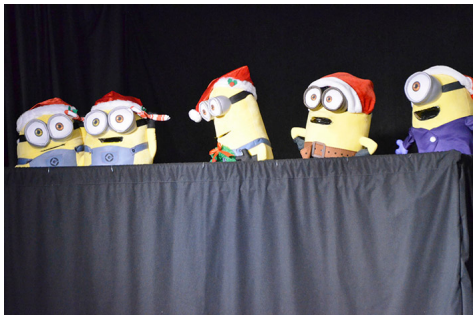
Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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The children’s play was held at The Door Gallup Christian Fellowship Church

The spirit of Christmas is expressed in many ways: through music, through kind gestures, and even through a simple children’s play.

A Despicable Me Christmas was held at The Door Gallup Christian Fellowship Church on Christmas Eve. This was a funny play with a spiritual spin, based on the popular film. Children of the church acted it out for a packed audience.

The play was performed by kids ranging from ages four to 12. A professional set was constructed, with puppets and a black light show also supporting the handful of children dressed in costume singing numbers from the movie.

Tony Vitali, who oversees the Children's Ministry of the church, has been organizing the plays since 1999. Vitali was intrigued with the idea one day and that was all it took.

"I thought hmm, this looks kind of interesting, and I've been doing it ever since," Vitali said.

He says it takes a lot of planning, lots of prayer, and patience, but it always comes out smoothly at the end. The entire process is done with a team that is involved from the beginning. The team helps to choose the play by considering what is popular at the moment, and then deciding what to use and go from there.

"We get a sort of idea, and for example we did the play *Frozen* and did a different spin on it," Vitali said. "It depends on the children too, we get different kids each year and they are all talented. Every year you don't know what we are going to get, some can sing, some are shy, and we help with that. It's challenging and fun at the same time."

With *Frozen*, the approach involved individuals with frozen hearts, who could not feel love nor give it. For this year's *A Despicable Me*, the church reimagined the popular characters by giving them a condition that turns them evil. The only cure is to hear the true meaning of Christmas.

Past plays have taken inspiration from *Star Wars*, *Frozen*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and so many others.

Vitali said it takes a lot of practice and is challenging work for everyone, especially the kids, since they have to perform the final effort in front of their families and friends.

Vitali said they just work with what they are presented, and that's the beauty of it.

"We are blessed with the kids, to have them perform and simply just have faith that all will go well, and it always does," he said.

Other adults also lend a hand in the whole production, like Cheri Bertinetti, who has been an active member since 1976 and has always been involved with the activities with the church.

“I’ve always been involved with children, whether it’s Sunday school or children’s church, it’s my heart,” Bertinetti said.

Another church member, Roberta Yellowhorse, said it’s a lot of fun and quite exciting not knowing what you’re getting yourself into. Starting in 1981, Roberta Yellowhorse has been lending a hand to the productions.

“I was asked one time to help out and not knowing what was involved with it. I soon found myself contributing to these plays,” Yellowhorse said.

Although the tiny actors are kids, the total production from the beginning to the end is so phenomenal and polished, one would think a professional acting troupe was brought in from Los Angeles. The sets are masterfully created, thanks to the handiwork of Leo Lucero, who also was asked to help one day.

Along with constructing the sets and backdrops, Lucero works with black lights. He finds the work all worthwhile even if one person gets the message of the play.

“The best part in working with these plays is seeing the people respond to the message that is given in each play,” Lucero said. “If it’s just one person or multiple people hearing the message, then it’s totally worth it, it’s what we strive for.”

Audience member Dion Calabaza said the play was surprisingly funny, and made special note of the theatrics involved, especially the black light performance.

“I couldn’t believe these were little kids doing all this, I was left with my mouth open, and it was nice to see a play like this on Christmas Eve,” Calabaza said. “But I was totally blown away with their black light show, they definitely gave an outstanding performance.”

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