

Want a Presidential Candidate to Come to Your Party? An Elvis Look-Alike? Call Jan Kearney.

# LIFE of the PARTY

By Emily Kaiser

**E**ven in Washington, a town of second acts, this one is unusual: Idealistic schoolteacher leaves her job to become a mime. Twenty-five years later, she finds herself the owner of an internationally recognized entertainment company.

Jan Kearney was teaching at Mount Pleasant Montessori School in the 1970s when her husband died of cancer. She decided to take a new path and enrolled in a mime class.

"When Terry got sick, that was kind of a wake-up call. Hey, life is short, are you doing what you want to be doing?"

"I wanted to do something silly, something with no redeeming social value," Kearney says, only half joking.

She and a classmate would "put on whiteface and go out to a restaurant, or on the street, just to see what would happen." The classmate went on to become a lawyer. "But I never got over the thrill of performing," Kearney says.

She went to work as a clown for Town Clowns, a balloon-delivery shop. When the founder moved away in 1981, she sold Kearney the company.

"When I took over, I was a terrible can't-say-no person. People would ask for performers we did not have, and I would always say yes. Then I'd figure out how to do it," Kearney says.

Balloons got phased out, but the clowns stayed—along with celebrity impersonators, cancan dancers, marching bands, and cirque troupes. Kearney changed the company name to Cast of Thousands, which now provides entertainment for conventions, company parties, and museum openings as well as birthdays and weddings.

"Our characters can serve as decor as much as interactive entertainment," says Allison Silberman, head of sales. Companies tend to prefer action—say, a murder mystery. Fundraisers lean towards subdued elegance.

Re-creations of Las Vegas casinos, television studios, and a Venetian carnival have won the company a dozen awards.

Among its most popular characters are current and former presidents. George W. Bush is so in demand, it flies in a look-alike from Florida who can command \$3,000 a night and comes with a mock Secret Service detail. Since springtime the company has offered a John Kerry impersonator.

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Among former presidents, says Pam Burton, president of the company, "I don't think Nixon or Clinton will ever go away." Bill Clinton is a favorite among Democrats and Republicans alike. "It depends on the group whether they want Monica, too," says Silberman, who doubles as Lewinsky.

Other favorites: Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Austin Powers; the cirque performers; and Uncle Sam, who often arrives on stilts.

**T**o find characters, Cast of Thousands draws on a network from nearly three decades in the special-events business. "You get to know obscure things: where can you import feathers, who are the best contortionists," Kearney says. Pam Burton attends casting calls to find actors interested in supplementing their income.

"We have to train people to do this sort of work. It's not traditional acting," Burton says. "When we send someone out as Ben Franklin, he has to be Ben Franklin and talk to strangers in character."

"It takes a lot sometimes to draw DC people out of their own worlds," Kearney says, "to bring them into the make-believe."

Burton remembers a recent convention of accountants, who were lured into a Bacchanalian night of dancing and drinking by cirque-style performers all dressed in white.

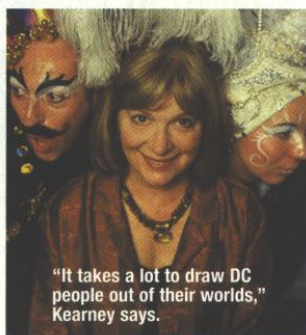
Occasionally the guests get too involved. "Guests get fascinated with the performers. They'll ask, 'Who are you really?' We coach them to stay in character," Burton says.

"Sometimes, if it's an all-male event, they will hit on Lady Liberty," Kearney says.

Living statues sometimes overhear conversations they shouldn't: "We had Venus de Milo at a garden party, and she heard so many details of a lawsuit, we were terrified that she was going to get subpoenaed."

"Our peers in other towns, they get stuck doing the standard themes, like Mardi Gras; red, white, and blue; Dickens Christmas," Burton says. "We've gotten to do futuristic themes at the Air and Space Museum, art themes for the Smithsonian; we've recreated Studio 54 at the Greenbrier."

"Even after 25 years, I am still surprised at the requests we get," Kearney says. "You never know what insane thing is going to come over the phone next."



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Photograph for The Washingtonian by Matthew Giard