

# Getting into the Act

Hudson Benzing

Thirteen-year-old Hudson Benzing demonstrates the range that's helped him win parts in several local theatrical productions.

by Janina Birtolo

**H**udson Benzing is a young man with big dreams. There's nothing unusual about that—except that Benzing is well on his way to making those dreams a reality. Only thirteen years old, the Cape Coral youngster has appeared in close to a dozen professional shows at the Naples and Broadway Palm dinner theaters, and not just in bit parts. He's played young Tommy in the rock opera of that name, Charlie in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, and young Patrick in *Mame*. He was also one of fifty finalists to appear on Nickelodeon's "Funniest Kid in America" contest.

"My favorite was *Mame*, because I had to do all the shows, so I got to know the people really well," Benzing says. "I like playing different characters. It's fun to act out in front of people."

Born into an acting family, Benzing accepts all this as natural. Of his two



brothers and two sisters, all but one act. His mother, Gerrie, was an actor and drama teacher. She also wrote *Going Home*, the monologue Benzing performed to win the Young Artists Awards 2005, a scholarship event tied to the annual Edison Festival of Light.

"It's about a kid in a mental institution, who's trying to convince the doctors he's well enough to go home," Benzing says of the monologue. "But he often forgets who he is and goes into different characters."

The 2004–2005 season was a particu-



larly busy one for Benzing. He typically does only one or two shows during the school year. This year he did five. "I think I want to do this [as a career]," he says. "This year really determined that. I really think I can go somewhere with it. I'm getting to that [awkward] age where there aren't a lot of parts for me, but I'm going to try to go out for bigger things."

Given what he's accomplished already, it's a good bet that Benzing will find—and make the most of—those bigger things. His young star is just beginning to shine. ✎

PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BLASE

## INTERNATIONAL APPEAL



S I N C E 1 9 4 3

Atlanta	Bellevue <i>opening in 2005</i>	Oman
Beverly Hills		Marbella
Chicago	Bahrain	Taipei
Emeryville	London	Bangkok
Palo Alto	Berlin	Abu Dhabi
San Francisco	Hamburg	Al Ain
Scottsdale <i>opening in 2005</i>	Munich	Qatar <i>opening in 2005</i>
Beirut	Osaka	Dubai
	Tokyo	

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# A Passion for Community

Karen Ryan



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Karen Ryan juggles a full-time job at LCEC with a long list of volunteer commitments.

by Greg Luberecki

**K**aren Ryan would have difficulty keeping a résumé of her community volunteering efforts to a single page. She serves on the boards of the American Heart Association, Meals on Wheels, Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce, and Edison Festival of Light. She's a campaign coordinator and former board member for United Way, and she does work for the American Cancer Society, Children's Hospital, and Habitat for Humanity. Ryan also recently got involved with a strategic planning committee for Lehigh Acres—and she doesn't even live there.

Did we mention that Ryan also holds a full-time job, as public relations manager for LCEC, a not-for-profit electric distribution cooperative based in North Ft. Myers?

Friends often ask Ryan why she's involved in so much. "I can't imagine if I *didn't* do all this," she responds. "What would I do? My house would probably be a little more organized—but I'm never there anyway!"

Ryan got her first taste of the rewards of volunteering as a student at Florida's St. Leo University, where community involvement was encouraged. "I saw how just a little effort on your part can make a big difference in somebody's life," she says.

LCEC, where Ryan has worked since 1996, also encourages her volunteering. "I'm very fortunate that LCEC is so supportive of it," she says. "But I would do it anyway; it's just a passion of mine."

Ryan has instilled the same values in her eleven- and thirteen-year-old daughters, involving them in her activities since they were very young. "It's like second nature to them now," she says. "They know the meaning of community."

Last year was Ryan's first on the Edison Festival board, and she says the contributions of community members exemplified what she loves about Ft. Myers. "Every time you turned around, there were volunteers," she says. "It's what I'm so passionate about: people actually getting involved in their community and making it great." 🐾

# A Winning Attitude

LeDondrick Rowe

by Greg Luberecki

**I**n just a few years, LeDondrick Rowe, athletic director of Boys and Girls Clubs of Lee County, has built a youth sports and fitness program that serves as a national model. Area high school coaches send players to train at the Shady Oaks Community Center in Ft. Myers, where Rowe is based. College coaches even show up to scout talent. And the folks at Boys and Girls Clubs of America headquarters know Rowe's work well. "They call this site a lot for ideas," he says.

Rowe started volunteering in 2001 and took a job the next year. "We had no money, no uniforms, no equipment," he recalls. Now his program boasts nine national championships—six in fitness and three in flag football—more than any other Boys and Girls Club in the country, according to Rowe. His young athletes have met President George W. Bush and Florida Governor Jeb Bush; they've heard proclamations honoring them read on the state Senate floor. "Also, these kids receive \$1,000 scholarships for winning [a national championship]," he says.

Many youths come to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Lee County's Shady Oaks unit for athletics, but once there they benefit from its comprehensive program. While one age group jumps rope or runs laps for "Coach Dondrick," others work on character and leadership development or health and life skills. The only activity with no time limit: homework.

For teenagers, especially, who visit in the evening, the club is critical. "You know it keeps them out of trouble," says Rowe. "It gives them a chance to set goals and see that the sky's the limit for them. We can give them the attention they need to be successful."

Rowe has set up a "recognition wall" in the club's game room to display awards his youngsters have won and



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BLASE



As athletic director of Boys and Girls Clubs of Lee County, LeDondrick Rowe helps kids develop skills both on and off the playing field.

news articles about them. "Kids take pride in the program," he says. "I don't have to sell it because they do."

Keith White, director of the Shady Oaks unit, says he and Rowe have a long wish list. At the top: a facility dedicated to the club, which currently shares the community center with other local interests. That way, Rowe could "do some of the things he *really* wants to do," says White. Sounds like the sky's the limit for Rowe too. 🐾



# Soothing Through Sound

Simone Awhina



PHOTOS BY LIZ NEWMARK

During a recent visit to Sanibel, Simone Awhina demonstrated how she uses her voice to help herself and others deal with pain.

by Libby Boren McMillan

Imagine losing a fiancé and a boyfriend within the span of two years, then choosing happiness as a mantra. Holland-born Simone Awhina did just that, and she now helps others deal with pain. This talented vocalist uses sound to do so, and earlier this year, she visited Sanibel for a series of sound-healing workshops and concerts.

“It’s like going to church in a way,” she says of her concerts. “You get inspired [and] you go home and try to look at life in a different way.”

Awhina was studying Reiki (a form of energy healing) and living in New Zealand when her fiancé, Nico, died suddenly of a brain tumor. About a year later, she fell in love again, but her boyfriend, Jason, died tragically in a car accident. Returning to her native Holland, Awhina focused on music as a way to heal herself, entering singing competitions and writing songs about pain. She also sought out renowned sound healers to learn more about how one’s voice can ease physical and emotional ailments.

“I was only twenty-six and twenty-

seven when Nico and Jason died. I thought, ‘I have another seventy years to live, to have an incredible life and make my dreams come true,’ ” Awhina says. “I realized then that you can choose to have pain be part of your life, or you can choose happiness.”

During her workshops, Awhina teaches participants techniques for helping themselves and others. “Everything is made up of vibrations, and sound is a vibration,” she says. “If you have a disease or illness, the vibration is stuck, it’s stagnated. I can tune into bodies and feel where there is a stagnated vibration and start to project the right frequency to open up the stuck vibrations.”

She also performs songs from her CD *Journey Through My Soul*. “In a concert, I take people on a journey having to do with losing something, or someone, that you really love,” she says. “I create a space for people to...be totally true to their feelings....I want to show people that life has its sad moments and also its joy. We never know what tomorrow will bring.”

For more information on Simone Awhina, visit [www.simoneawhina.com](http://www.simoneawhina.com).