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## POP Arts Enhances Skills, Creates Community



# POP Arts Enhances Skills, Creates Community

*by Cynthia Chambers, PhD*

There may be many reasons why we are drawn to a venue to see a performance, but POP Arts (Power of Performing Arts) hopes that you are drawn to its performances by the possibilities. POP Arts is an inclusive performance arts program for individuals of all abilities, Kindergarten through age 30. In January, 2011, Dr. Cynthia Chambers, an assistant professor in the Special Education program at East Tennessee State University (ETSU), and Ms. Kathleen Buttolph, a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Teaching program at ETSU, partnered with university students and Tricities community members to create POP Arts. POP Arts' mission is to provide a safe, strengths-based environment to facilitate the talents of individuals with and without disabilities.

In January, POP Arts announced its first audition and individuals with and without disabilities showed up from across the Tricities. POP

Arts used the audition process to identify cast members' strengths and interests, and to consider the types of roles for which an individual may be suited. The auditions involved dancing, acting and singing activities, with modifications as necessary, keeping in mind that everyone would have a role in this program. POP Arts adopts a philosophy of inclusion, recognizing that all individuals have a place to contribute and to grow.

Once the auditions were complete, the POP Arts cast was born! A total of 23 individuals, with and without disabilities, formed POP Arts' first cast, including individuals with Down syndrome, CHARGE Syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit disorder and learning disabilities. POP Arts utilized a workshop model to allow cast members to develop in the areas of music, dance, acting, storytelling and script development. The workshops were held two to

three times per week.

"All instruction is designed to move with the student and be flexible to his or her needs," said Ms. Buttolph. "Though a workshop or coursework time period may end in a production, POP Arts is not production-driven. POP Arts is all about the process—finding what works for the individual and working with that individual as if they are learning any other new skill; teaching them to master that skill, hoping that they retain the skill."

Volunteer and future special educator, Christie Culbertson, said, "One of my favorite things about this group was our willingness to tweak anything that needed it to meet the unique and individual needs of everyone involved. If it didn't work the first time, we found a way that it would; a way that anyone who wanted to could participate in the performance in their very own way."



In April, the POP Arts cast performed their first production, *Everyday People*, which highlighted dances, group songs, solos, original scripts by cast members with disabilities and various acting scenes. On performance nights, there were lots of emotions in the air. Everyone was excited! Cast members and volunteers were nervous and anxious. POP Arts co-founders were optimistic, but knew that no workshop or rehearsal had ever gone the same. They hoped that the hard work and growth of the cast members would be revealed during the production.

On opening night, 165 people attended; 145 people came the second night. Everyone was amazed! "I was very nervous before the performance, because my son, who has autism, has a very short attention span and gets nervous in crowds," said Amy Wenk, who also had two children without disabilities participating in the program. "I was amazed at how well he did. I really liked that he had a buddy with him the entire time to help him through the performance. We were thrilled when we saw Jared singing and dancing along with all the others in the POP Arts cast."

Although the first POP Arts production was a success, the true accomplishment took place across the weeks of workshops and rehearsals. For many individuals, POP Arts became a place to develop performance as well as life skills. For others, POP Arts became a family, or a place to belong. Beth Miller, parent of an adult with autism, indicated, "Communication has always been a challenge for Catherine, but when she performs in front of a live audience, she becomes self-confident and takes to her characters with confidence and ease. Having a program like POP Arts has added dimensions to these children's lives that they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to experience."

Tracy Gott, parent of a child with autism, remarked, "For the past two years, we haven't had anything to go to outside of school. I had been praying for something for Will to do and POP Arts was like a message from God. POP

Arts has been a life saver. It has given Will strategies for life in the community and at school. Through the arts, this was the one thing he could do that allowed him to shine in life."

Kaitlin Bevins, a future special educator and POP Arts volunteer, shared, "[POP Arts] made me realize that going outside of the box and trying new ways to teach or learn from other individuals and participants provides more growth in both the participant and the facilitator."

Mary Isley, parent of a son and a daughter with and without autism, stated, "[POP Arts] has given us a brighter outlook on [our children's] futures... it has opened up a new set of possibilities."

Ms. Wenk said, "ALL of my children have grown from POP Arts. It has given them so much self-confidence. My outgoing child enjoyed it thoroughly, my shy child came out of his shell and really shined, and my child who is told the word 'can't' over and over, was told he CAN and he did!"

"I guess what has surprised me the most is not the number of people that came out to be a part of POP Arts," concluded Ms. Buttolph. "I think that the desire to perform will always be popular. For me, the surprise was how everyone worked so hard for each individual person. Support was everywhere. Not just for the cast members, but for each other. Through POP Arts, parents found support through conversations with other parents; college students found support in their education outside the classroom; cast members found the support of new friends that they may not normally seek or that may not normally seek them at school or in the community; instructors found support in new ways to teach; every person found support, in that there was a place for all in POP Arts."

POP Arts has definitely opened the door to possibilities; those that were expected and those that were never anticipated. For more information on POP Arts, contact Cynthia Chambers at [siblings@etsu.edu](mailto:siblings@etsu.edu) or 423-439-7586.



Photo by Cindy Chambers



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