doesn’t let his magic and ventriloquism interfere with his

work at UGA, adding that he usually performs on weekends and during the summer. But he said performing informs his teaching, and vice-versa.

“I mostly do (magic shows) when I’m not teaching,” he said. “And I often like to use magic in the classroom to make certain points or to get students’ attention on things that might not be terribly interesting. (Shows have) helped me be a better teacher, especially where my delivery is concerned.”

For more information on Karnok, visit www.keithmagician.com.

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