

Leisure Worlder

OF THE MONTH

BUNNIE GORMLEY

Vaudeville is alive and well in Leisure World, thanks to a variety band called the Kool Kats and its indefatigable director Bunnie Gormley. The group dispenses the therapeutic gift of laughter to local residents and groups throughout Orange County in fast-paced shows combining favorite tunes, singing, dancing and comedy skits.

As director and choreographer since 1973, Mrs. Gormley is credited as a catalyst who has broadened the band's repertoire and encouraged the talents of individual members for the rollicking performances which have won them recognition as fun-loving representatives of the area's senior community.

Music has been a lifelong interest of the former Midwesterner. "I come from a singing family," she explains. "We never had a family gathering that didn't end up as a song session." The clan roster includes a grandfather who sang at President Lincoln's inauguration, a sister who had been a professional dancer since childhood, and Bunnie's mother, Mrs. Izma Suess, a former wardrobe mistress who is now one of the kazoo-playing Kool Kats members.

As a teenager, Bunnie sang with the Evanston Light Opera Company in Illinois and traveled for a time with a puppeteer troupe giving shows for school children and fraternal groups in the Midwest. She later took a job with the Northern Trust Bank in Chicago and performed with its choral group in a weekly radio program.

After marriage, motherhood and a 13-year stint as secretary to a Democratic Committeeman in Skokie, Ill., Bunnie moved to Leisure World in 1969 with first husband Lyle Millward. Following his death two years later, she continued working as a deputy clerk in the District Attorney's office in Harbor Municipal Court, Newport Beach.

It was during a vacation cruise that she met Joe Gormley, a New Jersey Transport Co. employee and part-time professional musician. The two performed together in a shipboard variety show and eventually were wed, to the delight of friends who describe their marriage as the perfect musical merger. The couple's vocal harmony duets are one of the highlights of the Kool Kats show schedule. Bunnie also contributes her distinctive low-pitched voice to the New Harmonaires women's vocal ensemble in Leisure World. "I sing bass," she jokes.

In her role as volunteer director of the Kool Kats, she spends countless hours developing songs and skits designed to fit specific audiences throughout Orange County. Favorite bookings have included the Senior Citizen Celebration at Knott's Berry Farm, a performance for former President Ford's visit to Leisure World in 1976, and a memorable appearance at the Stroke Rehabilitation Center at South Coast Hospital where one formerly immobilized patient began tapping hands and feet in time to the music.

At other times, the band has performed in less ideal surroundings. Bunnie recalls that a leaking roof at the Long Beach Veterans Hospital necessitated some fancy tap dancing around a bucket placed on the floor to catch errant rain drops. "And when we did a show for Home Federal's local opening in 1978, we found ourselves competing with the cement mixers out on the parking lot," she says. "We've also given performances at mental hospitals and convalescent homes. Each show we do is a new challenge."

The 25-member Kool Kats band rehearses every Saturday morning at Clubhouse Three. The weekly workouts have a dual benefit, according to the director. "Our members range in age up to 86 or older. A few of them won't say how old they are. But there are some with heart problems, with stroke impairments or emphysema. This is great therapy for them, as well."

Income from the group's paid engagements help defray costume and prop expenses, with the surplus going to the Ray of Hope adult handicapped center in Tustin.