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LAGUNA BEACH

JUNE 2012 » OCINSITE.COM

Magazine



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Laguna Beach High School ceramics teacher, Bill Darnall, with his AP ceramics students.



SCHOOLED *in the* Arts

An inside look, from stage to sculpture, at how small-town Laguna Beach inspires big-time dreams for its high-school-aged artists—and those even younger.

By Debbie Lavdas

AS IF THESE KIDS' LIVES AREN'T CHARMED enough—volleyball after school at Main Beach, hangs and haunts like Heidelberg and Gina's, and living everyday in picturesque Laguna Beach—the local teens here also get stellar performing arts programs that thrive when other districts are going down like a badly slashed, beaten up Jackson Pollock painting. According to ABC News, in California, the state arts council budget shrank from \$17.5 million to \$1 million.* How do Laguna Beach students continue to have the grand curtain calls and top-notch visual arts programs when it's just curtains for other districts? We caught up with some of the town's most dedicated and emotionally invested youth directors to artfully enlighten us.



Teacher Mark Dressler addresses students during a Laguna Beach High School theater production of the "The Sound of Music."

YOUNG BLOOD

The elementary and middle school arts programs are also recognized and nurtured in Laguna Beach. Mark Dressler, who also teaches drama at Thurston Middle School, says, "Back in the '90s, there really was no drama program at both the middle school and high school. The program had not thrived since the '70s and early '80s. I went to the school board and encouraged them to let me begin a couple of classes, one at the middle school and the other at the high school. From that point on, the program has grown into what it is today." He says the Thurston program acts as a direct feeder into the high school program. "The small size of our district helps. I get to know many of the elementary school kids, and they come to the big shows and naturally dream about being on the Artists Theatre Stage."

STAGE PRESENCE

It might take a genie in a bottle (and a hope and a prayer) to keep other school productions alive, but at Laguna Beach High School, it's on with the show with Disney's "Aladdin," "The Sound of Music," the sophisticated Sondheim musical "Into The Woods" and many more. LBHS produces four major shows each school year, as well as additional smaller performances. "Performing arts are typically the subjects first on the chopping block," says Mark Dressler, Laguna Beach High School drama director. "They aren't perceived as a need in basic education. The difference with Laguna is that LBUSD understands the importance of programs like ours. We are also fortunate because we are able to create much of our own capital by selling tickets to our great shows."

Mark is confident that as long as the community keeps appreciating fine theater, they'll always have a way of generating income. He adds, "Other schools don't have beautiful theaters where they can sell tickets to an audience of enthusiastic community members hungry for great pieces of theater. It's incredible considering little old Laguna Beach High School has barely 1,000 students, making it the smallest public high school in Orange County."

That strong community sentiment is echoed by Laguna Playhouse youth theater director



"The Sound of Music" at LBHS, 2012

Donna Inglema—a veteran director, writer, producer, teacher and actor, who says, "For a town of just 24,000, it's just remarkably arts-oriented and completely embracing of the arts on all different levels ... instrumental, vocal, theatrical, dance and visual arts for certain." She adds, "And there's everything that goes on here during the summer—all the art galleries, all the performances with Laguna Playhouse, No Square Theatre, Gallimaufry Theatre and the high school and the junior high school doing performance-oriented plays. It's a big music scene, as well." In her Laguna Playhouse youth theater program, students receive training from pros in the field, giving them exposure to first-hand experience.



BILL DARNALL

Senior AP ceramics student Nicolai Elghanayan



A drawing by student Kennedy Gheraldini

One young star who's been on stage with Laguna Playhouse and who attends LBHS is Jackson Tupy, who had the lead in the high school's "The Sound of Music" performance this past spring. Jackson was accepted to UCI in its voice department. "Living in this community keeps my perspective open," he says. "It also doesn't hurt that it gives me ample opportunity to pursue my passions. The sheer number and caliber of arts programs throughout Laguna inspires me."

Natalee Palmer, a 17-year-old LBHS student, studies dance and choreographs performances. "Learning dance is one thing, but performing for people I love and admire makes my passion become a dream," she says. "Seeing how welcomed dancing, acting and singing is, pushed me to dive into the world of art fearlessly. If I lived in a less-inspired arts community, I may have never attempted to branch out of my shell."

VISUAL PERSPECTIVE

Laguna Beach High art teacher Bridget Beaudry-Porter tells us the visual arts program at the high school works closely with outreach programs, artists and industries in the area. "Our program

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Artist: Luis Cornejo

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is very diverse and gives students skills needed for a career in the arts.” Courses include digital photography, screen printing, graphic design, ceramics and 2-D art courses. From her advanced classes, one standout student who shows a creative approach to drawing is Kennedy Gherardini, a junior at LBHS. Bridget describes her work as “vibrant and intricate, and her thematic elements are very interesting.” Student Jessalyn Owens, a senior at LBHS, has gained Bridget’s attention also with her gifted eye for photography.

Bill Darnall, ceramics teacher at LBHS for nearly 30 years, says that all of his ceramics classes are UC-approved art courses covering beginning, intermediate, advanced and AP (Advanced Placement for college) curriculum. “We’re right at the top when it comes to course offerings and maintaining the highest standards in ceramics/art education in California, if not the country,” Bill says.

Bill gives funding kudos to SchoolPower—the oldest, nonprofit education foundation in Orange County—as one of the school’s biggest financial supporters. “They have been instrumental in the development and the continuance of our fine art department,” Bill explains. “We are very connected in our community with the working/professional artists in Laguna Beach via the Festival of Arts, the Sawdust Art Festival, LOCA, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna College of Art & Design and Art-A-Fair,” Bill adds. “All of these organizations offer their support in the form of scholarships, apprenticeships and jobs. The Festival of Arts just gave the visual art department \$10,000, and much more for our performing arts department.”



Jackson Tupy in a Laguna Playhouse production

OPPS AND PROPS

It’s the blend of Laguna’s art professionals and deep roots that bring the opportunities. Bill, as both the ceramics teacher and a working artist (with the Sawdust Art Festival since 1973 and on the board of directors for nine years), helps foster opportunities for the students in apprenticeships and summer jobs at all three of the summer festivals. Plus, there are the scholarships/grants for the students. “These are just a few of the benefits afforded us to make our school quite unique and

fortunate,” Bill explains. “This, I believe, really sets us apart from any other school here or anywhere.”

Mark adds to those opportunities with classes like his Theatre 2 class, which gives all students with a specific interest the chance to learn set building/design, lighting and sound production, and costumes. “LBHS students have expert adults that they can work with in these areas. Our stage manager from last year (Caroline Rechter) received a scholarship and is attending a quite prestigious academy,” Mark says.



CHRISTIAN MARRINER

SHIRIN TINATI

BRIGHT STARS/FORMER STUDENTS

Many young talents have come out of Laguna Beach and gone on to acclaimed success. One such star is Christian Marriner, born and raised in Laguna Beach. He attended LBHS, was on stage at Laguna Playhouse and toured in Rodgers & Hammerstein’s “South Pacific” as Luther Billis. Christian, a recent graduate of The New School in NYC with a BFA in musical theater, told us it’d be hard to say that just one person helped him get to where he is today. “The community support got me where I am today,” he says. “I had no clue I could do it. Mark Dressler showed me how theater can be almost therapeutic—I lost my father the day I was cast as the lead in ‘Music Man’ my senior year. And Roxanna Ward taught me to sing,” he adds. Christian also credits Steve Josephson of Gallimaufry Performing Arts, who was a great mentor and helped him with acting and dance skills. And he thanks Donna Inglima, “When I was cast in the Laguna Playhouse show ‘Honk’ with Donna directing, I thought I was on Broadway. Being cast in the show made me think I could make it in New York. Donna is a blessing.”

Christian has come a long way from the sleepy streets of Laguna and the one-way ticket he bought to New York City. Other visual and performing artists who have come out of the Laguna Beach schools and gone on to success? Bill Darnall of LBHS says Jenn Prewitt, artist/teacher/photographer; Mike Brennan, ceramist/artist; Robert Jones, ceramist/artist and Jason Fontana, art director, are just a few of the successes.



Cassidy Kelly in costume with Reagan Foy

FESTIVAL AND FAIR INFLUENCE

Pageant of the Masters director Diane Challis Davy describes the Festival of Arts scholarship program: "It's for art, music, dramatic arts and writing students of Laguna Beach High School and is a four-year opportunity. All high school students can get high school credit for their community service by participating as a volunteer cast member in Pageant of the Masters," she says.

Continuing arts education is also encouraged through the Junior Art Exhibit at the Festival of Arts during the summer art show. From thousands of submissions, selected by art authorities, works from more than 300 students (K-12) are on display every year. The exhibit showcases the next generation of young student artists and is a testament to the importance of art in school systems.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

They say it takes a village to raise a child. In Laguna Beach, it may take a community to raise an artist. And whether they all hit Broadway or go on to professional status doesn't seem to make or break the town's commitment to young talent, as so well stated by Donna when we chatted in the Laguna Playhouse lobby. "Theater training is the best training for life because of what it asks of you. It asks you to be absolutely in the present moment, it demands strong communications skills, out-of-the-box thinking, expressive skills, and you're working with your body and mind. And you're also working in collaboration with other people."

Seems Laguna Beach is not just a charmed place to grow up, but a thoughtfully supportive place where art is treasured—and not just in the fancy art galleries. LBM

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