

PHAME Academy of Fine Arts puts the spotlight on those with special needs

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by *Smoke Signals* that will showcase the real-life effects of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Broadway siren is singing. The lights, the drama, the applause — it's all the same whether your needs are ordinary or special.

Since 1984, PHAME Academy of Fine Arts in Portland has dedicated itself "to enriching the lives of developmentally challenged citizens of all ages through participation in performing and fine arts," as its charter says.

Carol Stady, an English woman with a lifelong love of acting who moved to Portland when she was 13, got the ball rolling. At 70, she still directs the program.

"I went to the Special Olympics and saw some of the athletes not playing the games, just sitting there. I thought, 'They could sing! They could dance.' I got 12 of them together and we put on the Baby Jesus story on the Christmas of 1984."

Two actors from those days are still around and performing in the current production of "Beauty and the Beast." Pat Hansen, 32, is in rehearsals now for the part of the

Beast, and Jason Marick, 33, is Maurice, Belle's father.

"He is one of my heartfelt loves," Stady says about Marick. "He is very, very sincere about acting."

She has similar superlatives for her other actors.

"All of the actors are the best," she adds. "Whether the audience can understand every single word doesn't matter to me at all."

The scripts are always projected on a screen for the audience.

"I loved the theater as a little girl," Stady says. "I put on plays with friends in the street, at my direction, of course, and when I came here at 13, the theater was still my love. When I was 17, I sang in a choir, and the choir leader fell ill. I was chosen leader and carried on with that for many years."

She was working at First Interstate Bank, leading a choral group there, when "my daughter and I saw something on TV about the Special Olympics. And the idea was born."

Michael Ashton, who serves as assistant director, is "a music genius," according to Stady. "He's 24, young, he comes out of Portland Community



PHAME Academy of Fine Arts Director Carol Stady helps actors with lines during rehearsal for the academy's performance of "Beauty and the Beast."

Photos by Michelle Alaimo

College. He's an actor (amateur) in his own right, but singing is his forte. He wants to share with the students."

"This is something I'm dedicated to," Ashton says, "working with a population that I never could have imagined could be so talented."

"You want to give them all you know," Stady says. "You reach for the stars even though sometimes you only hit a tree. It doesn't matter when you are reaching for that star."

And some of them do reach the star. She says that Hansen, playing the Beast, is one.

"I feel like when I do a performance," Hansen says, "it shows other people who don't understand what people with special needs can do. Carol sees through that."

Spirit Mountain Community Fund contributed \$5,000 to the program last year for the first time. Another request has been made for 2008.

The group is looking for a permanent home. Today, it leases space in different parts of town. And the folks at PHAME are always on the lookout for new volunteers.

"We write grants every summer," Stady says. "Parents give \$20, \$50, sometimes \$1,000. I'm still a silly person about how much money it is, even though I once worked for a bank."

"I would really encourage people to not just look at the (special needs) people as they look," Hansen said. "Personally, I look for what's inside to bring out what they can do."

With three 10-week terms a year, a recital at the end of each and a major annual production, students of all ages participate. And the classes go beyond acting.

"We have dance class, acting class, art class, writing class, choir — every art that I can think of, and music development," Stady says. "They sing solos, play the drums or guitar or something."

New participation comes by word of mouth.

"Maybe a mother hears about us and says, 'Oh, my child is always acting in his room. Can we come and see what you guys do?'" Stady says. "Parents are interested in all of the comings and goings. Our parents are very involved."

At beginning of the acting class, "I greet every single person, and we start at 3:30 right on the dot. I start with something to tell them, some joke I heard that's appropriate. Then, there are announcements, when every child says something they did last night, or what they saw on TV. They get two minutes each. They've got so much inside. They want people to listen."

Before, after and even between parts of the rehearsals, the actors are active.

"It's very lovely," Stady says.



Pat Hansen, playing the Beast, and Breanne Itner, playing Belle, rehearse a scene from "Beauty and the Beast" at the Community of Christ Church in Portland on Saturday, April 5. The actors are part of the PHAME Academy of Fine Arts, which will be performing the play on May 31 and June 1. Spirit Mountain Community Fund contributed \$5,000 to the program in 2007.

"Sometimes it gets a bit out of hand; they start talking or arguing about something."

You can see a couple of them going over their lines. Other times, they just talk to each other.

"They're very social," Stady says. "But Michael and I are always around to keep them in the building and safe."

"They're like one family. The kids say that themselves. We're like one big family."

For Stady, PHAME is "the love of my life, beside my daughter and little grandson. I want to solve everybody's problem and I usually do, somehow. I'm happier now than

I was when I was at 20."

The 400 seats in the theater are practically full for most performances, Stady says.

"And after the show," she adds, "the students go right out in the audience in their costumes. I just smile."

"At the end of 'Les Miserables,' the whole cast came down the aisle singing, 'Do You Hear the People Sing?' I still get emotional about it. When I saw it, it broke my heart."

"The curtain call is the highlight of the whole show," Stady said. "Each (participant) is introduced by name. They come forward and take a bow and their faces are worth the price

of admission. They're so sincere. They can't hardly stand it, they're so happy. And the audience is on their feet every time."

"It's very thrilling. Very thrilling."

"Each year," Hansen says, "I personally see a lot of growth in everyone we had. We have a lot more ways that we could show the public what people with disabilities can do. People say they have to be in a special area, and that's not true."

"I've noticed a lot of people when they first come into our group, they are not quite sure of what's going on," Hansen adds. "Not feeling like they'll fit in. People had come and

didn't really feel like they would fit in with what Carol was doing, but once they got into it, got going — and Carol gives the encouragement — they open up."

DVDs of such performances as "My Fair Lady," "The King and I," "Oliver," "Oklahoma," "West Side Story" and many others from across the years are available at the PHAME office: 503-973-5815.

The latest production, "Beauty and the Beast," will premiere at The Performing Arts Center on the Sylvania campus of Portland Community College on May 31 at 7 p.m., with a matinee performance on June 1 at 2 p.m. ■



Aaron Hobson, playing LeFou, sings a song on Saturday, April 5, during rehearsal for the PHAME Academy's upcoming performance of "Beauty and the Beast."