

# The Kistler Family Presents:

PUPPETS  
CHALK ART  
STORY TELLING  
DRAMA

LEVITATION  
MUSIC  
COMEDY  
JUGGLING  
VENTRILQUIISM  
BALLOON TWISTING

## The Christian Conjuror



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Personality Profile:

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When our new FCM President Ed Jarvis and his wife Marge retired from their position as Evangelists for the Salvation Army's Central Territory, it left a huge hole. Army Headquarters started looking for someone to pick up the Jarvis' banner and continue the work. Meet their successors: The Kistler Family.

We caught up with Kerry at his home base in Des Plaines, Illinois during a break in the family's touring schedule. We wanted to know how all of this unfolded.

**CC:** Let's look backward for a moment. How did you get your start in magic?

**KK:** I was one of those kids who would NOT quit asking "How did you do that!?" (*laughs*) No lie! My boyhood pastor, Stephen Kiplinger was both a gospel magician AND a chalk artist, and I would pester him to death to teach me his tricks. I gave him no rest (*laughs*).

Then I haunted the library for magic books, which paid off in spades – literally. A lady in town, Mrs. Reed, tried to give the librarian a box of magic books that had belonged to her late husband. Since I had already devoured every magic book in the place, the librarian put the lady in contact with ME! She not only gave me a big box of books but several boxes of magic gear too! What a gold mine! I suddenly felt initiated into the inner circle of magic (*smiles*).

After that came trips to Stoner's Magic Shop,

magic lessons from Jimmy Yoshida, and lots more. There are many threads that make up the tapestry of my magic heritage.

**CC:** To what extent was the FCM a part of that heritage?

**KK:** Huge... extremely significant. About 1975, an evangelist named Rev. Timothy Costales gave me a box of tricks that contained an old beat-up copy of the Christian Conjuror. It led me to the FCM. I attended my first convention at Winona in '77 and was never the same. I roomed with a guy who became a great life-long friend and eventually the best man at my wedding – Alan Skogerbo.

I also met an FCM old-timer, Tony Birch, who sold me boxes of old magic magazines. That introduced me to the magic legends of the 50's and 60's. Which, in turn, led to an **Abbott's Get-Together** where I actually got to meet the magic icons I had only read about.

And, truly, the writers in the *Conjuror* became my faithful mentors each month. Special thanks to all those contributors and editors for helping to shape my destiny.

**CC:** Speaking of destiny, how did you end up where you are now – traveling and performing full-time with your family for the Salvation Army?

**KK:** Wow. I do a lot of mentalism in my shows, but I never saw this one coming (*laughs*). The complete story could fill



Jeremy & Sarah help make our stage illusions really sparkle

several *Conjurors* but I'll try to give you the condensed version.

Back in 1996, after 20 years of varying success with magic, I received a mailing from veteran chalk artist Gary Means. To this day neither of us knows why he sent me that flyer. But, God knew. I had no chalk easel, but God had that covered too – and led me to Jim Hicks who GAVE me his spare easel. So, I went to the workshop and had an epiphany moment. Life changed after that weekend. Chalk art energized me to begin performing again.

**CC:** Wait, you said you began performing “again”. Had you quit performing for a while? If so, Why?

**KK:** Yes, several times, actually. Why? Lots of different reasons – the demands of a growing family and career; no money for equipment – at one time I actually sold off nearly my whole magic collection to pay some pressing bills; discouragement with my performing ability and technical skills... which I still lament at times (*laughs*). I think many performers are a rather broody – sometimes-melancholy – lot and after performing a sloppy show or watching a polished pro at work I would think, “Why am I doing this?”

“Dean” Bill Baker once made



Jill plays a sweet old lady in one of our musical vignettes. I hope I age as gracefully.



Two tubes, ten spears, a little smoke, no mirrors. Yep, Sarah's still in there.



Sarah and Jeremy ham it up during a vaudeville-style sketch on spiritual blindness.

a passionate plea that we should not be performing if we aren't willing to pay the price in practice. I had to agree with his arguments and so I quit performing whenever I felt that I could not give magic what it demanded and deserved.

**CC:** And chalk art was the catalyst that revived your performing career?

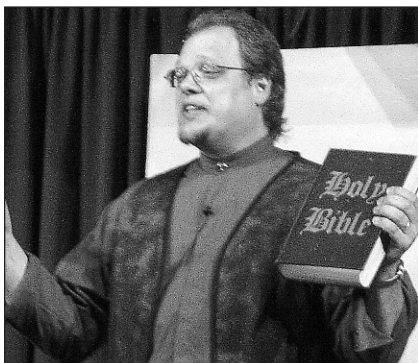
**KK:** It really was. As rich as my magic heritage was, the chalk art began getting an unbelievable audience reaction – people were coming to the altar for salvation, standing ovations, etc. Even though I viewed myself as a magician first and a chalk artist second, it was always the chalk that people wanted to talk about. Almost by default my magic became an appetizer while the chalk art became the main course. In a way, my magic is still trying to get the same respect as my chalk art (*laughs*). After lots of work, the gap is closing.

**CC:** So back to your journey to the Salvation Army – what happened next?

**KK:** Right. To summarize the saga, from 1996, bookings began to pick up steam, the programs became more developed and our kids became more and more involved...

**CC:** Not to interrupt – how did your kids get involved in your shows?

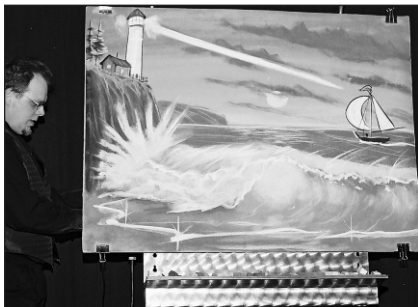




You are looking at a 'This Little Light of Mine' version of the Bible. Verses that teach us to be a witness are highlighted in a very special way! (can you guess what happens when I open this Bible?)

**KK:** They just got sick of watching dad perform (*laughs*). I didn't want to leave my family home every weekend, so I started looking for ways to get them involved. We dug some puppet equipment out of the attic – from a previous stint as Children's Church directors – and expanded the show to include short puppet pieces. Sarah, 16, now manages all the puppet gear, she plays keyboard, writes music, performs in skits, and assists with larger illusions. I know she would make a great chalk artist if I would only get serious about training her (*hangs head*).

We also added stage lights and a sound system which Justin, 14, manages. He's a juggler, balloonatic, and is very gifted technically – he spends spare time writing computer code for gaming applications.



I keep my drawings under 20 minutes. This Lighthouse drawing is nearly finished.

Jeremy, 12, is my on-stage assistant, a character actor in skits, balloonatic, and puppeteer. He wants to be doing more magic and has a fascination with escapes. He's currently working on a strongbox escape. He's a funny kid and when I look at him, I see myself 30 years ago.

Christy, 8, helps with puppets and really has the gift of hospitality, so she is also our program hostess – our official greeter that hands out programs before the shows begin. And she wants to be doing more. I'm always looking for new ways to write the kids into the shows.

**CC:** So, Kistler Family Ministries really is a family affair.

**KK:** Absolutely! I am already depressed about the day when all my kids are grown and gone. We keep telling our kids that we get their firstborn children as road replacements when they leave home (*laughs*). It is such an unbelievable blessing and joy for Jil and me to be ministering full-time with our kids by our side. My wife Jil is an absolute Proverbs 31 woman. We would not be with the Salvation Army today if Jil had not kept me from making the biggest mistake of my life!

**CC:** This sounds like death-defying stuff. What happened?

**KK:** (*big sigh*) It happened like this. From 1996 to 2000, our family ministry grew until it felt like God was steering us toward full-time. So we tested the waters and set up a ten-week tour from New York to Kansas and back. We did 35 programs and had a great time. Although we did very



Time for the blacklight - an invisible cross will emerge in the lighthouse.



A picture says a thousand words. This chalk piece concludes our program on Holiness.

well in love offerings, I knew that being a full-time independent ministry required more faith than I could muster. Seriously, my hat is off to independent full-timers – especially families. Until you have tried it you can never understand the demands. I was pretty sure that going full-time for us meant hooking up with some larger organization. I began sending out letters and videos to likely candidates. But, nothing opened up.

Now, when we started to home school in 1996, we gave up half our income. Finances steadily grew worse while we tried to sell our house. So, even though we had experienced a successful ten-week tour, we were forced to make some tough decisions. First, we sold our RV trailer. Then we said goodbye to our 15-passenger van, which had pulled the trailer, carried us, and hauled our equipment. Then we had a new problem – we had no way to get to gigs and had to start turning down invitations for bookings. We also moved into a much smaller house with no storage and had to borrow space in an old barn to store our equipment. Basically, our dream was dying on the vine, and I really didn't know how to stop it. For over 2 years we stopped performing as a family. I only did a couple of small solo gigs as favors for friends.

Finally, my dream was dead, and one day I sat down with my wife and said: "Jil, since God doesn't seem to care about our family ministry, then why should I? Isn't it true that where God guides, God provides? And since He hasn't provided, I must have been misguided. Why don't we find somebody that God DOES want to use and give our

equipment to them? What's the sense of letting it rot in an old barn?"

**CC:** What did your wife say to your decision?

**KK:** (*looks away*) She cried. And then she made a passionate speech about how God still had wonderful things in store for our family ministry. So, I just shut up and thought, "fine let the stuff rot."*(laughs)*. But she kept me from making a critical mistake, because a few months later we would need that equipment for an audition (*smiles*).

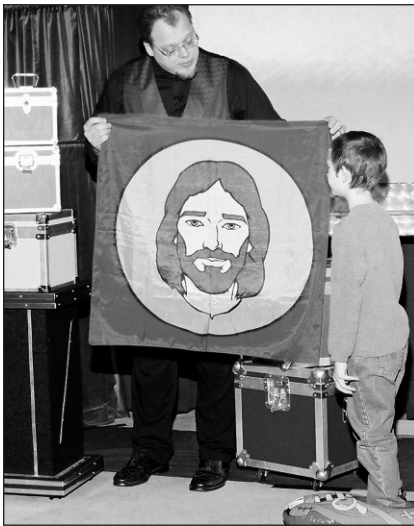
In November of 2002, the Salvation Army Territorial Headquarters in Des Plaines, Illinois contacted us. Major Jan Sjogren, head of the Evangelism department, wondered if Kistler Family Ministries would be interested in partnering with the Army. Their Territorial Evangelists Ed and Marge Jarvis had retired, and our name ended up on their short-list of candidates. How they happened to have our contact information in their files is another long God-orchestrated story. I was speechless.

Four months later we were driving to Chicago for an interview/audition. One of the shows was at the Harbor Light Mission in downtown Chicago, an adult rehab center run by the Army. We had over 30 men come to the altar that night for salvation – more than we had ever had in a single meeting. A week later Headquarters called and asked how soon we could start. Three months later we moved from upstate New York to Chicagoland. That was July 2003.

**CC:** So, in less than one year you went from nearly giving all your equipment away to being full-time evangelists with the Salvation Army? Amazing!

**KK:** (*smiles*) There is no word in the dictionary to describe it. And, I've left out some really cool parts of the story too – like how we stood in the bitter January cold, chipping through three feet of snow and ice to get our equipment out of that barn for the audition (*laughs*). Or how I had my own personal "burning bush" experience with a flaming Bible prop (*laughs*). I'm not kidding, it was an awesome confirmation of this call. But, that's another story. However, I must admit, I'm still getting

used to the title of “evangelist”. I guess the



The assistant's shoe was destroyed and he didn't want the replacement on his left foot. After some byplay, we found his restored shoe in the nest of boxes. Let Jesus 'heel your sole' today!

Army had to call us something, but I'm simply a magician/chalk artist who loves sharing the gospel along side his family. The Army has provided everything we need as we travel throughout 11 mid-western states. The Army supplies a motor home we live in for 2/3+ of the year and a home in the Des Plaines area for when we're off the road between campaign cycles. And, incredibly, we actually have a budget for supplies and equipment! FINALLY, after all these years! (*shakes head and laughs*).

**CC:** Any final thoughts to share?

**KK:** Nothing is wasted with God. Yeah, it's a pity that God needed 42 years to get me road-ready. But, it could of been worse – God spent 80 years getting poor Moses ready (*laughs*). Here is a recent conversation I had with God:

**Q:** Why was my boyhood pastor a magician and chalk artist?

**A:** So you would prepare from a young age to be the magician and chalk artist you are today – to carry on Stephen's legacy.

**Q:** OK, but why did you take me into the commercial art and illustration field for 9 years?

**A:** So you could complete your art training in preparation to be a chalk artist. Plus, now you can art-direct your own promo material.

**Q:** OK, but why did you take me into radio and TV for several years?

**A:** To enhance your communication skills. Plus, now you can produce and mix your own performance sound tracks.

**Q:** OK, but how about that year as an interim pastor?

**A:** So you would learn how to write and preach a sermon. Plus, now you better understand the challenges and trials of small church pastors who will be booking you.

**Q:** OK, but how about those 11 years teaching in a state prison?

**A:** So you would learn patience, compassion, gratitude, and management skills. Plus, now you know how to connect and minister to the men at Adult Rehab Centers.

**Q:** So, nothing is wasted with God?

**A:** Nothing. Every experience is simply a training school for greater work that lies ahead.

**Q:** Um, you mean there's more advanced stuff to do after this?

**A:** WooHoo! You're finally beginning to get it!

**Q:** OK, God. One last question...

**A:** Promises, promises.

**Q:** Why did you put our family ministry on hold for over 2 years?

**A:** The timing got complicated because Ed was having too much fun and didn't want to quit. (*smiles*)

God DOES have our best interests at heart. He plants the desires in us and knows the best way to fulfill those desires. He had a better dream in mind than I could have thought up myself. Now there's the REAL magic (*smiles*). ✠