

Tustin's 'Ever After' cheers children with much-loved princesses

March 27, 2017



Princesses Jessica , from left, of Fullerton, Caitlin , of Irvine, and Gracie , of Santa Ana interact with a visitor. Kimberly Downey runs Ever After Princess Events, which supplies young women dressed as princesses to parties. The company also does a lot of pro bono events like an Operation Warm Wishes fundraiser for a family battling cancer in Tustin on Sunday, March 5, 2017. (Photo by Ana Venegas, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By SUSAN CHRISTIAN GOULDING / STAFF WRITER

For more information, see everafterprincess.com.

Mia Mercadante wanted the three princesses all to herself.

The 4-year-old Irvine girl employed many a tactic to distract them from all the other children huddling about in awe. She danced, she sang, she plopped down on laps, she asked Ella to tie her shoe. She even offered gifts, including the “Fairy jar” she had just decorated with glitter.

“I love them so much!” Mia announced.

Mia and dozens of other kids came to the Tustin Senior Center on a recent Sunday afternoon to participate in a fund-raising event for a family battling cancer. There were loads of activities – games, arts and crafts and a booth for elaborate face painting.

But many of the little girls just kept gravitating back to Fairest Princess, Ella and Mermaid Princess, who stood off to the side offering hugs and cheerful chitchat.

The young women played their roles enthusiastically, never breaking character, with chirpy voices, exaggerated expressions and theatrical gestures.

“Everyone freaks out when they hear me,” said Fairest, aka Gracie, 19, a film student at Orange Coast College.

An old pro, Lacey has been portraying the Fairest princess character since she was 13 for various princess-supply businesses. Last June, she signed up with Tustin-based Ever After Princess Events, founded in 2015 by Kimberly Downey.

The company is an offshoot of Downey's OC Dance Productions® in Irvine, which the Tustin resident started a decade ago.

Ever After Princess Events has 22 “cast members” and another 17 dancers – mostly college students working part-time – to entertain at birthday parties, corporate events and other fetes. Her staff is relatively interchangeable, adept at playing any number of roles, from Warrior Princess to Rose Princess to Barbie, or a swimming mermaid, fairy or elf.

Downey, 42, juggles at least eight assignments a weekend, and as many as 14 during summer months. Most characters go for \$169 an hour, plus another \$99 for each additional actress. Swimming mermaids cost \$249.

However, it was the charitable pro bono opportunities that motivated her to create her princess enterprise.

In 2013, one of her 2-year-old twin daughters underwent open-heart surgery at Children’s Hospital of Orange County. Too young to understand the reason, Racquel spent weeks trapped in a hospital room.

“She cried constantly,” Downey recalled. “The only time she would smile was when a therapy dog or entertainer came to her bedside. It was the only thing that took her mind off the pain.”

After Racquel finally left the hospital healthy, Downey determined to start a philanthropic business dedicated to CHOC and other child-related endeavors.

Through her dance company, she knew people in the entertainment industry who helped arrange her first rounds of auditions. Downey largely hires young women with backgrounds in theater.

During interviews, she asks candidates if they are willing to donate a couple of hours a year to CHOC or a cause of their choice.

“It’s not a requirement, but most people love the idea,” said Downey, who gives 10 percent of her profits from Ever After Princess to charity.

Their visits to CHOC offer a break from tedium not only for sick kids but also their siblings.

“It’s hard on brothers and sisters, too,” Downey said.

Parents relish the “10 minutes we come in and make their child smile,” she added. “It gives them peace to know that someone cares.”

Downey tries to prepare her young employees for the emotions stirred by critically ill children.

“I give them a manual that explains to them what they might see,” she said. “Still, many times, they leave in tears.”

In some cases, the princesses are allowed only to wave at patients through the door’s window pane.

The entrepreneur has spent generously on her frilly wardrobe, which includes 60 custom-made costumes that cost as much as \$1,000 each. She also has invested in numerous high-quality wigs. The Rapunzel locks set her back \$600.

Princesses watch a video to learn how to apply their own makeup. They also read up on their characters’ back stories to make their total transformation.

“I re-watched all the videos to get down each little mannerism,” said Caitlin Harjes, 20, a theater major at UCI. “The kids know the movies really well. They’ll catch you on things if you’re not careful.”

Harjes’ personal favorite is Mermaid Princess. The funniest question she’s heard from a child: “How do you go pee?”

“Mermaids fascinate kids,” she said.

For that matter, princess in general fascinate little ones.

“A princess is someone children can look up to yet at the same time feel close to,” Harjes said. “Princesses are warm and friendly. They have a nice attitude.”