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Everybody Plays a Part

Family Center for the Arts wants families to play together

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In the stage show *Babes in Toyland*, characters from nursery rhymes explore a fairy-tale land, battle villains and share in adventures. While it's a children's story, it's also something families enjoy together.

The same can be said for the local venue that staged the show recently. The Family Center for the Arts, at 6136 S. Westnedge Ave., is definitely a family affair.



View in the magazine.

“When a family comes in, everyone is engaged in doing something. People are not rushing to leave after class. It’s becoming a warm place for people.”
– *Rebecca Achenbach*

The center offers classes and activities for parents and for children in a variety of art forms, from theater to painting to dance to music. It has its own theater company, which stages four productions a year, and in late December children, teens and adults put on Babes in Toyland, bringing all of the age groups together.

The focus isn't just on the art, it's on the family, says the center's owner, Rebecca Achenbach.

"When a family comes in, everyone is engaged in doing something," says Achenbach. "People are not rushing to leave after class. It's becoming a warm place for people."

Hidden away on the back side of the Southland Mall in Portage, the Family Center for the Arts is in the same location as the Y Art Center, a program of the YMCA of Greater Kalamazoo that began in 2012 under Achenbach's direction. It quickly became her pet project, and in September 2014 the center separated from the YMCA and Achenbach recreated it as the Family Center for the Arts.

"This is my dream job," she says. "I love working with children and families."

The center offers annual memberships ranging from \$185 per person to \$375 per family. People can sign up for individual classes or events, which range in cost from \$15 for arts-and-crafts activities to \$50 or more for acting workshops. Center participants include

children as young as 18 months to adults, and more than a dozen students have signed up for classes in the last six months. Achenbach says each month another three to five families join the center.

The stage shows garner the most participation, since there's one every two to four months. Auditions for new performances begin just weeks after the last show ends. Everyone is welcome to take part in a musical — auditions are free — though members of the center are guaranteed a speaking role in each performance and can receive acting and voice classes at no charge.

"If a child is really dying to be in a show, I'll put them in," Achenbach says.

That's what keeps 11-year-old Anastasia Zepke, of Kalamazoo, coming back.

"I am passionate about acting," Zepke says. "There are a lot of opportunities. You can go through the entire play and be different characters."

Matt Grimm, of Kalamazoo, says his family started participating in the Family Center for the Arts in September, when his 7-year-old daughter, Lydia, wanted to take an acting class. Lydia's younger brother and sister, 3-year-old twins, wanted to join after hearing Lydia talk about the show.

“They needed little lambs and brought them both into the play,” Grimm says.

For parents or older siblings who are at the center while young children take part in an activity or class, there are also ample opportunities. The art room is set up for small painting or drawing projects, some of which hang on the wall of “Student Masterpieces.” Across the hall is a dance studio, and in the music room instruments are available for experimentation.

For Alison Barnett, 13, of Richland, the Babes in Toyland production was a father-daughter event. Alison played the role of Contrary Mary, while her dad, Mike Barnett, helped with the set design. He repurposed the Tin Man suit from the center’s spring 2014 production of The Wizard Of Oz into a chimney for a house on the Toyland set.

Mike Barnett says driving together to and from the center gave him time to talk with Alison. And the theater work, he says, has given his daughter more confidence and himself a sense of accomplishment. “I enjoy seeing what I’ve built (on stage).”

Achenbach says one of her goals is to get everyone in a family involved.

“There were mothers just sitting and talking, waiting for their kids,”

Achenbach says. "So we're bringing in Just Move," a Portage-based women's exercise studio. Ballroom dance, Zumba and other classes aimed at adults are in the plans for this year.

Achenbach says that as the center evolves it will continue with programs that offer something for moms, dads and older siblings so everyone can take part one way or another. And when everyone is taking part, they're all enjoying time together, Achenbach says.

"The social aspect just happens," she says.

Tags:

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Y Art Center

Rebecca Achenbach

Anastasia Zepke

Matt Grimm

Mike Barnett

Alison Barnett

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Arts

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