

Nashville Scene

Best of Nashville 2011: Kids Writers' Choice

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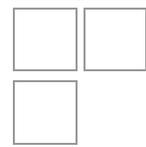
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ERIC ENGLAND

Janet Ivey-Duensing from Janet's Planet



Super Villian

BEST CHILDREN'S TV HOST: JANET IVEY-DUENSING, *JANET'S PLANET*

A double-digit regional-Emmy winner and one of Buzz Aldrin's ShareScience ambassadors, Janet Ivey-Duensing is a familiar face to grown-ups as co-host of *Tennessee's Wild Side* on NPT. But ask any fan in the 100 markets that carry her program *Janet's Planet*, which airs as interstitials mornings and afternoons on NPT, and they'll recognize the personable Nashvillian as one of the nation's preeminent science and astronomy educators.

Her latest project, set to visit some 30 cities through next spring, may boost her visibility to another level. It's an ambitious touring show with music that launched recently in Tampa, after a special mid-September preview for Nashville. (It'll return to Percy Priest Elementary on Nov. 11.) Utilizing what she calls "both my loves," live theater and video, it takes kids on an interactive journey through the solar system, with the help of fellow Music City theater veterans Josh and Jeremy Childs (as comic foils Professor Cosmos and Dr. Comet) and a robot companion named Toastbot.

Fashioned from PVC pipe, a bucket, a windshield-wiper motor and LED lights — and yes, a toaster — Toastbot exemplifies the spirit of exploration she hopes to foster. Its creator and builder, Lauren Heinrich, is a 13-year-old student at Hendersonville's Merrol Hyde Magnet School, home to a competitive robotics team. Lauren stepped up and delivered, Ivey-Duensing says, where professionals said it couldn't be done for the show's budget.

The host credits her own love of science to Mrs. Ernestine Yarbrough, her beloved fifth-grade teacher at Holmes Elementary in her hometown of Covington, Tenn. "She whispered in my ear, 'You're going to be a great writer someday,'" Ivey-Duensing recalls. "What you put in the minds of children is paramount." JASON SHAWHAN & JIM RIDLEY

BEST SENSORY OVERLOAD: FARMERS' MARKETS

The sorts of lessons parents try to impart to their children through conversation — eat good food, get outdoors, meet new people, learn stuff — are more effectively relayed to the youthful brain through osmosis. Bring the kiddos to any of

the great neighborhood farmers' markets around Nashville, and watch them thrill to the bustle, dance to the live music and marvel at colorful produce. When vegetables come from a party, they seem that much more friendly, see? STEVE HARUCH

BEST INDOOR WONDERLAND: HILLWOOD STRIKE & SPARE

If the Hillwood Strike & Spare were more accurately named, it would be called something like the Hillwood Strike, Spare, Bar, Arcade, Party Room, Bumper Cars and Oh Yeah, Vintage Show Biz Pizza Animatronic Band Palace of Amusement and Delight. Or, y'know, HSSBAPRBCOYVSBPABPAD for short. The West Nashville staple has a little of everything and a lot of lanes, so whatever your indoor recreation of choice — did we mention Skee-Ball? Pocket billiards? — you're likely to find it here. STEVE HARUCH

BEST RELATIVELY CONTAINED FREE-FOR-ALL: DRAGON PARK

Teeming with gleeful, zig-zagging kids, Fannie Mae Dees Park — better known as Dragon Park — provides a multi-modal destination off West End for families to burn some of that energy that might otherwise go into bouncing off the walls at home. With an entire subdivision of playgrounds, a hill, a tunnel, a grassy field — and of course, the iconic, highly climbable dragon — it's the perfect terrain for running wild on a sunny day. STEVE HARUCH

BEST FREE PUPPET SHOWS: DOWNTOWN LIBRARY

As if we didn't already love the downtown library enough — it's a treasure we should not take for granted — they also offer puppet shows that are hundreds of times better than they have to be, with richly creative performances that are as enrapturing to kids as to the adults who bring them. If you didn't make it to this year's puppet festival, you missed out on some seriously impressive productions, but you can still catch "Ellingtown," an engaging short program about jazz great Duke Ellington. And it's free — no strings attached. STEVE HARUCH

BEST FAMILY GETAWAY: BONNIE BLUE FARM

Trip, trop, trippity trop down the Natchez Trace toward Waynesboro, Tenn., where Gayle and Jim Tanner and their herd of 80 goats will welcome you like family. Under the arched gateway of Bonnie Blue Farm, life moves at a different pace — but not necessarily a slower one. The Tanners work sun-up to well past sundown, milking their herd twice a day and producing artisanal cheese for restaurants across the state. Guests on the farm can join Gayle in the milking parlor, play in the creek, visit the cheese cave and sleep in the cabin that Jim built (complete with modern conveniences). If you didn't know better, you might think you were in the French countryside, but Bonnie Blue Farm — and its cheese — is an exceptional taste of Tennessee. CARRINGTON FOX

BEST ART CAMP: LEQUIRE GALLERY

Is it wrong that I felt a twinge of jealousy every morning as I delivered my child to LeQuire Gallery to spend the day with artists such as Greg Decker, Tom Turnbull, Ben Caldwell and Alan LeQuire, who came together to create an all-star artistic experience for grade-schoolers? I mean, when I went to camp, we made lanyards and Popsicle-stick birdhouses, but my kid came home every day from LeQuire Camp with sculptural armatures and three-dimensional compositions in copper wire. One day, I arrived to find kids sitting on the studio floor while Jim Sherraden of Hatch Show Print and songwriters Paul Burch and Bob Delevante gave an impromptu concert among the easels. Jealous much? CARRINGTON FOX

BEST SPORTS CAMP: VANDERBILT BASEBALL

If you want to see baseball morph from part-time hobby into full-time passion, stop by Hawkins Field in the peak heat of summer, when the college boys show the little guys how the game is played. This year, the Commodores were fresh off the bus from the College World Series in Omaha, and the enthusiasm was ramped up across the board, from kids to coaches to parents. Moms and dads are invited to watch from the stands, especially on the final day, when Coach Tim Corbin turns the field into a giant slip-and-slide and shows the campers how to slide into home, with athleticism and style worthy of the big leagues. CARRINGTON FOX

BEST KID-FRIENDLY ADULT RESTAURANT: THE WILD HARE

Named for the unruly locks of the owners' child, this White Bridge Road eatery is hoppin' with families, yet there's no kids' menu. That's because Elizabeth Stelling Bills and husband Brian know how to feed a whole family without playing down to the youngest members. Brick-oven pizza with fire-pocked crust knows no age limit. Kid-friendly favorite mac-and-cheese gets an adult-approved upgrade with smoky gouda, and a classic BLT gets ramped up with Benton's bacon. When it comes to dessert, Wild Hare's chocolate mousse and peanut butter pie bring out the inner child in every diner. Meanwhile, there's a chalkboard for the minors and a beer-and-wine list for the moms and dads. It's not family-style dining — it's family dining with style. CARRINGTON FOX

BEST ADULT-FRIENDLY KID RESTAURANT: PIED PIPER EATERY

Grown-ups, please disregard the table tops of laminated album covers and the rock 'n' roll-themed menu: the Piper family's East Nashville diner isn't about you. No, those David Cassidy chicken tenders, burgers, fries and onion rings are aimed straight at the little ones — something made clear by the toy-train table set up near the kitchen, where tots happily re-enact the climax of *Super 8* while their parents take a breather (and sneak bites off their kids' plates). What makes this a destination instead of a stopover is the presence next door of Tammy Derr's delightful Fairytales Bookstore and More, one of the hardy mom-and-pop outfits that survived the Bookseller Apocalypse of '11. JIM RIDLEY

BEST ENTERTAINMENT OPTION: LIVE THEATER

You can pay megaplex prices to take the kids to a 3-D movie — or here, give me \$50 and I'll reproduce the experience by poking you in the eye and picking your pocket. If its multi-dimensional family entertainment you crave, performing spaces around Nashville offer a year-round banquet — whether it's the merrily participatory Saturday-morning shows by Richard Stein's Olde Worlde Theatre Company at The Belcourt, the Nashville Shakespeare Festival in Centennial Park, or of course the 80-year-old Nashville Children's Theatre, arguably the most consistently outstanding troupe in the city. JIM RIDLEY

BEST TRICK-OR-TREAT EVENT: GHOULS AT GRASSMERE, NASHVILLE ZOO

Fun: walking door to door in your neighborhood and asking for candy. (Take a kid, if you're into that sort of thing.) Good fun: performing the same activity on Halloween, dressed in your costume of choice (vampire, ghost, eighth president of the United States Martin Van Buren). Great fun: all of the above in murky darkness, punctuated by the bloodcurdling shrieks of white-cheeked gibbons, the rustling of meerkats and the stealthy flutter of the short-tailed leaf-nose bat. Last year, more than 23,000 visitors trooped through the Nashville Zoo's annual hextravaganza, a dandy "Carn-Evil" of candy stations, midway games, animal exhibitions, haunted hayrides, mystery mazes and "Scary-Go-Round" rides (as well as an attraction with the we-got-nothin' name "Road of Haunting Surprises"). It runs 5-9 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays Oct. 14-30; we recommend going either early or late to avoid the creepy crush. JIM RIDLEY

BEST CREEK WADING: THE FARM AT FONTANEL, WHITES CREEK / RIVER PARK, BRENTWOOD

They're free, they're convenient, and except for the threat to your dignity from algae-slickened flat-rock creek bottoms, they're safe. Bonus picnicking points for Fontanel's fine boardinghouse fare, including fried chicken, site-smoked barbecue and kids' meals served on commemorative Frisbees — the restaurant is quickly passing its corporate kin the Loveless Cafe as our place to send out-of-towners — and for the Chick-fil-A, Local Taco, Five Guys, Chile Burrito and Fresh Market en route to River Park in Brentwood. And remember: Crawfish lunge backward, not forward. JIM RIDLEY

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