

North State Voices: Whimsical puppets carry a serious message

By SUSAN TCHUDI

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I want people to know that I am dead serious.

I am serious about the deaths of Americans and Iraqis; I am serious about the severity of injuries sustained there; I am serious about the enormous psychological damage done to participants in and victims of war.

And I am serious in my deep disgust of the trillion dollars the United States is spending on this aimless, endless undeclared war. A war in which victory is not definable or achievable.

So I am participating in the Chico Peace and Justice Center's puppet rally and pageant Saturday. Despite the seeming frivolousness of the 20 puppets that will be on hand this weekend, the message — like my anti-war sentiments — is deeply serious. The puppets are symbolic of the many, many alternative ways the United States might spend a trillion dollars that would benefit people and have a positive — rather than destructive — impact.

I'm not sure if I would have become involved in the puppet pageant if it weren't for my husband, however. A man of boundless energy, he volunteers at the Peace and Justice Center a couple of afternoons a week, after spending mornings working on the farm.

But when the topic of giant puppets came up as a way of observing the anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, he noted that our son was a puppeteer and puppet builder. It wasn't long until Chee had "volunteered" to teach puppet making to community

members interested in participating in the "Rally and Giant Puppet Pageant: Alternative Uses for a Trillion War Dollars."

Cheetah, who during college years was a member of the Naked Puppets troupe in Olympia, Wash., is a generous young man and a talented teacher, and was happy to share his time and talents. I'm not sure he anticipated six weeks of Saturday workshops, after which he had to go to the farm to take care of the animals and garden, making for a long Saturday, when most twenty-somethings would rather be kicking back.

However, his efforts have paid off. Big, beautiful puppets are beginning to emerge, becoming more expressive as they are painted, get hair and clothing, and are raised above people's heads on backpack frames — all in the endeavor to express hopeful, helpful ways to spend taxpayers' dollars.

A golden sun with big blue eyes and red lips advocates solar power; a wearable apple symbolizes improved education; a railroad conductor desires more trains to replace dependency on airplanes and cars; a grandmother speaks for quality care of all children, especially those with special needs; a nurse promotes health care for all Americans; an ear of corn represents "sin maiz, no pais," a movement to remove massive tariffs on imported Mexican corn; a Zapotec woman pleads for the end of oppression of indigenous people, particularly women; a great blue heron, representing riparian habitat, calls for greater investment in environmental protection; 20 fish puppets symbolize the need to protect our rivers; a goat asks for Farm Bill support of ecologically conscious farming; the Campus Involvement and Awareness (CIA) organization at Chico State is creating puppets that argue for greater help for New Orleans and free tuition for college students.

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While beginning as a helpmate to my husband and a cheerleader to my son, I've gotten pretty committed to making our message of sustainable agriculture and local, organic food for everyone come alive through our Jolly Green Ecological Giant. He's quite beautiful. Made of foam and felt, he'll be over 10 feet tall and symbolize healthy food with his parsnip nose, leaf hair, corn mouth and cauliflower ears.

It's been wonderful getting to know the good people who work with the Chico Peace and Justice Center. As new folks in town, we have been grateful that the commitment to social justice and a peaceful world has a strong presence in our adopted home.

I appreciate those who have participated in this serious play. I hope you'll come to City Plaza on Saturday (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.), both to enjoy the artistry of these home-grown puppets but more importantly to show support for positive directions for improving our world and our community.

And be sure to shake the Jolly Green Ecological Giant's carroty hand.

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