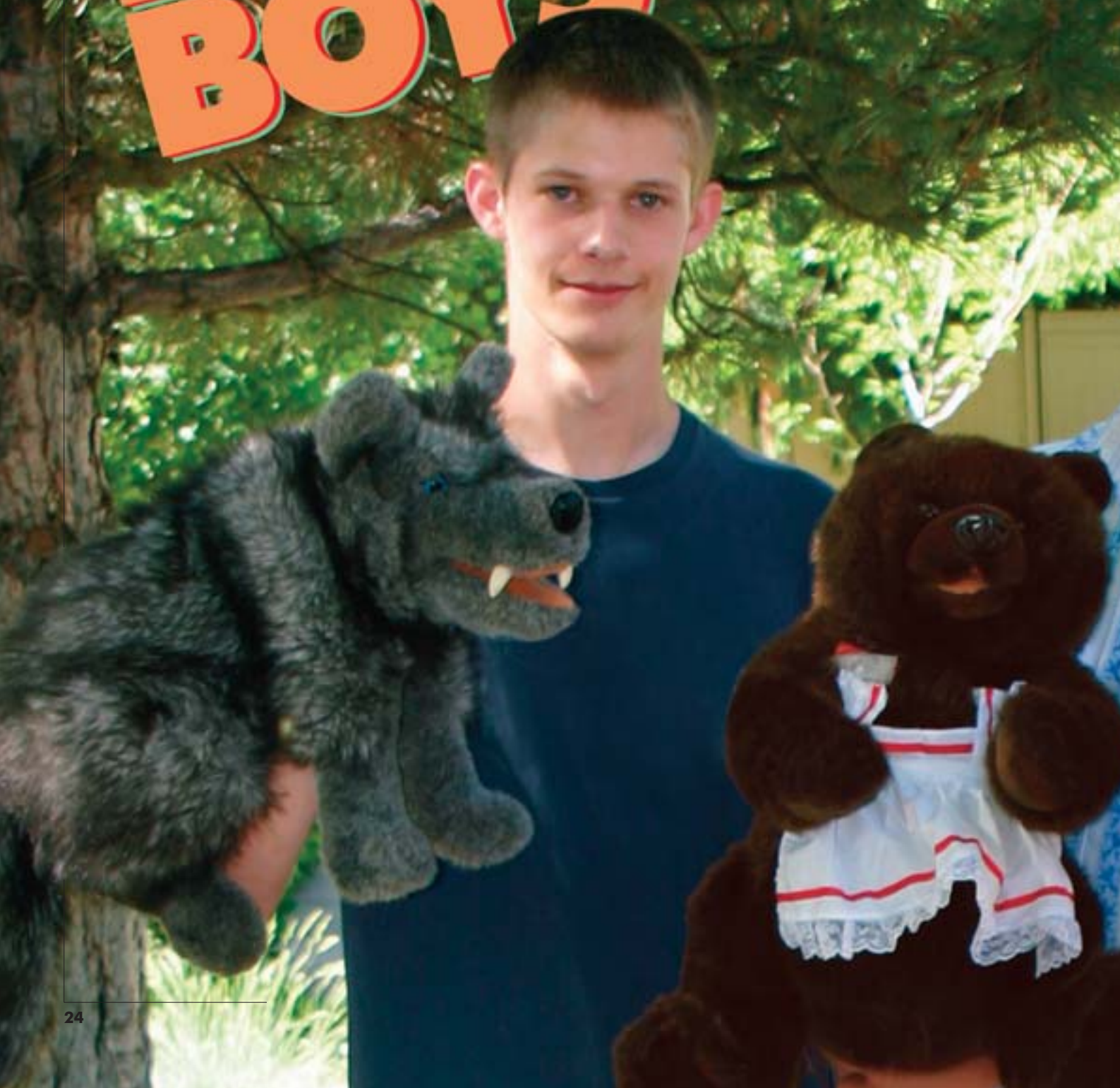



The PUPPET BOYS

BY RILEY M. LORIMER





*To children in need of attention,
these priests are more than
mere puppeteers.*

Last December, two small boys extended a very special dinner invitation to Alec Ferguson, Jimmy Rasband, and Brandon Clayton, priests in the Provo Edgemont Stake. The young boys, who came from a high-risk home, invited their teenage friends as guests of honor.

“Apparently they were in a situation where they didn’t have a dad in the family. And so they kind of looked up to us three guys as father figures,” Brandon recalls with a smile. It’s one of his favorite memories of his high school years. He loves spending time with the children who have come to know and love him, Alec,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



The puppet shows last only a few minutes, but the boys often play with the children for hours afterward.

and Jimmy as “the puppet boys.”

For the past three years, Alec, Jimmy, and Brandon have been volunteering their time once a month as puppeteers at Kids on the Move, a care program for children at a local hospital. Recently, the boys added a weekly show at the Family Support and

Treatment Center in their hometown of Orem, Utah. In both venues, the boys perform for children in high-risk situations.

And although the work can be draining, it’s also the highlight of their week.

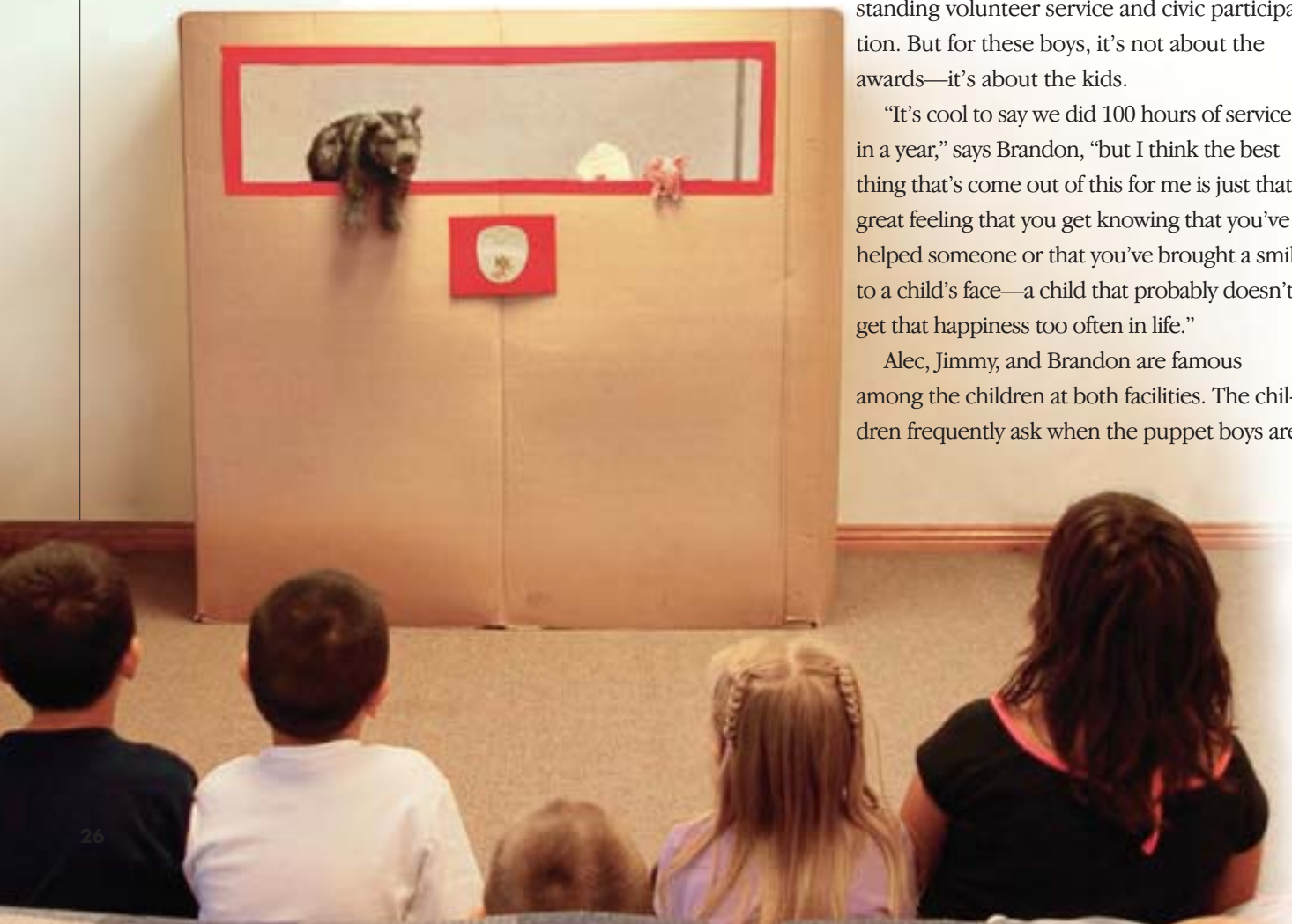
“It’s so fun! It’s like being a kid again,” says Brandon.

Selfless Service

In the last year alone, Alec, Jimmy, and Brandon have performed more than 100 hours of service with their puppet shows. In doing so, they have completed the service requirements for their Duty to God awards. Each of the boys has also qualified for the Presidential Service award, which is awarded to individuals who have demonstrated outstanding volunteer service and civic participation. But for these boys, it’s not about the awards—it’s about the kids.

“It’s cool to say we did 100 hours of service in a year,” says Brandon, “but I think the best thing that’s come out of this for me is just that great feeling that you get knowing that you’ve helped someone or that you’ve brought a smile to a child’s face—a child that probably doesn’t get that happiness too often in life.”

Alec, Jimmy, and Brandon are famous among the children at both facilities. The children frequently ask when the puppet boys are



coming. When the three teenagers walk through the door, they are greeted by countless hugs and shouts of delight. The puppet shows that they perform last only about 20 minutes, but the boys often stay for several hours to play with their young friends. Each of the boys has made a connection in his own way with the children they serve.

“Brandon will really get into playing with the kids, and they love him for it. Sometimes 15 kids just come to him at the same time. He’s really lovable when it comes to the kids,” says Alec.

Brandon says, “Jimmy is always there for the kids that maybe don’t look like they have someone giving them one-on-one attention. Jimmy goes right over there and makes friends. He’s always there for them when they need him.”

In addition to doing the puppet show, the boys draw pictures with the children. Alec’s artistic talents make him a favorite. “They’re fascinated by Alec’s drawing ability,” says Brandon. “I’ve seen it where literally 18 kids have come up and asked him to draw a picture for each of them. And he does it just for the kids.”

Jimmy says his friends’ enthusiasm and willingness to serve are the reasons for their special relationship with the children. “They go and actively participate and play with all the kids. I think with little kids it’s often that you just have to be there.”



Setting the Example

Francesca Lawson, Alec’s mother, often goes with the boys when they perform their shows. She describes the response of the children’s mothers. “There was one mother who said, ‘My children don’t have many positive role models in their lives. My boys really look forward every month to coming and being with these guys, because they’re positive male role models.’ I was touched by that. I don’t think these boys totally understand what a difference they’ve made.”

All three boys feel that the experience has blessed them with greater understanding.

“It’s not like it takes special people to be able to give service,” says Alec. “It’s not difficult, and it’s not necessarily very time-consuming. A hundred hours out of a year is not a lot at all. I don’t think enough people give service.”

Jimmy says he learned the importance of taking time to get to know individual children, because “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10).

Brandon says he has gained a closeness to the Savior and a greater understanding of charity. “It’s helped me to be more Christlike. And in a lot of ways, I feel closer to the Lord, especially when I’m serving. It makes me feel like I’m doing good in life—like I’m doing okay.”

If these three friends should ever wonder whether they’ve done any good, they need only remember the words of one small boy who recently announced that when he grows up, he wants to be a volunteer—just like the puppet boys. **NE**



Alec, Jimmy, and Brandon use their unique talents to connect with the children, many of whom do not have a male role model at home.