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How an unexpected guest made KKG his home



When Lana (Weiss) Brown '70 moved into the Kappa Kappa Gamma house on Graham Street, none of her new sisters could have imagined what she was hiding in one of her suitcases.

“By the time I got to Wesleyan I’d been a professional ventriloquist for 10 years,” she explains. “I started at age 9 and performed all over Chicago and the Midwest. When I moved in to the Kappa house, though, I was first hesitant about bringing my dummy, but finally decided I should.”

With “Jerry” tucked in his case (Jerry had his own tailor and

Lana had an agent, an arranger and a costumer on the payroll), she thought it best not to mention her unusual career to her new sisters.

“I was terrified to think they might consider it silly,” she admits. “Even though my young television-radio-voice career was paying the tab on a lot of my college expenses, I didn’t want them to deem it stupid.”

Today, Lana is an adjunct professor of internship and senior seminar courses at Vanderbilt University and also works as a liaison for Michigan State University’s internship program with Chicago Public Schools. Comfortable in her academic career, she can look back on her ventriloquist days with wistful pride. But at the time, Lana feared the scorn of her KKG sisters if they learned about Jerry.

It was Lana’s roommate, Jean (Butz) Hall '70 — the daughter of a Wesleyan trustee and a coed from the same hometown — who knew of Lana’s talent and shared the secret. The two of them have remained soulmates ever since. “She broke the surprise one autumn night at dinner and I thought I would die,” Lana says.

But to her surprise, the Kappas wanted to see “it.”

“I’d hidden the box under my bed on the second floor and so with a little coaxing I went and got Jerry, performed, and they stood — and continued to stand — with rousing support,” she remembers.

James Whitehurst, who chaired the Religion Department at that time, was Lana's professor in Oriental and Occidental Religions. Whitehurst also happened to be a professional magician. When he discovered Lana's ventriloquist act, he asked her if she'd cover for him on a couple of Bloomington gigs he couldn't make due to scheduling conflicts. She agreed, and from then on the two recommended each other for performances. "We appeared at the State Farm Christmas Party for employees, at the Bloomington Country Club and the Beich Candy Company," Lana says.

Back at the house, the Kappas insisted that Lana perform at Rush, for alumnae dinners and Panhellenic performances. She used her puppet in the philanthropy parties the actives sponsored for local children and was proud to use her talents to help others. As Lana explains, "it was the 'blue and blue bond'" of Kappa sisterhood "without a 10 percent of the take." -- *Story by Marianne Wolf-Astrauskas '76*