

# At age 11, she's a veteran of the stage

By SUZANNE MARINO

LINWOOD — Ashlee Keating of Linwood turned 11 earlier this month, but already has more experience on the stage and behind the scenes than most will have in a lifetime.

Keating will step on the stage this Saturday, Sept. 27 at the Middle Township Performing Arts Center. It will be an encore performance of the perennial favorite, "Annie" with Keating in the title role. The same cast met with rave reviews when they performed in August at the Ocean City Music Pier.

Asked what she likes, it makes it a pretty easy answer as she loves every aspect of performing.

"I really love to sing," Keating said.

She also enjoys taking on a character and acting, choreography and making friends with the cast.

This is a real plus as "Annie" needs to do it all during the show that brings her from an orphan to find her place in a family along with her dog Sandy and Daddy Warbucks.

Although she said she enjoys all of the music of the show, her favorite song is, "Tomorrow."

She was part of a cast of "Annie" four years ago, but at that time she played Molly, Annie's little friend. Although doing Molly was wonderful, she enjoys tackling the role of Annie

even more.

In "Annie," Sandy the dog is her constant companion. So what is it like to work on a live stage production with a dog where there are no "take two" chances? Keating said "Sandy," who is really a 2-year-old Bijon named Charlie, is very good and works well with people.

Keating takes voice lessons from local voice instructor, Sal Dupree and added that he has been a great help to her, a sentiment Keating's mom, Dale Keating, echoed.

As part of the long learning curve that has enabled the young actor to land roles, she also takes dance lessons at Encore Studio of Absecon. Though she has never taken a formal acting class, Dale Keating said she works hard at the rehearsals and that seems to give her what she needs.

"Annie" will begin on Saturday with Keating in a long red wig. It will end with her in red curly-haired wig, "When I get all gussied up," said the "Annie" star.

Keating began in productions as a very young child and says that it has been fun each time. She has sung the national anthem at the Surf Sandcastle, numerous 9-11 memorial events, Miss America preliminaries, and is a frequent guest singer for the Boardwalk Bullies.

Keating recently sang at the

U.S. Open Tennis Tournament the night Pete Sampras retired. She had a one-day part on "One Life to Live" and played young Grethel in the "Sound of Music" on Broadway and was then a part of the Broadway Road Show traveling mostly on the East Coast.

Each time she takes on a role, there is something new to be learned and Keating said she learned something very interesting this time while in rehearsal for "Annie."

She learned to cry. She said it had been near impossible for her to just begin to cry but now she can do it whenever told.

"I think of my brother leaving for college and that gets the tears started," said Keating.

All the traveling and rehearsals take their toll, but one thing remains constant and that is school work comes first and being a kid while you can still be a kid is right up there on the list. Keating is in fourth grade at Seaview School in Linwood and plays travel soccer as well.

Asked if she liked "American Idol," it was a resounding yes. Keating might put some energy forth in the upcoming year along with her family and Dupree to make "Junior Idol." She did make the cut for "America's Most Talented Kids," but the show was axed from the networks lineup.

Last year, when Ashlee's



Suzanne Marino

**Ashlee Marie Keating, 11 of Linwood who will take to the stage in an encore performance in the title role of "Annie" on Saturday night at the Middle Township Performing Arts Center.**

brother, John, was a senior at MRHS, it was time for the many things a family needs to do together to get ready for college and that included many weekend college visits. That meant the younger Keating could not jump into as many productions or commitments.

Dale Keating said, "As a family, there are sacrifices and last

year the focus was on John and Ashlee accepted that without any question. Just like it was a sacrifice to be a part of the 'Sound of Music Broadway Road Show' for the family. We work it all out together."

As mother and daughter were running through some of the highlights of the young Keating's career, they both remembered a

favorite song that Ashlee did as part of a Broadway Review production, "Everything is Coming up Roses," the old Ethel Merman song.

At 11 years old, with a very supportive family, a strong coach, and the energy and personality to light up a small room, that song might be the perfect segue into a bright future.