

Seward native participates in Garrison Keillor skit

BY LISA BENNETT

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SEWARD — Among the traits Suzanne Ohlmann attributes to her Midwestern upbringing are small-town sensibility, pragmatism and hardiness.

"I just would never trade being hardy," the 23-year-old said, "for being a big-city wimp."

Add to that list a good sense of endurance, challenged on a recent Saturday when the Seward native performed on Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show. "The Nanny," a skit written by Keillor, is a good example of art imitating life: Ohlmann is employed as the Keillor family nanny.

"I was quite nervous, but at the same time I knew he (Keillor) wouldn't have asked me to do it if he didn't think I could come through," she recalled. "That was the fuel for the fire that made me go for it."

A 1998 St. Olaf College graduate in vocal performance, Ohlmann has worked for the Keillors since September. During that time, the author

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and performer overheard his nanny's singing skills while she was serenading his 2-year-old daughter in the bathtub.

"Bathrooms are always a great place to sing," Ohlmann said. "Without my realizing it, that's where they first heard me."

Weeks passed after he invited her on the show. In fact, she didn't see a script until the day before the performance. But the lack of prep time prevented her from worrying too much.

"If you are thinking about the technical aspects, relaxed jaw, relaxed tongue, raised soft palate, then you are thinking too much, when you should be singing," she said. "The point of singing is emoting and trying to connect through that."

She did connect — and she received a barrage of compliments backstage. Not many knew she actually was the Keillor nanny, or guessed her vocal career is still young. When someone asked where her last gig was, "I started to giggle," she

said. "I had to be honest with them."

In fact, her last performance was in Seward. She returned at the end of January to sing at a Habitat for Humanity benefit concert, which raised \$2,000.

But she considers St. Paul, Minn., home now, she said, and Keillor has asked her to return to the show. When not singing or working, she's learning tae kwon do and Spanish, dancing to salsa music and scouting new restaurants.

Her travels with the Keillor family provide many opportunities for big-city adventures. And lately, she said, she hasn't missed Nebraska.

"I'll walk down the streets of New York City and feel like 'Yes, here I am, this is me!' Then I laugh to myself thinking the first 18 years of my life were in Seward, Nebraska," she said.

But don't expect the long, tall Nebraskan to turn into a big-city wimp.

"I am very proud of being from Nebraska," she said. "I am so glad for everything I gained from my childhood growing up in a place like it."