

WACF grants give start to young actors

By Julianne Endres

Watertown Area Community Foundation

The Town Players community theater is one arts organization that has grown and evolved substantially over the years – partially due to the Foundation’s ongoing support. The Foundation partnered with the organization to grow the Town Players Endowment Fund by providing a \$25,000 match in 2008 and has supported the grass roots group in other ways including Youth Theater – which this “40 Stories for 40 Years” installment is all about.

As Watertown area youth take the stage this summer, Director Elizabeth Werness says it’s what the kids are doing off, as well as on the stage, that really matters.

The Watertown Area Community Foundation has supported the Town Players Summer Youth Theater program since it began about 10 years ago. Werness, a former music teacher here, has been coming back to Watertown every year to direct the theater day camp and live productions.

Foundation support has been key to the program’s success. “It allows education to be at the forefront. It’s about the process, not just the production,” Werness said.

Kids learn so much: they help with sets and painting, props, creating and developing characters. Some older ones were extremely excited this year to learn about some new projection technology that will be used in the “Frozen” production.

A program such as this in the Twin Cities, where Werness now lives, would easily cost \$400 per child, she explained.

“The Foundation support allows us to subsidize the camp expenses and that’s huge. The Foundation has given us the opportunity to involve students who otherwise might not have been able to come,” she said. “It’s truly been amazing. When we started we had about 30 kids and small shows.”

But that first year was only ‘opening night’ for a program



Courtesy photo

Elsa (left), portrayed by Kasidy Tvedt, is heartbroken after freezing Anna (Audra Wallenmeyer) Anna in one of the final scenes of ‘Frozen,’ which the Town Players Summer Youth Theater will present July 9-13 at the Town Players Theater.

that continues to grow and succeed. This year, the turnout for Town Players Youth Theater was so overwhelming that they had to split the young group and have two productions.

"We see a lot of returning kids," Werness said. "Ordinarily, about 90 percent return plus we grow an extra 15. I can't tell you enough what it means for the 'big' kids to come back."

One of those 'big' kids is Carter Canfield. He started coming to Town Players Youth Theater summer camp in the summer after third-grade and it is something he has looked forward to every summer since.

"It's one of my favorite times of year," said the 11th-grader. "It has really helped me put myself out there and be more confident as a person including when I have to speak in front of others."

He thinks of the cast almost as a second family.

"Some of my closest friends are people I've met in the Town Players' experience," he said.

Canfield joins some other

veteran youth actors in the upcoming Disney production "Frozen Jr.," but he put on a different hat for the youngest theater camp which just concluded with its performance of "Annie Kids." Werness encourages and appreciates the 'older' actors' help.

Maddi Hansen, who just completed her freshman year at S.D .State University, came back as an assistant director, and Canfield was happy to be one of Werness' 'right hand's as a volunteer, 59 hours to be exact.

"I was really surprised," Canfield said. "I thought it would feel like working but it was fun the whole time through. It was really fun to watch the young actors grow."

He also he remembered being in the young kids' shoes once, looking up to the older actors.

"It's kind of weird. I'm in that position now."

That continuation of teamwork between the different age groups, Werness said, is what makes a "star" out of every kid.

"The older ones have the ability and opportunity to work with the younger people." "It really is a bridge between the two which makes this program unique. It's a true testament as to how successful this program is when kids like Carter come back and volunteer. They are here using up their mornings to help and be positive role models for these kids."

The audience will enjoy a memorable musical July 9-13. Tickets are available at Hy-Vee and Town Players (882-2076). However, the impact on the kids goes much further than the stage.

"It's not just a performance," Werness said. "What they take away is so much more and that's why this program is so successful."