

THE RIVERTOWNS Enterprise

The Hometown Newspaper
of Hastings-on-Hudson,
Dobbs Ferry, Ardsley
and Irvington

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 49 • FEBRUARY 24, 2012

75 CENTS



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Zachary Unger holds his guitar as his younger brother, Noah, plays with a keyboard.

Family takes cues from 8-year-old's star quality

By Denise Woodin

HASTINGS — In many ways, Zachary Unger is a typical 8-year-old. He lives with his mom, dad, younger brother, dog and two cats in a house that's not too big and not too small on a hilly suburban street. When he's not attending third grade at Hastings' Hillside Elementary School, Zach plays football and basketball and practices guitar. Oh, and he can show you a list of acting credits that takes up a whole page, including his role in the "Encores" series production of Stephen Sondheim's "Merrily We Roll Along" that ended a two-week run at Manhattan's City Center last Sunday, Feb. 19.

Zach was only 4 when the adults in

his life noticed his talent. Relaxing in the family's sunny living room last Saturday, David Unger described waking up one morning to a pitch-perfect melody. Thinking the television had been left on, Unger was surprised to find his older son sitting on his bedroom floor mimicking songs from the children's show "The Backyardigans." Zach's rendition was "word for word, note for note."

"That's when I knew he had real talent," Unger remarked.

Around the same time, Jenny Ottinger, Zach's teacher at Temple Beth Shalom's preschool in Hastings, encouraged David and Dana Unger to explore the acting programs at Random Farms Kids' Theater in Elmsford.

A highly regarded children's acting school, Random Farms has nurtured the budding careers of hundreds of Westchester children who have gone on to roles in Broadway and Off-Broadway shows, national tours, films, commercials and voiceovers. As a member of the "Jellybeans" program, Zach made his stage debut as Johnny Casino in the popular musical "Grease."

"Grease... for 5-year-olds?" a visitor asked.

"It was heavily censored," David Unger replied with a smile.

Like all Jellybean shows, "Grease" ran for a single half-hour performance at the Tarrytown Music Hall. But that half-hour transformed the young actor

and his family. "He completely took to the stage like it was his living room," David Unger remarked.

Dana Unger, who saved her son's first script and has filled scrapbooks with subsequent memorabilia from his shows, added, "They treated it so professionally. I totally credit Random Farms and Tarrytown Music Hall because performing on that stage..."

"It's really fun," Zach jumped in.

Anya Wallach, producer, artistic director, and founder of Random Farms, wrote in an e-mail to the Enterprise that her student "was only 5 years old, but it was easy to see that he had a natural gift. Zach was magic on stage

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

— it wasn't just his voice that was good; he was both charismatic and genuine and performed with so much natural enthusiasm that you couldn't resist smiling as you watched him."

In 2010, Zach auditioned for, and won, a spot with the Random Farms Industry Showcase, which brings young actors to a New York City stage for a one-time performance before agents and managers. A YouTube video shows 5-year-old Zachary singing "If I Only Had a Brain" from "The Wizard of Oz" and then launching into a mock yogurt commercial. After that, the phone started ringing.

David and Dana Unger have always loved the theater. David, the chief operating officer of US Energy Group, a company that manufactures and installs energy management systems for residential and commercial buildings, had taken an acting class in college. And both his and his wife's grandparents had been vaudeville performers. But neither of the Ungers pursued show business for themselves. "It must be a recessive gene," David Unger joked.

Indulging their own enthusiasm for Broadway, the couple took their sons to musicals — "The Lion King," "Mary Poppins," and "Billy Elliot" — and supported the boys' interest in performing. Taken along to his brother's auditions from a young age, 6-year-old Noah decided that he wanted to give acting a try as well. He now takes classes at Random Farms and has auditioned for voiceovers and commercials.

One of the first phone calls after the New York City showcase was from Abrams Artists Agency, wanting to sign Zach for television and theatrical roles. Once Zach had an agent — he works with Rachel Altman, who recently sent him a huge bouquet of congratulatory Mylar balloons for "Merrily We Roll Along" — jobs came on a regular basis.

During his first six months of auditioning professionally, Zach booked some commercials and several voiceovers, including Disney's animated series "3rd & Bird" and the singing mini owls on "Dora the Explorer."

His 2010 role in the Musicals Tonight! production "Three Wishes for Jamie" marked the first time Zach would perform with adults. It was, Dana Unger observed, "a huge growing experience" for him. And last summer, Zach played an unnamed boy in the Shakespeare in the Park production of "Measure for Measure" at the Delacorte Theater.

Movie-goers can also catch a glimpse of Zachary Unger in two feature films scheduled for release in 2012: "Tar," in which he plays the younger version of actor James Franco's character, and "What Maisie Knew," in which he appears alongside Julianne Moore.

Asked if there's one thing he hasn't done on stage that he'd like to do, Zach didn't hesitate: "Be on Broadway."

"We definitely see Broadway in his future," Dana Unger said, aware that such an opportunity may come sooner rather than later. Last month, he played a young Charlie Chaplin in the month-long workshop of a new musical, "Becoming Chaplin." While the show is slated for a move to Broadway sometime this season, casting decisions have not been finalized.

But that's in the future. On this particular Saturday, the dog needed walking and the kids needed to be fed — "not pizza; they had pizza twice yesterday!" Dana Unger called out before the family piled into the car for the trip into Manhattan for Zach's second-to-last day of "Merrily" performances. On weekends, the musical