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A magical life

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) CRYSTAL LAKE - John P. Hopkins casually twirls and shuffles a deck of playing cards with one hand as he explains how magic helped him learn to read. Hopkins, of Cary, said learning from magic books and kits since the seventh grade had the byproduct of greatly improving his reading. That's not uncommon, fellow magician Nino Cruz said.

"I guess we all started with the magic tricks," Cruz said. "We're like big little kids."

Hopkins, Cruz and Crystal Lake resident Glenn Chelius are among a handful of local and national acts set to appear at the sixth annual "Nothin' Up My Sleeve" performance next week at the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake.

The April 5 show will feature a veteran ventriloquist, "bubbleologist" performing "bubble magic," and six magicians, including Cruz's 17-year-old daughter, Alexandra, who will try her dad's top hat on for size in her debut performance as an escape artist.

Cash raised at the show won't be disappearing up the sleeves of the performers. Proceeds from the event will benefit the Raue Center. Cruz and Chelius hope it also has the added effect of raising awareness for magic locally.

"It is still an art form people love and want to do," Chelius explained.

Past shows have included acts ranging from standard card tricks to a performer hanging upside-down in a stunt taken right out of "Mission Impossible."

Although he **lives** in Cary, this will be Hopkins' first year in the show.

Always ready with a joke, Hopkins mixes magic and comedy in his performances. Hopkins, who is in his 50s, entered the magic business by practicing tricks at a bar, which, he said, was the perfect place to learn.

"Drunks screw everything up," Hopkins said. "They won't always do what you want them to do."

Expecting the unexpected is key for any magician, he said.

"There's a big difference between practice and performing," he said. "Sometimes people don't like to be fooled."

Although he performs for business parties or other events, Hopkins, for a time, dabbled with the darker side of the slight-of-hand business. He said he briefly became a gambling cheat by doing everything from switching dice to counting cards.

That's not uncommon in the magic business, although it's a path Hopkins, Cruz, and Chelius would strongly recommend against.

"You can get hurt or worse," Cruz said.

One thing made clear by the veteran magicians is their continuing passion for the trade. The rush of fooling the audience has not lost its luster, Chelius said.

"The magic just sort of happens and I'm as amazed as they are," he said.

Magical night

What: Nothin' Up My Sleeve, a magic show to benefit the Raue Center for the Arts.

Who's performing: Producers Glenn Chelius and Nino Cruz, ventriloquist Bob Isaacson, "bubbleologist" Geoffrey Akins and magicians Misty Lee, Mike DiDomenico, John P. Hopkins and Alexandra Cruz.

When: 7 p.m. April 5.

Where: Raue Center, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake

Tickets: \$15 and \$18

To reserve a seat: Call the Raue Center box office at 815-356-9212.

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