

Radio entertainer blends children's cause with wit

By SYLVIA LANG

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Serious cause did not get in the way of wittiness Tuesday when radio celebrity Garrison Keillor sauntered into town.

Keillor, whose Minnesota Public Radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, appeared at the Sunwood Inn in St. Cloud at a dinner for the benefit of orphaned children. Before moving on to somber themes, he humorously reported the latest news from Lake Wobegon to supporters of the St. Cloud Friends Chapter of the Children's Home Society of Minnesota.

Keillor, the shining star of the mythical Central Minnesota village, said he is receiving so much publicity lately because of his show's anniversary that he can't even go into his favorite restaurant, White Castle, without being recognized.

Before the show became a hit, the only people who knew about him either listened to Minnesota Public Radio or read "The New Yorker" magazine, he said.

He jokingly told his audience that the reason he was giving a free performance was to ensure that if success should ever spoil him, he at least would be remembered for doing one good thing. Even if people did not think the performance was very funny, he said, they at least would remember "that I came a long way to do it."

Injecting pathos into his monologue, Keillor said the work of the Children's Home Society reflects the teaching of the gospel.

He said one of the most loving acts of human beings is "taking strangers into our homes and making them part of our own family."

He described this type of love as "a great mystery — one I do not understand at all."

Returning to wry form, Keillor said the residents of Lake Wobegon, the mythical village somewhere in Central Minnesota, also did not understand that mystery. It was not something children could be taught at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Grade School, he

said.

Children spent more time trying to understand just what heaven was. "Would there be furniture in heaven?" Keillor asked. "Could we have pets there? What would the temperature be in heaven?"

Back down to earth, the 41-year-old Keillor said that being around children is one of the greatest things adults can do for themselves.

"What we do for them, we do for ourselves," he said, talking about his glee in listening to his 15-year-old son's account of a recent trip to Europe.

Keillor said that as a youth he dreamed of getting to Europe, playing a guitar and hopping a freight train to the West Coast.

He thus far has not realized any of those dreams, but his son at least has helped him live one vicariously, he said.

Keillor's appearance Tuesday helped raise about \$10,000 for the Children's Home Society of Minnesota, according to Dr. Arlen Simi, St. Cloud dentist who co-chaired the event.

The money will be used to help find permanent homes for 800 children up to age 17 who now live in foster homes.

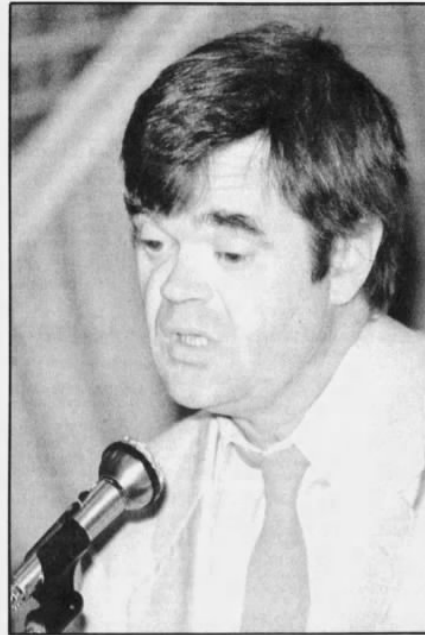
Many of the children are not adopted because they have disabling conditions such as retardation or emotional problems, according to Jo Prouty, coordinator of the society's "Waiting Minnesota Children" program.

A 16-year-old Stearns County boy, who had been bounced from foster home to foster home since age 5, recently was adopted after appearing on television and saying he wanted to be part of a family, Prouty said.

Often, the children suffer emotionally from abuse and neglect in their families of origin, according to Prouty. Sometimes courts have removed the children from their natural families in order to protect them.

They need families with the patience to help them learn to trust adults again, she said.

The Children's Home Society of Minnesota was founded 95 years ago to find homes for orphans.



Times photo by Mike Knaak

Humorist Garrison Keillor spoke at a benefit dinner for orphans.