

Cincinnati Ballet To Honor Michelle Chalk

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Ava Rosenstiel and Michelle Chalk as toy soldiers in Cincinnati Ballet's 'The Nutcracker'

Last December, Keith and Patty Chalk's daughter, Michelle, was performing in Cincinnati's Ballet's 'The Nutcracker' as lead soldier and dragon carrier. It was a busy, but exciting, time of year for this Fort Thomas family. Parents of the Nutcracker's Kids Cast are expected to volunteer backstage, and Keith loved this work.

"My favorite memories are backstage," he says. "Watching Michelle with her friends in the holding area as she interacted with the other children. Escorting her and her group up to the wardrobe area to transform into character. Escorting her and her group to the stage, and watching the performance from the wings. Escorting them off stage, back to the wardrobe room, and back to the holding area. These young children were pros."

Michelle, a 15-year-old soon-to-be Highlands freshman, died August 1, 2017. Her father talks about the tragedy.

Getting through the days, no, hours, in a seemingly joyful month for all is difficult for many, including the Chalks. Initially, Keith and Patty weren't sure if they were going to see The Nutcracker this year. But they also wanted to see Ava Rosenstiel, a Highlands High School

freshman, and a friend of Michelle who was cast as a soldier in 2016 and 2017. They also wanted to see Jenna Harney, the daughter of Sonja Harney, the owner of Dance Express, where Michelle started to learn dance at the age of 3. **"We knew 'The Nutcracker' would be a triggering event for us,"** Keith says. **"Something that we hoped we could endure."**



Michelle Chalk, Ava Rosenstiel, Jenna Harney at the cast party for Cincinnati Ballet's 'The Nutcracker'

But then, they got an email. It was from Cincinnati Ballet.

"I read it to Patty and I could barely get through it before I broke down in tears," Keith says. "In perspective, I view the Cincinnati Ballet as a big deal. They are very professional there. From the dancers, to the musicians, to the stage hands, to the security and the ushers ... they are all professionals. I've rehearsed with 2nd Act performers and the conductor. I've worked behind the scenes. They have earned my respect. Then to have them honor my sweet daughter ... it is beyond my ability to put it into words. It is a gift beyond value. They are artists that are using their creation to honor Michelle."

This year Cincinnati Ballet is honoring Michelle's memory in 'The Nutcracker' playbill. In addition, yellow ribbons will be placed on the casting boards at all of the entrance doors to the Springer Auditorium.

"As soon as Cincinnati Ballet had heard of Michelle's tragic passing, I began the discussion with the artistic and executive teams to begin a discussion as to how to honor Michelle's memory in 'The Nutcracker' playbill," says Suzette Boyer Webb, Cincinnati Ballet's Director of Second Company.



Michelle Chalk (right) dressed as dragon carrier

Rosenstiel asked Webb if yellow ribbons could be used to help memorialize and remember Michelle. **"We were happy to determine a way to make this happen,"** Webb says.

In addition, Cincinnati Ballet gave the Chalks eight complimentary tickets to the December 20th performance of 'The Nutcracker.' **"Patty, myself, and Thomas and Robert (Michelle's brothers) will be using four of the tickets,"** Keith says. **"Two of the tickets will be used by Patty's parents (Don and Judy Baumann). The remaining two will be used by Michelle's godmother (Elizabeth Nelson) and her husband (Brent Nelson). Our extended family have purchased many more tickets for that performance."**

Cincinnati Ballet's first performance of 'The Nutcracker' took place in 1974. **"Traditionally, children have always been part of the cast, mostly performing the role of the party children and Ginger children,"** Webb says. **"In 2011, Victoria Morgan premiered her 'The Nutcracker' with casts of up to 84 children per performance."**

Michelle's first role in 'The Nutcracker' was as a party boy in 2013. **"It was in the beginning of Act I as part of the family Christmas party scene,"** Keith says. **"Most of the boys are girls wearing a short-boy-cut wig."** In 2014 and 2015, Michelle was cast as a solider. **"In the middle of Act I, the soldiers battle the mice and the nutcracker transforms into the prince,"** Keith says. **"Michelle loved play fighting with the mice."**

In 2015, Keith volunteered to be a "Ginger Dad," one of the four fathers that volunteer to dress as gingerbread men for Act II, Land of the Sweets.

And then came 2016. **"Through her hard work and coachable manner she earned the role of Lead Solider, a role typically reserved for Cincinnati Ballet Academy Students,"** Webb says. Last year she also was a dragon carrier, part of the Act II performers who animate the Chinese dragon to battle the acrobat.

Each year, rehearsals for 'The Nutcracker' would start in September. **"At the same time she would try out for the middle school musical, which would have try-outs in October and rehearsals beginning in November,"** Keith says. **"Every night was busy, and some nights we had to choose one of the two. She would come home late at night, having homework still to do and have not had dinner yet. She would get a shower while I cooked her something – usually something high carb. I would sit in the kitchen with her as she ate and got started on her homework. During exam week, she would have me quiz her. She worked very hard to get exceptional grades. It was late at night before she would go to bed, often with her Kindle by her bedside playing a Netflix TV show."**



Julie Russ (Highlands High School freshman and friend of Michelle), hugging Michelle after a performance

It's a nighttime routine that plays out in homes of many busy teenagers. But dancing with Cincinnati Ballet added something more.

Children in 'The Nutcracker' are separated into two casts. Keith says each cast is given half the performances, and act as understudies to their opposite cast member. **"So, she was scheduled for half the performances, and on-call for the remaining performances,"** he says. **"When you are on-call, it is possible that you could receive a phone call and be expected to arrive within minutes."**

Each performance dozens of parents volunteered to keep the children safe and get them to where they needed to be. **"Working backstage at the Aronoff was a privilege,"** Keith says. **"The first year Patty wanted to see every one of Michelle's performances. It got expensive. Subsequent years she would see maybe half of the performances. Patty's favorite thing in life was seeing Michelle on stage."**

And through Michelle's roles in 'The Nutcracker,' she forever became a part of a beloved Cincinnati Ballet tradition. **"Michelle was one of the quintessential nutcracker children in the sense that it created wonderful memories and special moments for her and for all of us,"** Webb says. **"Michelle worked extremely hard, persevered and always had a smile on her face, thus contributing to the warmth and honesty of 'The Nutcracker' production and the story itself."**

And this year will be different.



A Michelle "selfie"

"With every child, we celebrate their growth in their roles, and in their personal lives," Webb says. **"Even when they leave the production they are still party of our nutcracker family and certainly close to our hearts as we watch them journey on to other accomplishments. I have certainly missed Michelle throughout this year's Nutcracker rehearsals."**

But although Michelle won't be on stage during this year's performances, she'll be on many people's minds and in their hearts. **"Jenna [Harney] informed us that she will be wearing a locket with Michelle's picture,"** Keith says. **"Since it has changed venue – it has moved from the Aronoff and returned to Music Hall – we hoped the new surroundings would soften the bittersweet memories. Regardless, the performance and the music will be certain to trigger our tears. We will need to bring a box of tissues. I'm sure those in the audience will wonder, 'Who are those people crying?'"**

And yet, Keith encourages everyone to see 'The Nutcracker,' regardless if it's to honor Michelle. **"There are some wonderful events in Cincinnati to celebrate Christmas,"** he says. **"The model train display, skating on Fountain Square, 'A Christmas Carole' at Playhouse in the Park and Cincinnati Ballet's 'The Nutcracker.' I'm sure there are others that could be added to the list. Some families make them part of their annual tradition."**

The month of December can seem impossibly busy, especially for parents with children still at home. But as the Chalks know well, the traditions we hold dear are important. And necessary. Take the time for them, even when time seems difficult to find – for it's impossible to know if that time will someday be tragically cut short.

"As the Cincinnati Ballet's Children's Rehearsal Coach and as a mother, I cannot believe the depth of the loss that the Chalk family has gone through," Webb says. "It is such an honor to be able to celebrate the memory of her sunny disposition, dedication, hard work and beautiful smile, by dedication the Children's Cast performances to her."



Oh baby girl, you have all these decorations just for YOU. Oh how you loved decorating your bedroom and putting lights up around Spade's cage. We love you sweet, sweet girl and even in your death, we still will do everything we can for you. We love you so much. Forever.

