

New Year's Eve is waaay cool

By Gail Appleson

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Alicia Fallert got a kick out of First Night.

To be precise, she gave a kick at First Night.

Alicia, 8, of Imperial, boldly marched right up to a jester making balloons and gave him a good swift boot to the tush to the delight of the crowd of onlookers.

"Well, the sign on his back said 'kick me,' so I kicked him," she said. Asked if this was a new experience for her, Alicia didn't hesitate. "No," she answered quickly, "I'm not shy."

And the New Year's Eve celebration at Grand Center is certainly not a time to be shy. Especially this year, when a cold, brisk wind whipped through the crowd. What better way to keep warm than to join in the beckoning parade of kings and queens or dancing to the Munny Kids singing "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" from the musical "Spamalot"?

This year's event rang in 2007 with the theme "Red Hot Camelot" with about 75 performances and activities such as "twist and joust" in the street, the search for the artful "grail," a 30-foot puppet dragon and fireworks displays.

Other themes held sway at other events designed to celebrate the New Year.

At Louis & Clark Community College in Godfrey, yodeler and trick roper Randy Erwin entertained on one stage while hypnotist Ray Thompson kept another audience under his spell.

Erwin and Thompson were among those who entertained in the early hours of First Night River Bend. The college-sponsored event, expected to attract more than 3,000, featured a "Mother Goose" telling stories, and a gym full of children who made sand art, masks

and clay figures. Marionettes, a jazz band, country dancing lessons and illusionist Keith West were among the big draws.

At Grand Center, the First Night got off to a subdued start as revelers huddled in doorways seeking shelter from the bitter wind. Gene Koziatek of south St. Louis County and Rich and Lorraine Kennedy of west St. Louis County were lucky enough to find an open building and stayed in the foyer mapping out their plans for the evening and waiting for the parade to begin.

Despite the drop in temperature and an increase in price this year to \$8 a ticket, Koziatek said the music was well worth it. Performers ran the gamut from the soulful sounds of Kim Massie to the gypsy, jazz and Latin music of Farshid Etniko.

"You go to drinking parties and you're going to spend a lot more," Koziatek said.

As the parade started, families with small children began to gather on the street. Among them were Wylie and Bernice Williams of University City and their granddaughter Maya, 6, who lives in Phoenix. They danced along with the marching band trying to keep warm.

"We came because of the Camelot theme, for our granddaughter who is really into princesses," Bernice Williams said.

Then out came the balloon-twisting jesters with "kick me" or "kick him" signs on their backs.

Dan Raymond, who performs with the St. Louis Renaissance Festival and received the boot from Alicia when his back was turned, confessed that it wasn't that unusual.

"They (kicks) are usually very gentle, but the kids have a grand time," he said.

One of the new features this year was a "burn your regrets" station overseen by a wizard with a long gray beard. Participants could write their regrets on a piece of paper and hand them to attending knights who "catapulted" them into a flame.

Isadora Cryer and Lauren Brady, both 15, hesitantly approached the display.

What kind of regrets could these young teens possibly have?

"Ex-boyfriends," answered Isadora.

Doug Moore contributed to this article.