

# KELLIE HAINES

Ever since Kellie Haines discovered that her stuffed animals could talk, this Canadian ventriloquist has been entertaining and educating audiences with shows on a variety of subjects from space travel to Tourette Syndrome. Ms. Haines has a background in theater, dance and singing. She writes, directs and produces shows featuring her friends Magrau the bird, Kamilla the frog and Funnie the sock.



**TSA:** We've featured individuals with a wide variety of professions, but you are our first ventriloquist. We have to start with how you came to be one.

**Kellie Haines:** When I was eight I started taking my stuffed animals apart and making them talk. My puppets became my confidants. I found solace and comfort in them. And at a very early age I found my confidence there. It didn't matter if I had problems later—the teasing stopped for the time I was on stage. It felt good. It felt cathartic.

Those times on stage, I'm in the moment and it's the best feeling. I express myself in my educational shows. It's magic because the kids can really relate to the puppets and to me. The puppets can say things I might not be able to say.

**TSA:** The impact of TS varies from person to person. What has been the biggest impact of TS on your life?

**KH:** In the end it's been positive. But in the past it was the hardest thing I've ever had to go through in my life. I was out of control and sick, without knowing what I had. I was hospitalized at fifteen and that's when I finally got diagnosed. I thought I was destroying myself. So looking back on it now, without sounding too cliché, I had a dark time but it enabled me to have empathy, to read people and situations.

I don't always enjoy the aspects of having TS, but I have it and I chose in my early twenties to be proud of it instead of wanting it to go away. The impact is that I stand up tall. I got through a lot of stuff when I was a kid so I know that the next thing I have to go through—I'll get through. The experiences that you go through, shape you and maybe it's given me some confidence.

TS is part of me. It's inside of me. My husband says that he loves my TS and that it adds color to every day. We have a real sense of humor about it. Having to deal with what I have means finding a way to deal with it with a smile and a laugh. Life is short.

Now when I'm going through dark times, when I'm feeling down and suffering from really bad anxiety, I just think of the wonderful letters I get from kids with TS who talk about how they've been teased. Those kids have the courage to express themselves to me and to my puppets. I learn a lot from those kids.

**TSA:** What was it like when you were a child? Did you have any role models?

**KH:** All my role models have had hurdles—TS or not. I go for role models who have gone through a lot and are doing what they want to do. When I got out of the hospital my mom and dad were my role models. They had great coping skills.

Growing up I didn't have any role models with TS—I didn't even know I had TS. Once I got diagnosed it took me a long time to get involved with TSA. At first I was afraid to even go to meetings because I didn't know what to expect. I had a lot of denial. I looked at it as being very new. But then I went to a TSA meeting in Ontario and there were all these people embracing it. I hope I can be a good role model now.

**TSA:** How did your family cope?

**KH:** I have a sister and a brother—both younger. As far as the family unit goes I was very sick and undiagnosed through adolescence. My family became a protective unit around me, protecting me from teasing and from the letters that were sent to my family. I didn't learn about the letters until later. They were religious letters from very small, uneducated minds, telling my parents terrible things. There were also supportive people. My friends accepted me.

I was out of control and my family went through a lot of pain. I came through the whole experience and then I had to start over again at sixteen. My dad said it was OK, because I was "catching up."

**TSA:** Some kids withdraw, some discover a special outlet, what worked for you?

**KH:** I was the creative, hyper kid who channeled her energy into ventriloquism.

And now I do it as a profession!

**TSA:** Stress has a big impact on people with TS. Do you do anything to help alleviate your stress?

**KH:** That's a big one for me. One that I use every day is exercise. I'm a runner and cyclist. I go up stairs three at a time. I have an excessive amount of energy. Sometimes I feel really bad, but after a run I feel better. I also listen to music, jazz or classical, something calming. When I have anxiety a few tears is also a good release. Anxiety is an issue for me. Each time I experience it; it's like the first time. But I try to be positive.

I'm very health conscious. I'm careful about what I eat, careful about the amount of caffeine in my diet. Performing every single day, I have to keep my body in shape and my hands too. I can't afford tendonitis.

I also like movies. Movies really take me outside of myself. I get my head into someone else's. I'm looking at the cinematography, the acting, etc. If the movie is good I can sit still for three hours.

**TSA:** TS is in the media a great deal lately. Some of the presentations are more realistic and more positive than others. What do you think of the role of the media in increasing awareness?

**KH:** This is a really important topic because what you ultimately want is for people to see a realistic look at TS. If there are shows that are mocking it or making it horrifying, people get scared because they fear what they don't understand. Misconceptions are really scary.

**TSA:** Do you have any last words for kids with TS and their parents?

**KH:** If after my show the kids remember just one thing—that Magrau [puppet] starts to feel good about himself, then I've done a good job.

