

PRESS
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Willsboro Central holds Theatre Summit for fifth-graders

By ALVIN REINER Press-Republican

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ALVIN REINER/P-R PHOTO Willsboro Central School Board Member Phyllis Klein wears a mask as she addresses the students at the Willsboro Theatre Summit.



ALVIN REINER/P-R PHOTO The students became both physically and mentally engaged during the Theatre Summit.

WILLSBORO — More than 100 fifth-graders from several Essex County schools played theater games, learned how to present oneself, gained confidence and met an award-winning performer at the Willsboro Central School Theatre Summit.

The day's activities included a "Pirates" theater game in the gym; a series of improvisational games in several classrooms; a Reader's Theatre demonstration by the teaching artists; and a question and answer session with two-time Tony-award winner and Emmy-award winner George Hearn.

"It's great to have this level of performers and to bring in their experiences to our students," Willsboro Central School Superintendent Steve Broadwell said. "We have had world-class musicians and now a two-time Tony Award winner like George Hearn is giving back to our students. This is tremendous."

"Our arts department is so strong," Phyllis Klein of the Willsboro School Board said. "The arts live with you the rest of your life."

Willsboro fifth-grade teacher Derrick Hopkins created the unique and engaging approach to integrating the Common Core with the foundations of theater.

Hopkins outlined the day's program.

"Kim Hartshorn, SUNY Plattsburgh theater professor; his student Abigayle Ploetz; and theater educator and actress Annie-Laurie Lemieux will join me in teaching improvisational skills. Improv is the gym of the actor. Theater games build confidence, teach fundamental and rudimentary skills of theater, and are so much fun."

SUNY Plattsburgh Education Professor Mark Beatham was on hand.

'PIRATES'

To get the event going, the students went into the gym to play the "Pirates" game, in which Hopkins got the youngsters actively involved by focusing on and responding to directions. Using pirate commands, the fifth-graders learned about stage directives as they attacked, looked for mermaids, went overboard and climbed up the crow's nest.

"You are acting all day — from when you wake up until you go to bed," Klein said later in the day, addressing the students while wearing a theatrical mask. "Like William Shakespeare said, 'All the world is a stage. And all the men and women merely players.'"

With the help of programs such as the Theatre Summit, Willsboro fifth-grader Sierra Bronson is no novice to the stage.

"They (presentations) are fun to do. It's like sports to me. I liked playing Eeyore in Pooh."

TRUST, LISTENING

"I learned to trust other people that I didn't know," Keene Central fifth-grader Tara Fine said. "I also learned that if you listen you learn a lot more things."

"Acting takes confidence," Fine's classmate Aidan Lopez volunteered. "Listening is a big part of acting. Some of the games helped me to understand more about acting."

As part of the theme, which coordinated with their classroom studies, the students attending were engaged in New York state's Module 1: Civil Rights. Within the curriculum, students study the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Unit 1, and read the novel "Esperanza Rising" by Pam Munoz Ryan in Unit 2.

In the final unit, students are asked to make connections between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and "Esperanza Rising" by writing a play (integrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and performing it in the style of Reader's Theatre.

"I learned that, on stage, you should always make your partner look good," KCS participant Silas Green said. "You should learn to trust people because they can help you on the stage if you forget a line or something."

Nevin Dockery of Keene also mentioned "trust."

"I learned that it is good to trust people and it takes a lot of time and practice to do something right in theater."

"The opportunity for students to study, work, play and be immersed in theater with other students who are all studying the same content is an amazing educational gift," Hopkins said.

"Hopefully, this event will give students and teachers inspiration as they tackle the curriculum. I am so grateful to all the theater artists who stepped forward to assist, Steve Broadwell, Willsboro Board of Education, all the teachers who jumped in and said, 'Yes!' and of course, the students for working hard and learning. It takes a lot of courage to perform, and I'm so proud of their efforts."

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