

CORAL GABLES

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Connecting Communities

Small miracles become big stars in Area Stage Company program

BY HELEN LEMUS

The Inclusion Theater Project at the Area Stage Company is home to a talented group of 119 students.

Conceived by Maria Banda-Rodaz in 2014, the project provides people with developmental disabilities ages 5 and older with a unique opportunity to explore stagecraft firsthand in a conservatory setting.

The original students were surprising. They came to the conservatory to learn about theater and instead ended up conquering some of the limits that everyone said would be a fact of life.

"One student who was non-verbal, has ended up speaking," Banda-Rodaz said. "A couple of years later we had so many students that I was able to start a program."

The students learn from coaches how to perform. They are given theater, dance and voice lessons. They have to memorize lines, choreography and songs. They are in the same curriculum as the other groups. Twice a year, they stage performances open to a public audience. To participate, the students have to win a slot in an audition which consists of a one minute monologue and 16 bars of a song. The next performance, *Frozen Jr.*, is scheduled to open in July.

Developmental disabilities are challenging problems for youngsters and their families. Autism, cerebral palsy and spina bifida are some of the diagnoses that these kids face. At the Area Stage Company's Inclusion Theater Project, the coaches, staff and students focus on what they can do and not on what they cannot.

"They're on stage, singing and dancing, coming in and out without adult supervision carrying the show," Banda-Rodaz said.

Amy Bogardus has an 18-year-old daughter who has been with the project since its inception. She said that her daughter profited immensely from the experience.

"I'm thrilled," she said. "It's fantastic."

Sometimes a person with autism will be able to recite entire passages of script verbatim after hearing someone else say it. In a program like

this, kids with autism can benefit from utilizing this skill and in so doing build self-esteem as they are applauded and rewarded for it. Plus, dramatic instruction, role-playing and theater play have been shown by researchers to create new neurological pathways in the brain, improving brain function.

When asked what was the most rewarding part of directing the project, Banda-Rodaz spoke about the changes that she saw in her students, but she is mainly happy to provide a place for them to act.

"To provide actors with developmental disabilities with a platform where they can practice and be successful at doing theater," is what she said gave her the most satisfaction.

"I would love for people who have family members with developmental disabilities to come see what we do," she

said. "I call them my small miracles. Every day someone learns a line better or learns a song, who couldn't sing before. It's breathtaking."

The students meet with coaches at their schools: Crystal Academy, Great Heights Academy and Our Pride Academy. The coaches are professionals in the field of musical theater. Although the program has



Coach Rebecca Cartaya opens the session with some motivating words.



Nicole Soccaras, who portrays "Elsa" in *Frozen Jr.* practices her lines.

(Photos by Gary Alan Ruse)

therapeutic elements, it is not therapy.

"ITP is first of its kind program in that it provides a platform for performers with different abilities to showcase their talents in the community," said Rebecca Cartaya, a speech pathologist who is one of the coaches.

For more information on the project, send email to itp@areastagecompany.com.