

Are you excited? Nervous? We are merely minutes away from visiting with our elected officials. That sounds pretty scary, right, especially for those of you who have never talked face-to-face with your elected officials. In our minds we always picture them as somehow smarter than us, more “in the know” than us, which in some way makes us feel inadequate by comparison.

But my parents always reminded me as a child that everyone puts their pants on the same way, one leg at a time. A refreshing cliché that is so appropriate for your time here today.

Relax, share your thoughts on the Arts, and let your voice be heard. You may not have a list of facts in your head, or the ability to write a dissertation on the value of the Arts, but what you do have is the passion of being an observer or participant in the Arts. That, my friend, is a priceless commodity, so simply exploit that commodity.

I just want to take a bit of your time and share with you some thoughts about the education field.

I have been a Colorado high school theatre and English teacher for 29 years, and I love it. I thoroughly enjoy the interaction with the students in my classes each day. Since I teach high school theatre, I also have daily after-school practices for... the... whole... school... year. Unlike the athletic coaches who coach for a season, the theatrical season lasts the entire school year. And I truly cherish the daily rehearsals.

In my many years as a teacher, I have shared great joys and sorrows with my students, and their families.

- I was in my classroom with my students when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded.
- I was in my classroom with my students when the O.J. Simpson verdict was read.
- I was with my students in Times Square when Y2K hit and the world went into utter chaos. Whew, glad we survived that one.

- I was in my classroom with my students when the second plane hit the World Trade Center.
- But I was also with my students when the first black president took the oath of office.

Countless historical events have taken place in my 29 years of teaching and times have changed. There have been some big changes in the educational landscape. Now students are experiencing the classroom of the 21st century. But one thing is consistent; my students are always with me. And today is no different. I came here today with sixteen brilliant young students from sixteen different high schools across Colorado.

The Colorado Thespians calls these students State Officers and they volunteer to work on improving theatre education in their community, at our annual conference and with their fellow students. They are ambassadors, raising awareness for arts education and opening doors wherever they can.

They are also celebrities. In this group of students, you have Otto Frank from the moving dramatic play *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Matt DeJong from Chaparral High School, who shaved his head to play the role. You have Hope Caldwell from the fictional town of *Urinetown*, Sarah Harmon from Denver School of the Arts. You have a Shakespearean woman, strong, convincing, and battling with love, Beatrice from *Much Ado about Nothing*, played by Nicole Campbell from Horizon High School. And the loveable, childlike character of Coneybear from *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, Jeremiah Light from Cherokee Trail High School. Tyler Donovan from Mountain Range High School, who put those long legs of his to good use in the musical *Copacabana*. These students are full of talent. For example, Tyler is not only a theatre student, but he is also a concert pianist.

Even the teachers who have accompanied these students bring their brush with dramatic literary characters. Dr. Mary Schuttler from the University of Northern Colorado played Ms. Molly in *Hello Dolly*, and only broke character briefly as the set behind her collapsed. Dr. Schuttler is now the head of the theatre education program at UNC. Mr. Beau Augustine was Doc in *West Side Story* at Pomona High School. For that role he shaved his head and grew the sides long, so that he could

have the best comb-over an 18-year-old could ever have, and still he asked a girl to prom styling that hairdo. He is now the theatre teacher at Pomona High School.

As a national screener for high school theatres across America, I have had the distinct advantage of observing hundreds of high school productions from all over the country. I have witnessed the conflicts of *Macbeth*, the romance of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the unstoppable musical humor and tap extravaganza of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, all on the high school stage. I can't even begin to name the number of musicals and plays I have observed, but they have all had several things in common.

They had high school students up on stage in front of overwhelmingly supportive audiences, audiences that were made up of their community members, family, and friends, and what they were doing on stage was making literature come alive. Each of these students will graduate with a diverse résumé that makes them better prepared for life. These students have experienced things that they will remember for a lifetime, because they had the opportunity to be involved in the Arts. For each of these productions required the students to understand the culture and diversity issues of a given society or group of people. In some instances, the students had to command roles that required dialects or accents, playing characters that far exceeded their age and life experiences, such as in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*.

When high schools produce musicals, they have student orchestras that play Broadway musical scores, scores that were written for professional musicians, by composers such as Rogers and Hammerstein, Jerry Hermann, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin. What a treat to experience the Arts in our schools and to see the students' hard work pay off.

In Colorado we have been blessed, and we can thank the visionary leaders at the Colorado Department of Education and the legislation that backed that process to revamp the Colorado Academic Standards and embed them with 21st-century skills. These new standards were adopted a year ago and they incorporate all of the Arts—Theatre, Music, Visual Arts, and Dance—and they are standards that consistently outline what a child needs to learn, what they need to be exposed to, and how they will be prepared for their post-secondary education or workforce readiness. It is the job of all of us to come together to strengthen arts education,

and our professional arts organizations are a big part of that partnership. Colorado Thespians is committed to taking on a leading role in developing theatre rubrics for the classroom, encouraging the implementation of the new Colorado Arts Standards, and providing helpful resources for the Arts instructors.

Now let's get down to business. I could list the research that tells us the relevance and importance of Arts education, but I would be preaching to the choir. So let me close by adding these comments.

Sadly, during these difficult economic times, arts programs are the first to be sacrificed. In many schools where classroom space is limited, art "studios" are now only contained in a cart that is wheeled by teachers from room to room, severely limiting the arts education that students receive.

In Colorado, many of us realize the importance of designing and maintaining arts education programs that are culturally enriching, stimulate creative expression, build self-esteem and improve academic achievement. In addition to the effects of Colorado's new state academic standards, the impact of House Bill 1273, and the Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) program, Colorado is reaching for new horizons.

In a community as diverse as Colorado, the Arts serve as an essential bridge across language and cultural differences. They become the shared link, the glue that shapes our understanding of how we see ourselves and each other. In giving children the materials and the freedom to create through positive and supportive legislation, we celebrate our children, their families, the schools they attend, and our communities. Today, more than ever, the Arts are needed by our young people as a forum for self and safe expression, communication, exploration, imagination, and cultural and historical understanding.

Enjoy your day and make sure to share your passion!

#### References

- Importance of the Visual Arts in Education*, by M. LoParco
- Teaching your students about art is a good idea—here's why*, Kinderart.org, published by Columbia University Florida Alliance for Arts Education
- Why is Arts Education Important?* Published by Educationfund.org
- The College Board, Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, 1995
- The Schooled Mind: Do the Arts Make a Different Way of Knowing?*
- Safe Havens: Portraits of Educational Effectiveness in Community Arts Centers*
- The Creativity Crisis*, Newsweek, by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, July 10, 2010