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Scott Florence, 17, of Sugar Land, participates in a voice-over workshop conducted by Bettye Zoller.
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Voice actress offers tips for success in her business

By TINA MARIE MACIAS
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She can do the voice of a child to eerie precision, but her dog voice and teenager voice are a little off. Nonetheless, Bettye Zoller still describes herself as "one of the most well-known voice coaches in the U.S."

She is popular. When this voice-over veteran visited Houston to give a much-anticipated workshop last month, it filled up quickly, and people were turned away. She'll be back for another workshop in the fall.

Zoller has been a voice actress for 33 years. She began after a co-worker in a Dallas jingle studio told her about it.

"One day I was singing with a girl, and she said, 'I've got a session. ... I have a voice-over,' " Zoller said. "I said, 'Holy smokes, this is what I do. I'm an actor. I'm not just a singer.' I didn't even know about voice-overs."

Zoller said she has been singing and acting since she was 5. She received her bachelor's degree in vocal performance from the University of Missouri. Last year, that same university gave her an award for being its alum with the most unusual career.

She stresses to students the need to make an audience suspend its disbelief.

"A lot of people think that that person who has a headache has one. They don't know she's acting," Zoller said. "That's the true test. I don't want to know there's a script. If I think you're getting paid to say that, I won't believe you."

IN her workshops, she emphasizes sounding honest during the first read and teaches some tips on getting into the business.

"First they should realize it's not just talking. Some people think if they can talk they can get into reading," Zoller said. "It is a skill and it can be learned, but it takes study."

She also said those who want to break into the business should find a professional to make their demo, attend workshops and be open to doing all kinds of voice-over work.

"Everything talks now. Even greeting cards talk," Zoller said. "The girl that does all the car GPS announcing, that's a full-time job; five days a week, that's all she does."

Zoller now lives in Dallas, a booming area for animé production studios, breeding ground for animé voice actors and home of A-Kon, the longest-running animé convention in the U.S.

Zoller said she trains students who want to go into animé, but that type of voice acting is not her forte.

She prefers voicing for audiobooks, commercials and, her favorite, toys.

"They're so creative. They're as creative as children are," she said.

Zoller is the voice of Lionel Trains' 2007 edition and said she has worked for more than 3,000 companies during her 30-year career.

Two of her most recognizable roles include being the voice for Speak & Spell, the 1980s talking educational toy, and voicing commercials for Pace picante sauce.

"I have a lot of people remember that," Zoller said. "They'll whip around and say, 'New York City? Get a rope!'"

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