

North Theatre fueled by teamwork, dedication

Jen Zettel-Vandenhouten USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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Alyssa Jansen, playing Imogene Herdman, Leah Dreyer, playing Mother, and Aidan Buechler, playing Ralph Herdman, fight over a doll that is a stand in for the baby while rehearsing a scene for “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever” during a theater seminar production class at Appleton North High School earlier this month. *Danny Damiani/Post-Crescent Media*

APPLETON - Hard-working students, dedicated volunteers and the vision of director Ron Parker are the elements that have made Appleton North High School's theater program one of the most successful in the state.

Parker, who has led the program for more than 16 years, deflected praise from himself onto everyone else involved with North Theatre.

"Whatever success we've had is really because these kids believe in each other, the adults believe in the kids and the alumni believe in the kids — it's this family," he said.

The North program recently earned a coveted Critic's Choice Award at the Wisconsin High School Theatre Festival for the 16th consecutive year. Three years ago the program was named the best high school theater program in the Midwest by Stage Directions magazine.

Parent volunteers said they and the students take their cues from Parker.

Laura Biskupic first got involved with the program a decade and a half ago when her son, Charlie, performed in "The Sound of Music." During the performance, the Biskupics marveled at their son, a 6-foot-5-inch freshman football player, on stage dancing.

"We were astonished. Just that was enough to sell us — that they could get this giant young man to dance," Biskupic said.

As her family got more involved in the program, Biskupic saw the high bar Parker sets for students, and how they respond by putting in long hours, helping each other give their best performances.

What's more impressive is that it's achieved through collaboration, not competition, she said. "The thing I appreciate so much about him (Parker) is that he encourages these kids to be their best selves, probably even pushes them to achieve more than he ever thought they could, and he does it without this competitiveness," Biskupic said. "He encourages them to be kind."

'Every kid is welcome'



Appleton North High School's Ron Parker gives direction to students in his theater seminar production class. *Danny Damiana/Post-Crescent Media*

Before Parker took over at North, the last stage show had a cast of 11 students. He opened up the program to as many students as possible. Now, hundreds of teenagers participate in plays, musicals, the improv group, the Summer Shakespeare program or Drama Club.

"Every kid is welcome. We have kids who are jocks and kids who are really into school, kids who are not into school, kids who are from every possible mindset, every possible condition, every possible socioeconomic group," Parker said. "Everybody walks in the theater program and no one is ever judged. They're all accepted, because if you're crazy enough to be part of this thing and work hard to create this thing, we want you as part of our family."

Ariana Douglas, a 2009 North graduate, said the students buy into Parker's philosophy and give everything for their performances.

"I remember being in rehearsals during production week, and we would be there from 9 a.m. until 10-11 o'clock at night and never did I see a student complain about being tired," Douglas said. "It's something we all wanted to succeed in."

Douglas went on to earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's degree from Louisiana State University in vocal performance. She now works as a studio artist with the Florentine Opera Company in Milwaukee.

Throughout her journey, she's kept some of Parker's words of wisdom in her back pocket. "I remember Ron Parker saying that you have to be the best that you can be — even if you have one line — and make sure your acting is just as good as your singing, even if you're singing one solo line," she said. "That was something that stuck with me."

Innovation through excitement



Jacie Jones surprises other student actors while rehearsing a scene during a theater seminar production class at Appleton North High School earlier this month. *Danny Damiani/Post-Crescent Media*

The North Theatre program has earned the Critic's Choice award at the Wisconsin High School Theatre Festival every year since Parker took over.

The shows are so popular in the community, it's hard for the box office to get everyone a seat, said Biskupic, who volunteers there during performances.

Parker keeps students engaged and the auditorium full by selecting the latest stage works and sprinkling in classics. North Theatre will present 'The Little Mermaid' in the spring. It only recently became available.

"I like doing things that get kids excited. 'The Little Mermaid' was released for amateur production in September, and I had a contract the same day it was released," Parker said. "Kids are excited because it's a new show — something that hasn't been done by a lot of people."

The same was true of 'Mary Poppins,' 'Spamalot,' 'Shrek' and many more. Furthermore, the program's collaborative atmosphere gives students more of a stake in each show. They actively contribute ideas to all aspects of the productions, which gives them a feeling of ownership.

For the 2015 spring musical, students adapted 'Alice in Wonderland' from Lewis Carroll's original work, and later condensed it to a one-act play.

"When they suggest something and ... they see their idea happen, all of a sudden they realize they have good ideas," Parker said. "Sometimes kids are not allowed to think that they have good ideas, and they do."

The result is a domino effect, where people freely offer their ideas for the good of the program. "One idea leads to another, leads to another and everybody contributes. The same with the volunteers. The same with the parents. Everyone feels that they're a vital part and their contributions are seen and experienced every single day," Parker said.

Volunteer 'army'

Parker refers to BOLT — Boosters of Lightning Theatre — as an "army" of parent volunteers. They coordinate everything from ticket sales, set design and costumes to meals for students during long rehearsals.

"They allow me to do my job and work with the kids. They take on all the other stuff — it's pretty awesome," Parker said.

Joe Sina, chair of BOLT, said there are about 100 parents who pitch in during productions. Some stick with the program even after their children graduate.

Volunteers bring valuable experience to the table and enjoy sharing their knowledge with students.

"I'm really blessed with all these people who feel they have a vested interest in what happens here," Parker said. "They keep coming back and I think they really believe it's because they have a chance to connect and make a difference in young people's lives."

The general philosophy behind BOLT is simple: Parents want to spend time with their children, but teenagers generally want space from their parents. BOLT allows parents to share the theater experience with their child in a way that isn't intrusive.

Parker and the more seasoned volunteers set everyone to work, and parents aren't typically volunteering right next to their child.

"It's not like Mom and Dad are on the stage with me or in the front row — no, they're in the Green Room sewing costumes or they're in the back painting, so they're there but they're not there," Parker said.

Biskupic said she couldn't wait for her youngest daughter, Molly, to get involved with North Theatre.

"It wasn't because I wanted to see her on stage. It was because I wanted her to get to work with all of these adults," Biskupic said. "The volunteers are quite amazing, too, and in this atmosphere of collaboration, I was really looking forward to that."

Alisa Jordheim will always remember the volunteers' efforts while she was in high school.

Jordheim graduated from North in 2004 before pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Cincinnati. She teaches voice part-time at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee when she's not performing.

"I'll never forget the incredible group of parents that would help build sets, costumes, fundraising," she said. "I think the Appleton North community is really strong and it wouldn't be as successful without them."

Jen Zettel: 920-993-1000, ext. 539, or jennifer.zettel@gannettwisconsin.com; on Twitter @jenzettel