

THE FIRST ✿ THE ONLY

VeroBeach

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Though non-native and a bit noisy, the regal peacock and peahen have become

Prominent Neighbors





MAUREN NICOLACE

A partnership between Ballet Vero Beach and The Learning Alliance, along with a grant from the Indian River Community Foundation, gives first and third grade students the opportunity to attend a free dance performance that's aligned with what they're reading in class.

Cultural Impact

ACCESS TO THE ARTS CAN BE A TICKET TO A BRIGHT FUTURE



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

“This play is called *Our Town*,” the Stage Manager began. “It was written by Thornton Wilder and directed by Mrs. Maggie Baker.”

The lead role of the Stage Manager character was being played by my daughter, Olivia, in her final

theater performance as a student at Saint Edward’s School. I watched in awe of her poise and confidence.

“In it,” Olivia as the Stage Manager continued, “you will see Ms. Logemann, Ms. Peponez, Ms. Beckwith, Mr. Corrie, Mr. Nelson, Mr. Miller, and many others.”

Several of these cast

members have been performing with Olivia since middle school. Some have also played lead roles in works ranging from *Schoolhouse Rock!* to *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Others, even while playing minor roles, have stolen the show.

I scanned the room, observing a familiar look of

Opportunities for participation in arts and cultural activities in Indian River County are plentiful.

pride on the faces of other parents who have been in the same audiences as my wife, Stephanie, and me over the years. Families that have experienced the themes of the play's three acts together over the years. Daily life. Love and marriage. Death and eternity. Our town.

On its own, adolescence is fraught with emotion and awkwardness. It is filled with character-building learning experiences, some easy and some hard. For many, the self-doubt of the teenage years is like kryptonite, the fictitious radioactive substance that rendered Superman powerless. For our daughter and many like her, the performing arts have been the antidote. Through acting, painting, playing, singing, writing, and other creative pursuits, these kids have soared.

To graduate with a standard high school diploma in Florida, students in Indian River County and throughout the state are required to earn one credit in fine or performing arts, speech and debate, or practical arts that develop skills and

techniques that promote creativity, interpretation, and imagination. Beyond this minimum standard, further immersion depends on the occasional opportunity to experience art integrated into regular academic coursework provided by one or more of the community's arts and culture organizations.

One innovative and inspiring community activity that integrates art into education to promote third grade reading proficiency is Ballet Vero Beach's "Stage to Page" program. This collaboration with The Learning Alliance gives students in first and third grades an opportunity to attend a free matinee dance performance that brings the story and curriculum around a book students are reading in the classroom to life. The program is supported in part with grant funding from Indian River Community Foundation and benefits more than 5,000 students annually.

Another exciting activity that brings art into the classroom is the Vero Beach Opera's "Class Act" program. In recent years,



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Katherine Eppink, a dancer with Ballet Vero Beach, engages students with a book.

elementary students have been introduced to Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and then participated in exercises that promote reading and math proficiency. The organization's president, Joan Ortega-Cowan, tells me that these experiences plant seeds in children that can grow into a love of opera and the arts for generations to come. This is particularly important to me, as the Community Foundation stewards endowed funds to support the opera's long-term sustainability.

Children interested in individual training or group experiences in the performing arts benefit from a number of opportunities made possible in large part by the philanthropic support of generous community members. For 20 years, the Gifford Youth Orchestra has trained children aged 3 to 18 to master piano, stringed and percussion instruments,

and voice. Inspired by the longtime leadership of GYO founder Crystal Bujol, the Community Foundation recently awarded a grant of \$24,000 from the Community Enrichment Fund to provide annual tuition scholarships to students from low-income families. These students are introduced to an instrument, learn to properly care for it, and perform before a live audience. The confidence they gain will pay dividends for years to come.

For those of us beyond our school years, opportunities for voluntary participation in arts and cultural activities in Indian River County are plentiful. The annual Cultural Arts Guide published by the Cultural Council of Indian River County is a fantastic resource to find, learn about, and attend one or more arts-related events or performances.

One event featured in

the guide that Stephanie and I recently attended as guests of sponsors Trent and Rachel Leyda was Riverside Theatre's 50th

Anniversary Spring Gala. It was a magical evening featuring a performance by stage and screen star Kelli O'Hara and attended by a veritable "Who's Who" of Vero Beach society.

During the evening, event chair Sandy McManus announced that the celebration raised more than \$1 million—a huge endorsement for a beloved community institution with an education program that emphasizes more than simple entertainment for its students. Social awareness, collaboration, creative and social skills, arts appreciation, vocational



Gifford Youth Orchestra instructor Ellen Charles works with student Aliyah on the keyboard.

BROOKE SAUSERMAN



Brothers William and Wallace are Gifford Youth Orchestra vocal students and acoustic guitar enthusiasts.

preparation, and well-being. Right here in our town.

Back in Grover’s Corner, the fictional place and real time of 1901 to 1913 that Wilder transports us to, the final scene takes place in the town’s cemetery. Pneumonia, a burst appendix, a suicide, and a maternal death during childbirth: Causes of death then that are still common today and stand as stark reminders that every moment of life should be treasured.

Like the character Emily, I wonder sometimes if any of us ever realizes life while we live it, now or while playing any one of the seven parts the Bard puts on the stage. As infants? As whining schoolchildren? As lovers? As soldiers? As stoics? As bespectacled middle-aged adults? As toothless, blind ghosts?

Saints and poets, maybe. Artists for sure.

Through performances and the work they leave behind, creatives and makers have packed a suitcase for places that you or I may never have been. Because of their lived experience, their perspective, their inspiration, we have confidence in our own ability to travel and explore. To places where a young person casting eyes on Picasso’s *Guernica* may dream of visiting. To places where an aging neighbor reciting a line written by the late poet-president of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, may find comfort as a final resting place, where “two oleanders—white and pink—will perfume the Signare.”

What is an oleander? And who are the Signare? And where is *Guernica* or Senegal?

The answers are out there. To find them, art in our town is a good place to start. ❁

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