

2020 Report on CFCArts UpBeat! Musical Theatre Program

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Since our founding ten years ago, one of the key missions of Central Florida Community Arts (CFCArts) has been to make high-quality, beneficial arts programming accessible to everyone in Central Florida, regardless of age, ability, or available resources. Three years ago, through our partnership with the Down Syndrome Association of Central Florida, we recognized a critical need in our community. While performing arts programs for individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities existed, nearly all offerings concluded once the participant reached the age of eighteen or twenty-one. For adults twenty-two and older, programs providing access to drama and music experiences were practically nonexistent.

Benefits of Programming

The benefits of these programs are substantial and include improved self-expression, auditory processing skills, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and greater creativity and imagination. Research also identifies the importance of the arts in providing an outlet for participants to express their feelings (Buckley, 2005). Recognizing the importance of providing these programs, particularly for adults twenty-two and up, CFCArts' Education Team founded the Upbeat! Musical Theatre Program. Our goal was to provide a high-quality, customized performance experience for students of all abilities. Originally an in-person experience for those living in Central Florida, Upbeat! has become a virtual experience due to COVID-19, with participants joining from across the United States.

In conducting outreach, we rely on our collaborators, including the Down Syndrome Association of Central Florida and the Down Syndrome Foundation of Florida, to reach new

performers. Participation in Upbeat! is provided at little to no cost for participants, with scholarship options readily available for any family in need. Despite the low cost of tuition, we are committed to producing shows - whether virtually or in-person - that are of the highest quality in terms of script, production design, custom-made curriculum, and overall artistic experience.

Each production focuses on creative goals and individual performer objectives created with the support of the students' care partners. Instead of an audition, we hold interviews with each new participant and gauge their interests and communication style. Once we meet with all performers, our education team creates a customized script with roles that allow all participants to shine. We create opportunities based on the following:

Creative Goals:

- Opportunity for a creative outlet and self-expression
- Teach the techniques of acting
- Group cohesion
- Basic dance skills
- Train performers on how to act for the camera

Individual Student Goals:

- Improved self-expression
- Improved auditory processing skills
- Improved verbal and nonverbal communication skills
- Increased confidence and independence
- Greater creativity and imagination

The individual's goals greatly focus on positive self-concept through developing skills needed to thrive and feel successful, a concept which has been thoroughly researched as part of a 2011 medical study (Skotko et al., 2011).

Creating Equitable Opportunities

For performers to be most successful they are given the option of rehearsing scenes in groups and/or in one-on-one sessions, with the final rehearsal being filmed and edited into a complete production. Throughout the process, performers are coached through a virtual platform, with one-on-one tech instruction given to members and/or care partners who need assistance. We utilize many of the functions of Zoom including virtual backgrounds to act as the set providing continuity within the performance. Additionally, we are training these performers on how to act for the camera, an experience that most would have not otherwise received.

Since our in-person programs were suspended due to COVID-19, our Upbeat! Musical Theatre Program has successfully implemented two virtual productions, *Fairly Odd Tales* and *Alice in Wonderland* with *Cinderella* currently in rehearsals for Fall 2020. The high level of individualized work requires dedication and time from our education team; however, we are committed to this approach as it allows for greater comfort and participation. Each production concludes with a virtual premiere party and the final edited performance being sent out for sharing via YouTube.

Surveying the Participants

We are pleased to report that, through these efforts, Upbeat! is making a significant difference in participants' lives. After each performance, we survey families and evaluate the

results. The exit survey is conducted through Google Forms and completed by the participants or care partner (if the participant is unable to fill out the survey independently.) The survey noted below was administered in June 2020 and completed by fifteen of the seventeen participants.

The survey of participants found:

- 47% felt that the participant's auditory processing skills improved;
- 53% felt that the participant's physical communication, problem-solving, and reading comprehension skills improved;
- 60% felt that the participant's memory skills improved;
- 67% felt that the participant's social-emotional skills improved;
- 73% felt that the participant's verbal communication/speech, creativity/imagination, and positive self-expression skills improved;
- 80% saw growth in the participant's artistic development;
- 100% felt that the participant benefitted from the enjoyment and fun of participating in the UpBeat! Program.

In addition to this quantitative data, we received extremely positive comments from attendees, including the following:

- "AMAZING! We laughed so hard and thoroughly enjoyed how you guys coached each of the actors to produce the very best show ever! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I know this was a great deal of effort on your parts, but I wanted you to know how much we appreciate you and the excellent work you do!" - *Family of a participant*
- "Just a quick note to say how much our family LOVED the Virtual play last night... You found a creative way to keep actors engaged, feeling good about themselves, and invested

in their social skills with zoom! You guys are “ESSENTIAL” as far as I’m concerned and I hope you will continue going forward.” - *Parent of a participant*

- “Treating him like an actor, not like someone with special needs, is such a great gift. He was really directed, given feedback, encouragement. And it was great theatrical direction! Very impressed.” - *Parent of a participant*

Expanding the Program

As revealed in these surveys, CFCArts is meeting a real and tangible need not only in the Central Florida community but through our virtual efforts, a national need as well. After our latest survey, we realized an interest in the program had extended past our geographic region. While we are committed to remaining virtual for the present in the interest of safety, we are also exploring the possibility of retaining some virtual options to reach those who cannot travel to attend rehearsals in Central Florida. We are eager to continue growing and expanding this program into the future and are grateful for the opportunity to increase awareness of our efforts through the National Organization for Arts in Health’s 2nd Annual International Arts in Health Awards Program. Through our creative programming and use of media and technology, we are enriching the lives of an under-resourced population and moving closer to arts accessibility for all.

References

- Buckley, S. (2005). *Creative arts, imagination and expression - an important way of being, sharing and feeling?* Down Syndrome News and Update. Retrieved September 1, 2020, From <https://library.down-syndrome.org/en-us/news-update/04/3/creative-arts-imagination-expression-important-way-being-sharing-feeling/>
- Skotko, B. G., Levine, S. P., & Goldstein, R. (2011, October). *Self-perceptions from people with down syndrome*. American journal of medical genetics. Part A. Retrieved September 1, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3740159/>

Appendix

UpBeat! Theatre Troupe [Exit Survey](#) (June 2020)

In what ways do you feel your student benefitted from the UpBeat! program, if any? *

- Enjoyment/fun
- Artistic development
- Creativity and imagination
- Positive outlet for energy
- Positive self-expression
- Positive self-image/self-esteem
- Positive relationships with others
- Social-emotional skills
- Auditory processing skills
- Verbal communication/speech skills
- Physical communication skills
- Problem solving skills
- Reading comprehension skills
- Memory skills
- Academic skills
- My student did not benefit from this program