

Friendship at forefront: Penguin Project puts kids at St. Joan's center stage

By Krista S. Kano | Posted: Thursday, April 19, 2018 12:00 am

Before the first rehearsal of “Annie, Jr.” at St. Joan of Arc Catholic School, the kids were already in performance mode.

Mia Markley, 12, a Julie Billiart School fifth-grader, corralled fellow performers into a dance circle as the tassels of her pink hat bounced up and down. Her friend, Melina Bauman, a sixth-grader at Julie Billiart, stood in the center of the circle, grabbing her leg and lifting it straight into the air to thunderous applause from the other students.

That excitement, support and engagement have been key components of the production, which is a collaboration between St. Joan, the Chagrin Valley Little Theatre and the Penguin Project, a national nonprofit that pairs children with special needs (known as “artists”) with peer mentors who help them through the production.

“It’s not really about putting on a show. It’s about developing relationships. It’s about creating opportunities for kids to work together and to learn what it takes to make things happen together,” explained Penguin Project founder Dr. Andrew Morgan, who came to the first rehearsal in January. “The show is a sideline. It’s the end result, but the real process is the one of the growing relationships and friendships.”

Dr. Morgan of Peoria, Illinois, founded the Penguin Project in 2003 and has grown the program to 26 theaters across the country. Though Dr. Morgan offers recommendations and guidance, he explained that it’s really the community’s production. The only component that is constant, he said, is the pairing and collaboration of the artists and mentors. The St. Joan program, which will be staged this weekend, is the first in Ohio.

St. Joan first learned of the program last year, when they chose “Mr. Popper’s Penguins” as their selection for their One School, One Book initiative. One of the teachers was researching penguins and came across the Penguin Project. The school decided to raise pennies for the Penguin Project, and not



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Photos by Geoff Powers Artists, including Maggie Koehler of Chagrin Falls, far right, and mentors prepare for opening night of “Annie Jr.,” a collaborative effort of the Penguin Project, St. Joan of Arc Catholic School and the Chagrin Valley Little Theatre, at their dress rehearsal on Sunday. As part of the Penguin Project program, students with special needs, known as “artists,” are paired with typical students, known as “mentors.” Though the final product is a musical, the real goal of the program is to develop friendships.

long after, Julia Kolibab, CVLT's director of youth theater, contacted Dr. Morgan about setting up a program in Chagrin Falls.

Like he does for every new program, Dr. Morgan was at St. Joan's first rehearsal, and led the students in singing and dancing exercises while teaching them some of the music. The adults leading the production – including director Ms. Kolibab, production manager Marianne Veniero, music director Andy Novak and St. Joan fourth-grade teacher Christine Elliott – observed the artists and the mentors to see who would work the best together.

One of those pairings is Linden Wagner, an Orange High School graduate currently enrolled at CEVEC in Mayfield Heights, and St. Joan eighth-grader Shane O'Brien.

"I love my part," said Ms. Wagner, who is playing Grace in the production, as she holds onto Shane's arm for support. "I think it's going to be a beautiful outfit I'm going to wear. A blue outfit. I like the beautiful character."

Artist Trevor Smith, 11, who is playing the dog catcher, is paired with two mentors, St. Joan of Arc sixth-grader Cecilia Mascia and Chagrin Falls Intermediate School sixth-grader Lindsay Schumacher.

"They're wonderful to watch," Ms. Veniero said of the trio. "They prop him up and calm him down. Even if he's with his mom, they stay nearby and make sure he's OK."

Trevor's mother, Katie Smith, records him when he's on stage, and she explained that Trevor enjoys watching the videos and humming along with the music when he's not at rehearsal.

"The fact that he wants to come is huge. I think these are all life skills, to sit and wait and be a part of a group," Ms. Smith said. "I get a kick out of watching him up there. Sometimes he's zoned out a little, and then all of a sudden he does the hands and points."

"I think Annie is a very inspiring character," said artist Mia, who is playing the titular role and is paired with mentor Bridget Fitzmaurice. "She's one-of-a-kind and a special orphan. My favorite part is when she's in the big mansion and acts all surprised. And I love when the curtain closes, and she goes off stage, and then when the curtain opens, all the people are there."

Mia was initially nervous to play the main character, Mrs. Elliott said, and was especially concerned with memorizing all the dialogue.

"Bridget and Mia just bonded. Mia was nervous about memorizing, and Bridget said 'That's what I'm here for. We'll memorize it together,'" Mrs. Elliott said.

Ava Sturznickel, who is playing Ms. Hannigan, quickly bonded with her mentor Ava Popovich over their shared first name.

"She's become very bold, when before she was more inward. She has a lot more confidence and has been self-advocating," said Heather Sturznickel, Ava's mother. "Her teachers say she seems calmer and her

mind is more focused. I've seen a big difference. She's the most eager I've seen."

Artist Maggie Koehler, 13, a Chagrin Falls sixth-grader who is playing an orphan and a maid, said she loves dancing, and has been in numerous musicals through Chagrin schools. Maggie and her mentor, Claire Stinson, have worked together in Chagrin Falls musical productions before.

"She's been in typical plays with the whole school, but this is different with having the peer mentor," said her mother, Michelle Koehler. "I think it's great at both ends."

"The artists have come out of their shells and their mentors have grown so much," Ms. Veniero said.

"They've all grown so much and it's wonderful to watch."

"Annie, Jr." will be performed at the St. Joan of Arc gym, 498 E. Washington St. in Chagrin Falls, at 7 p.m. on Saturday and at 3 p.m. on Sunday.