



LET IT **Show!**



# IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

'Zuzu' actress Karolyn Grimes overcomes hardships by focusing on positives

STORY BY JULIE CAMPBELL

Few movies have captured the hearts of viewers more than the beloved 1946 Christmas classic, "It's a Wonderful Life." But for actress Karolyn Grimes, who played little Zuzu Bailey in the film, life after the movie was anything but wonderful. Orphaned by age 15, her entire life changed in the blink of an eye. The girl who had starred as a child actress in movies alongside Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Bing Crosby and John Wayne became a nobody in a Midwestern town, forced to live with an uncle and aunt who despised her. "I was pretty much pulled out from Los Angeles and shipped to a little town in Missouri," Grimes recalls. "That was the first big shock after losing my mother and my father." Grimes, still young-at-heart and active today at age 84, developed a resilient spirit that would carry her through other tragedies in her life, including

## CLASSIC FILM COMES ALIVE AT CHRISTMAS

At age 84, Karolyn Grimes still travels to promote "It's a Wonderful Life." She will be at the **Christmas Gift and Hobby Show** at the Indiana State Fairgrounds from Nov. 6-10, where she will be selling her new line of Christmas ornaments along with books, pictures and other items. Grimes is the author of "Zuzu's Petals: A Dream of It's a Wonderful Life" and "Zuzu Bailey's 'It's a Wonderful Life' Cookbook." The historic **Paramount Theatre** in downtown Anderson will show the film the evening of Dec. 6. Tickets may be purchased at the door. For more information, facebook.com/AndersonParamount or andersonparamount.org. Diehard fans might want to take a road trip to the **It's a Wonderful Life Festival** in Seneca Falls, New York, on Dec. 13-15. This annual festival has celebrated the film for 22 years. Grimes was instrumental in starting the festival. Several years later, she helped found the It's a Wonderful Life Museum in Seneca Falls, which participates in the festivities.

losing her adult son to suicide. "I always look for the positives, and I dwell on those," Grimes explains. "And that really got me through those years when I was trying to adjust to Midwest living. I love people, so I always try to find friends." With her career in Hollywood cut short, Grimes went on to get her education as a medical technologist, marry, and have four children of her own, while also helping to raise her three stepchildren. "I didn't even think about (being in the movies)," she says. "There was no need to dwell on it. I mean, it was done. So I just moved on with my life."

That all changed in 1980, when a reporter showed up at her door and asked to interview her about her role in "It's a Wonderful Life." "And that's the first time I saw the movie. I realized it was genius — it was absolutely fabulous. I was very excited and moved, and it tore my heart enough that I felt like it had to be shared." Grimes became an active ambassador for the movie, making appearances with the other actors to promote the film to a new generation of viewers.

She was reunited with the three other actors who played the Bailey children: Carol Coombs, who played Janie; Jimmy Hawkins, who played Tommy; and Larry Simms, who played Pete. Simms passed away in 2009, but the other two still share a special relationship with Grimes.

"Carol and I have been close for years. She's kind of like a sister to me," Grimes explains. "And the youngest boy (Hawkins) — we're real buddies and like brother and sister for real. The movie has brought us together."

Although millions of people across generations still quote Grimes' most famous line from the movie — "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings." — her humility is refreshing. She doesn't feel like she did anything special.

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- Karolyn Grimes