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Arts education moves ahead

Groups create virtual methods for expression

Keiara Carr | For The Journal Gazette

As the country became increasingly concerned with COVID-19 in early March, the annual FAME Festival was only two days away from opening. For more than 30 years, the festival has put a spotlight on musical performances and artwork from local students.

At the time, there were no solid guidelines on closing public gatherings, and FAME Executive Director T. Irmischer questioned if closing was the right choice.

"It was probably the hardest decision we ever made," Irmischer says. "We had to cancel because it all just happened so fast. The kids were so disappointed because they weren't going to be able to perform, or their artwork wasn't going to be seen. We asked all of our teachers to send us artwork so that we could put it on the website, and we got a few, but at that time, it was just so crazy."

It's not surprising the pandemic interrupted FAME and several other arts organizations that outreach to children and other sectors of the community. With little time to plan for the worst, many feared losing the value of performance of seeing their student's work unfulfilled.

"The FAME Festival is such a huge deal to these children. Somebody that's 30, 40 years old will come up to me and say, 'Oh my gosh, I remember performing at the Grand Wayne Center,' or 'I had artwork [at the festival] and my mom still has it hanging in her house,'" Irmischer says. "It is just so cool, and I don't want kids to lose their momentum."

Currently, Irmischer says the organization is planning how to approach the festival in 2021. The theme is "Planet Earth." She says the staff is meeting with the festival's partners at Grand Wayne Center to discuss some ideas and reaching out to teachers to help contribute virtual festival features.

In the meantime, FAME partnered with Crown Jewel Marketing to transition the traditional Fusion of Concert Colors into a virtual art gallery. Traditionally, the students' artwork is put on display during the festival.

"We want to make sure we do stay relevant and if it means making some programs that we don't normally do then maybe we have to do that," Irmischer says.

This spring became a crash course in how to transition traditional outreach programs through the use of virtual classes and recorded videos.

Phil Slane, director of development for Heartland Sings, says the organization created a makeshift TV studio to produce digital content for the Arts Integrated Residency program.

The program connects Heartland's vocal artists with local first grade students to teach the elements of opera. The program came to a halt this year as students were preparing their own operas for a performance.

Slane says the artists filmed the student's operas from their homes using sock puppets, claymation, animation and even Legos to portray the different characters.

"At the end of the day, we're artists. We want to make sure there's another generation of people who appreciate the art that we're creating," Slane says.

Moving forward to the current school year, Heartland tried to gain some understanding of what the school year will hold, and even now, it varies from one district to another.

For Southwick Elementary School in the East Allen County Schools district, the artists currently interact with students once a week in a virtual conference and produce recorded videos teachers can include in their lesson plans during the week.

For Adams and Washington elementary schools in Fort Wayne Community Schools, the artists schedule virtual visits twice a week.

"The technology aspect was the most challenging aspect of all of this," Slane says. "The other part of it, simply conducting these programs in a virtual method, I think our artists acquiesced to that very easily. At their core, they're definitely performers – it was just a question of how would they be performing and how they would interact with students."

Serving constituents of all ages, Fort Wayne Dance Collective's plan needed to be broad enough to serve the organization's four branches of outreach: education, health, disabilities and community.

"The people that we serve are our No. 1 (priority) as we have moved forward with pivoting programming, and that has been challenging because part of our mission is

that everything we do is able to serve all people of all ages of all abilities," artistic director Mandie Kolkman says.

Kolkman says using multiple platforms has been the most successful. Fort Wayne Dance Collective instructors hosted daily Facebook Live videos that can be accessed at no cost.

The collective also offers virtual Zoom classes for purchase on the its website.

Similar to Heartland, Fort Wayne Dance Collective's Dance in Education residency program is holding virtual classes for participating area schools, but in some schools the organization is able to host in-person classes as well.

The Dance Collective transformed its partnership with Parkview Health for its Healing Arts program. Before COVID-19, one of the collective's professional resident artists would visit patients and caregivers. Kolkman says Fort Wayne Dance Collective now provides tangible art projects for patients and caregivers to create independently and produce recorded videos on the hospital's TV channel.

Fort Wayne Dance Collective reopened on-site classes this summer with a protocol to maintain social distancing and required masks. Not even the best software can compete with experiencing the one-on-one relationships with students, Kolkman says.

"When you're in a class, you can adjust your shirt or you can talk to your students with an authenticity that you usually have one-on-one. These are students that you have built these relationships with – it's just easy," Kolkman says.