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SCVTHS Alumni, Katelyn Gaffney, left.

By MARK KENNEDY - *Associated Press* - Monday, November 28, 2016

NEW YORK (AP) - Megan Levinson had one wish when she turned 12. She was already starring onstage as Clara in the "Radio City Christmas Spectacular" but she wanted more.

"I blew out my candles and I said, 'I hope I grow tall enough to be a Rockette,'" she recalled. Wish granted.

Levinson, of North Caldwell, New Jersey, is one of two former Claras who have graduated to the ranks of the 80 women whose high kicks electrify this year's holiday show in New York. A family tradition for many, the show attracts an estimated 1 million visitors during its eight-week season, according to Madison Square Garden.

The other is Katelyn Gaffney, of Clark, New Jersey, who also played Clara, one of the show's young stars, in 2003 in Branson, Missouri, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when she was 11. She and Levinson both joined the New York company as Rockettes in 2010. "I remember watching the Rockettes when we'd be backstage not performing as Clara. I would try to practice all the choreography. I was like, 'I'm going to learn all the Rockette moves. When I turn 18, I can be a Rockette, too!'"

Gaffney and Levinson have become best friends in the Radio City cast. For the past seven seasons, they've been tasked with as many as five, 90-minute shows a day. Both also have appeared in the Rockettes' summer show.

"I think I can speak for both of us, in saying that we have both dreamed of being Rockettes for so long that, now, coming in every day, it truly is a dream to come here every single day and do what we love," said Gaffney.

The path from being Clara to a Rockette is all about talent - and height. The young girl must stand under 4-foot-11 and Rockettes must be between 5-foot-6 and 5-foot-10½. That means any hopefuls need a serious growth spurt in between. Levinson stood just 4-foot-6 when she started playing Clara in Chicago in 2001 but had shot up to 5-foot by the end of the year (and also lost eight teeth.) "I just remember telling my mom every day, 'I want to be a Rockette. I need to grow.'"

"I would write, 'Dear Diary, today a Rockette winked at me in the wings.' I looked up to the Rockettes so much as role models and I was so impressed by the teamwork aspect and how hard they worked," she said. "I looked up to them so much and now I hope that we're role models like that."

Gaffney's path to the ranks of the synchronized dancers started with her family's annual tradition of coming into the city to see the show at Radio City, something that always left her "enthralled." One day, her dance school did a tour of Radio City.

"I was so excited just to be in the room where Rockettes rehearsed," she recalled. The young girl soon learned that there were auditions for Clara the next day and, an 11-year-old standing 4-foot-4, begged her mom to go. She got the job. Gaffney, who grew up with only brothers, said she's found a sisterhood with the Rockettes and a connection to a glittery past that stretches back to the show's origin in 1933.

"This is so much more than a job to me. For most of us, we would do this for free. This is my life," she said.