



St. Johns Community students rehearse for real world

By Jake Martin

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If it's true all the world's a stage, students at the St. Johns Community Campus are ready for the spotlight.

Just two months ago, many of them didn't even know each other's names.

Courtney Helen-Grile, director of community engagement for Limelight Theatre, provides weekly workshops.

"I have an idea that theater is for everybody, and then I have this crazy idea that theater can solve all the world's problems," she said.

Her goal is to help participants trust, communicate, collaborate and express themselves. Her method: Acting.

"The difference has been night and day," said Lynne Funcheon, campus director.

The Community Campus is an affiliate program of the Arc of the St. Johns, serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

A charter school of the St. Johns County School District, the campus gives students with IDD an extended educational track. This allows them to complete public high school at the age of 21.

In her first year with Limelight, Helen-Grile has created partnerships with several organizations. These include Florida Odyssey of the Mind, St. Augustine Youth Services and local Girl Scout troops.

The partnership with Arc came about through a parent whose youngest son attended a program at Limelight. Michelle Sisto's older son, Evan, is a student at the Community Campus.

She told Helen-Grile she wished there was something similar available for Evan and his schoolmates.

“It also happened to be on my list of things that I wanted to accomplish,” Helen-Grile said.

Funcheon responded immediately to her email.

“We have to jump at any opportunity,” she said. “It was just really good timing and having the right people in the right place.”

While Helen-Grile has a flair for the dramatic, the premise isn’t so far-fetched.

A graduate of Savannah College of Art and Design, she began studying community engagement activities via drama while studying abroad in Ireland in 2011.

Through her theater games, students are learning public speaking skills, how to work in groups and solve problems.

Express yourself

Helen-Grile called the workshop to order on Wednesday, amid greetings and socializing.

“Act natural,” student Ryan Ward instructed the others.

They begin by introducing themselves and making a sound and movement to match their personality or mood.

Everyone in the circle is responsible for remembering the names and mimicking the corresponding sound and gesture.

Some coolly fold arms, pretend to swim, twirl or perform a short dance. Others, like Evan Sisto, jump in the middle of the circle and do an impression of Curly from “The Three Stooges.”

Henry Taylor’s sound was singing “Happy Birthday” for fellow student Javontae Crooms.

To Funcheon, the exercise has been particularly revealing.

“I realized these kids didn’t know each other’s names,” she said. “All the ‘Hey, dudes,’ and calling each other ‘partner’ was how they had accommodated for months.”

They then play Bibbity-Bibbity-Bop, which functions like a rules-intensive version of Simon Says. The game is a comedy of errors, fast-paced and full of laughter.

In the meantime, students also embrace the playful freedoms acting has allowed them.

Ward, known for his positivity and words of encouragement to eliminated players, theatrically threw his hat to the floor when he was knocked out of the game.

It's an art

Helen-Grile said they are learning how to communicate, not only verbally but through facial expressions, gestures and body language.

"That's where a lot of them have lost it in the past," Funcheon added. "You can say a lot of things if you do it with humor versus barreling in. They have not known that line."

They act out scenes in which something is done incorrectly, such as a daily task. Students are tasked with identifying what went wrong and improvising solutions they must then perform.

"We want them to feel confident to express themselves in a way that is appropriate," Helen-Grile said. "And, really, that's something everyone needs help with."

Funcheon said what students learn in the workshop can also be applied to other areas of the Community Campus curriculum.

Instruction includes money management; self-determination; independent living; building relationships; personal health and safety; and cultivating employable skills.

Arc makes use of 17 community-based sites for vocational training and daily living exercises. She said what Helen-Grile brings has helped them in all of those settings.

Both said it's difficult to measure success or quantify a student's competency, but Funcheon has seen the difference for herself.

They greet and shake hands with unfamiliar people, share stories and tell one another they enjoy their company.

“It’s about feeling safe, feeling confident and being able to be who you really are,” she said. “I don’t think you can give somebody a better skill.”

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