



PRESS RELEASES &
PRODUCTION
ABSTRACTS

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The Conservatory Receives \$6k Grant from EWomens Network Foundation

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Costa Mesa, CA. -- The Arts & Learning Conservatory (ALC) and their President and CEO, Debora Wondercheck, were recently awarded a \$6,000 grant from the EWomens Network Foundation along with access to networking resources meant to give the Conservatory a robust foundation to spread their mission.

The EWomens Network was founded with the mission to provide female entrepreneurs with the resources required to help them achieve \$1 Million in revenue for their organizations. They offer, conferences, personalized coaching, and networking events designed to assist entrepreneurs in this endeavor.

About The Arts & Learning Conservatory

The Arts & Learning Conservatory is a non-profit organization that has consistently supported the artistic learning of an average of 1200 Orange County K-12 students annually for the past 17 years. The Conservatory's mission is to provide all youth with access to quality arts programs based on the values of accessibility, equity, confidence, and creativity. They have most recently partnered with the 100 Black Men of OC to offer drumming and improvisational classes to young professionals and students. They have recently finished their debut production and second ACTivism Initiative show, *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical*, which showcases the agency of teens as they navigate the world, including themes like Dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, and family relationships in addition to The Gospel Voices of Orange County: a celebration of African American Culture at the Musco Center for the Arts. Arts & Learning Conservatory has provided over 600 scholarships to students in need.

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President and CEO of Arts & Learning is accepted to the Board of the Orange County Theatre Guild

Published on January 6, 2022

Costa Mesa, CA. -- The Arts & Learning Conservatory, a national award-winning arts education non-profit, is delighted to announce that their President and CEO, Debora Wondercheck, has been accepted to the board of the Orange County Theatre Guild.

“My life has been so enriched by the arts– from public elementary school to college. These experiences along with directing, teaching and advocating arts for all, have given me life-long interest and experience in theatre arts education”. Debora added, "I am very humbled and excited to work with such a great Board and have the opportunity to add value to a fantastic asset in our theatre community located right here in Orange, County. “

The Orange County Theatre Guild, founded in 2015, aims to bring Orange County theatres together to make greater change and build a more united community. Together they strive to bring the benefits of theatre to individuals and society at large.

This board appointment is a joy for the Conservatory as their mission aligns with the unity of the guild and their aspirations to bring new perspectives to the OC Theatre community.

After a year of growing further into the community with partnerships ranging from 100 Black Men of OC to the YMCA, the Conservatory is excited for their CEO to build stronger connections to theatres who share their vision of nourishing and supporting artists while bringing a love of theatre to more diverse audiences than ever before.

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More Press Release examples available on [The Arts & Learning Conservatory's LinkedIn page](#)

“The Things That Make You Different, Are the Very Things That Make You Strong,”

Offering a Sense of Belonging in The Arts & Learning’s Production of The Lightning Thief.

One of the most common struggles teens face, is finding a space of belonging. Whether this means their struggle in the social battlegrounds of High School, or within their own identities, and families. Part of this unease stems from an assumed lack of agency – those teenagers do not have the ability, or believe they do not have the ability, to feel in control of who they are and wish to be, especially in the society around them. *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical* beautifully highlights this struggle and provides students with the opportunity to showcase their agency through that which makes them different.

Demigods grapple with ADHD and Dyslexia, adept for battle strategy and reading Ancient Greek, but not helpful in a traditional classroom setting. Some Camp Half-Blood Campers, know their godly parents and have tense relationships with them, while others have no idea where they come from, and many don’t feel good enough to garner their parent’s attention or approval. While most teens have parents a little more accessible than Poseidon or Athena, the pressure to live up to or get away from the accomplishments or mistakes of one’s parents can be a painful process for young teens, and indeed, young adults. *Lightning Thief* brings all this relatable teen angst to the table with a heavy helping of swordcraft, monsters, and magical writing utensils, to show students the agency and bravery that they already possess and their ability to facilitate real change.

The Conservatory chose this as their second ACTivism Initiative production, not only because it showcases authentic teen voices, but because it celebrates them and allows all cast members the opportunity to be the heroes, we already believe them to be. **This show is a chance for our students to be themselves, but at their bravest, smartest, kindest, most colorful, and most creative, articulating to them that they really do belong, both at Camp Half-Blood and here, with us at the Conservatory, blue hair and all, if they wish.**

Discovering an Opportunity for Catharsis and Social & Emotional Learning in Arts & Learning's Production of *Les Misérables*

Catharsis in theatre, first introduced by Aristotle in *Poetics*, represents a process by which the intense and tragic emotions of the actors in a performance spread throughout the audience, as though they too have truly experienced such heightened emotion. Over the course of the show, the audience is given the opportunity to process these intense feelings, and finally resolve them, creating a sort of emotional cleanse for both the actors and spectators.

Though theatre has evolved greatly since Ancient Greece, we still find evidence of the need for catharsis in the popularity of heavy television dramas, and true crime podcasts in the pandemic era. It is no surprise then, that when asked for their input, our older Arts & Learning students requested a more serious show than those traditionally put on by the Conservatory.

While we assumed that the immediate interest lay in the well-loved numbers and powerful roles, after brief interviews with some of the cast, we quickly learned that the real appeal of *Les Misérables* was the deeply emotional nature of each character's narrative. Similarly, students were eager for the challenge as actors, to understand their character's motivations well enough to convincingly convey these emotions, offering an excellent opportunity for Social and Emotional Learning in the cast.

Grief, loneliness, rage, crisis of identity, social injustice, tenderness, love, and hope are all prevalent themes in both the production and the zeitgeist of the pandemic. This has created a unique opportunity for students to process the life-altering, uncertain, and ongoing changes of the last two years in the pre-scripted drama of their own production. "Where else will I find a safe space to feel all of this?" one student remarked after his character analysis session with the director, while another expressed her interest in "learning more about how to express sadness and grief."

Students also appear invested in their character's ability to be strong while also fully experiencing deep emotion. Aubrie Ofner and Kaylie Camacho, our cast Fantine and Eponine respectively, both shared that their most interesting challenges lie in finding the strength and bravery within characters that experience so much sadness. Sebastian and Simon Khan, our Val Jean and Marius respectively, also expressed similar eagerness to understand the many different kinds of strength and intense emotion that both of their characters exhibit.

This production also represents the first time in several years that many students have had the ability to act together more directly. Through rigorous weekly testing and masking, we have reduced risk sufficiently to remove social distancing from the blocking, allowing the many poignant moments of the show to fully engage both students and audiences together. Because of this, we have seen a shift in the students. They have quickly become a tight-knit community, invested in each other's growth and well-being. A lesson on stage consent from the director led to a chorus of "is this okay with you?" from cast members tousling in a dramatic scene. Older students have also begun to "adopt" the few younger cast members, eager to help them with direction, make them feel at ease during serious scenes, or to keep them entertained during long rehearsals, providing a strong community of support around a new generation of young actors.

During the pandemic, school, work, and the pressures of everyday responsibility, have not slowed to allow many the opportunity to process losses and struggles endured during this tumultuous time. This show highlights some of these challenges and even members of the production team have found themselves moved by simple staging choices and the readiness of students to fully commit to scenes even in early rehearsals. Perhaps what we needed, as a community, was a safe space to be, well, *miserable*, with the hope that in processing these emotions together, we may emerge from this time stronger than before.