



Cary adviser part of joyful sharing that cues Special Gifts Theatre

Peer mentors guide buddies with disabilities who love performance arts

By REGINA BELT-DANIELS

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Special Gifts Theatre peer mentors are teamed with buddies with disabilities who have an opportunity to shine in a safe and inclusive place in the spotlight. (Photo provided by Special Gifts Theatre)

Shannon Mayhall just finished a successful run in Raue's Williams Street Repertory production of "Native Gardens" in Crystal Lake, and currently is in rehearsal for iambe theatre ensemble's Elgin production of "Wake Up, Mrs. Moore," a company she co-founded with Doreen Dawson for women of a certain age. But she is most proud of her work with Special Gifts Theatre.

As a peer mentor adviser in her second season with Special Gifts Theatre, Mayhall got involved because she witnessed her niece, Ruthie Schweidel, as a peer mentor onstage with her buddy-student in an SGT performance of Disney's "Moana JR." in Winnetka.

"I was so moved, I knew it was for me," said Mayhall, a Cary resident.

Her niece has been involved for six years, working with the same buddy for four. A high school senior, her niece loved her experience with SGT so much she is pursuing a career in special education. And Mayhall says her own experience with SGT has been "nothing short of inspiring and rewarding."



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Special Gifts Theatre was founded in 2000 in Northbrook by occupational therapist Susie Field, who saw the need for an inclusive theater program for her clients who were individuals with disabilities. Executive director since October 2017, Elise Larsen is proud of the 350 students that SGT serves annually; 250 are people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (such as Down syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy) and 100 are peer mentors who provide friendship and support to those student actors during rehearsals and performances. The actors range in age from 7 to adults.



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The peer mentors all receive disability awareness training with one-on-one coaching and support that Larsen says is designed “to develop patience, empathy, compassion and leadership skills, fostering lifelong relationships, celebrating and honoring creative differences.” Larsen herself first was introduced to SGT when she was in graduate school for Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling at Columbia College Chicago.

Parent Allie Gillies of Palatine described her daughter Meghan’s experience in the music therapy program: “SGT has changed our daughter’s life, and provides a safe space in theater where she fit in from day one. Our family can’t stop talking about the changes in Meghan. She is more confident, she looks forward to every Thursday, and is so happy. I was so moved by how SGT transformed Meghan’s life that I joined the board of directors in fall 2021. Meghan is now in her fourth season; she is a happier, more successful student at school. She volunteers at the library, and is far more independent. We credit SGT with these accomplishments.”



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John and Laura McGinn, parents of SGT student Jack, agree: “SGT has been a great support for Jack to have a place to socialize, and it gives him a terrific outlet for his creative side.” And Jack confirms: “I have met a lot of people in my 10 years at SGT, but the spirit is always the same. Good times, good vibes. SGT is like family besides my own family.”

Current peer mentor Arushi Bhatia commented: “Since my first year at SGT, I have always learned to always keep in the back of my mind the fact that you never know what someone is going through.” And Julia Duffin, a former peer mentor, shared this upon her high school graduation: “SGT has had such a huge impact in my life. As I worked together with my buddies each Thursday, I realized that helping guide someone to success is my true passion.”

SGT currently uses six theaters for its productions: Sundling Junior High School in Palatine; Copeland Manor Elementary School in Libertyville; Ebinger Elementary School in Chicago; Loyola Academy in Wilmette; The Skokie School in Winnetka; and Conyers Learning Academy in Rolling Meadows.

Upcoming performances include:

- “Moana JR.” on April 13-14 at Conyers Learning Academy in Rolling Meadows. (Youth cast with peer mentors)
- “Fame JR.” on April 21 at Sundling Junior High School in Palatine (Creating Outside the Lines adult cast program)
- “Shrek JR.” on May 19 at The Skokie School in Winnetka (Creating Outside the Lines adult program)

Larsen says performances are particularly exciting “because everyone gets to see their hard work come together. I am thrilled to lead the talented, dynamic team that has such a professional and transformative impact.”

And as peer mentor adviser, Mayhall so aptly states: “SGT provides an opportunity for the students to have a voice and to shine in a safe and inclusive place. SGT provides an opportunity for peer mentors to experience diversity, and to be a part of breaking down stereotypes.”

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SGT is truly a special gift – its motto: Dream. Believe. Achieve.

• *Regina Belt-Daniels most recently directed “Love Letters” at Steel Beam Theatre, and is celebrating her 10th year of writing theater reviews for Shaw Local News Network. As a retired special education teacher, she is most grateful that Special Gifts Theatre exists and is a success.*

IF YOU GO

- **WHAT:** Special Gifts Theatre
- **WHERE:** Various locations
- **WHEN:** All shows begin at 2 p.m.
- **INFORMATION:** tinyurl.com/2d73df5x

