

A special role

Young actress in 'Shrek the Musical' makes a point of reaching out to children with special needs and challenges

By Joe Burris
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First Danielle Soibelman handed out green toy ears similar to those of the animated character Shrek, saying that she wanted each of the assembled students at the Glen Burnie Children's Guild looking "Shrekdafied."

Then the 11-year-old actress from Los Angeles, who plays young Fiona in "Shrek the Musical," offered a behind-the-scenes look at the production being performed at the Hippodrome through Sunday, April 3. She even showed the students a few choreographed moves from the musical about an ogre and his friends.

Soibelman was a big hit at the school, which is part of a nonprofit organization that educates and serves children with special needs, including those with autism and multiple disabilities.

But what the students might not have known is that they are a big hit with Soibelman. A preteen whose sense of compassion for those less fortunate far exceeds her age, she takes time during the tour to reach out to children with physical and emotional challenges.

"If I can't do [acting], or maybe when I get a little older, I might want to work in a school wherever I live and be a drama teacher for children with special needs," said Soibelman.

"When my brother was younger, he had some social and emotional challenges," said Soibelman. "I saw his friends, and I became friends with them and children with special needs at my school. I saw how they were treated, and I couldn't stand it."

Soibelman has been acting since age 7, starting out in community theater before moving onto television and film. She has *See **ACTRESS**, page 2*

performed in more than 20 other theater productions, including "Annie" and "Ragtime," and she has performed in such television series as "Saving Grace" and "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?"

She is a member of Actors for Autism, a performing arts organization that provides opportunities for individuals with disabilities, and she seeks to serve the organization while on tour.

"I thought, 'What better way than to go to schools for children with autism and share "Shrek" with them?' " said Soibelman. " 'Shrek' has such a great message of being different and how differences make you special and unique."

Andrew Ross, CEO and president of the Children's Guild, said Soibelman contacted the organization after visiting its website. "If you ever wonder what talent really means, all you need to do is stand here and watch the way she interacts with the children, the way she comes alive and they respond to her; the way she is so authentic as a person," he said.

"Her mother told me that even at a very young age, she would stick up for the kids that were just different, or had a disability, on the playground," Ross added. "That's pretty impressive coming from an 11-year-old."

Soibelman visited three groups of students at the Children's Guild, showing them how musical stage props work as well as how makeup artists transform her into character.

She then taught students dance moves performed in the musical to the Monkees song "I'm a Believer." Students and teachers kept up with her every move.

"Shrek the Musical" tours through July, making stops in such cities as Cincinnati, New Orleans and Charlotte, N.C., before concluding in Los Angeles. Soibelman says she plans to visit schools in each area.

"It's an exciting experience even though it's kind of sad leaving home," said Soibelman, who signed on for the musical in December. "I'm having a great time, and we've all been able to balance it out and figure out how we're going to do this, and we made it work."

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Actress Danielle Soibelman, 11, pays a visit to the Children's Guild to talk about being a performer.



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"Shrek" actress Danielle Soibelman, 11, shows students at the Children's Guild pictures of how her makeup is applied.