



Montford Middle School eighth grader Erin Broder learned to tint her video to look like “Wizard of Oz” footage for her performance of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” JODI DREW/SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

DIGITAL DRAMA

Montford students leap at chance to star in their productions

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In the last nine weeks of the school year, Jodi Drew’s chorus and drama students are usually preparing for their annual Showcase. The performance is the culmination of the artistic growth that’s occurred through the preceding months. The pandemic and resulting school closure presented a challenge, but Drew — a veteran teacher with decades of experience — knew the show must go on.

Instead of presenting their polished pieces to a packed audience of fans, Montford Middle School’s emerging performing artists recorded works to be shared digitally.

To keep them engaged and challenged, Drew provided lots of options for students who might be facing distractions from siblings or have limited working space.

“They were able to choose whatever fit their schedule and situation,” Drew said. “Then they each got one-on-one feedback from me until we felt the presentation was where we wanted it.”

The individualized attention allowed for intensive and customizable instruction. Drew helped students identify areas to strengthen and together they worked on skills like character development and expression as well as breath support, tone and composition.

The students took to this teaching model with enthusiasm.

“COVID couldn’t stop their passion,” said Drew. “They had to perform. They just missed it. One student even built a set in her backyard. They’re making costumes and doing half day recordings. I was blown away how many students took the time to go live, sing, dance, sing with sign language. I tear up thinking about it.”

Erin Broder is one of those students. The rising eighth grader pulled together a backdrop, scenery, props and a costume for her rendition of “Part of Your World” from “The Little Mermaid.” She also experimented with cinematography tricks and tinted her recording of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” with a sepia tone reminiscent

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of 1930s films.

"Mrs. Drew's assignments have inspired me," she said. "I've done things from home that I've never done in school."

Erin's mom, Jennifer Broder, agreed.

"During this time of homeschooling, the arts have given my daughter a channel for her creativity," she said. "It's made me happy to see her so involved, rather than just sitting in front of the computer."

Rising eighth grader Corbin Beazer and his older sister Lydia, a Lincoln High School student, showed off their comedic timing in a number from "Beauty and the Beast."

Corbin has found his involvement in the performing arts to be a stress reliever.

"I really enjoyed being able to take a break from everything that was going on at this time and just sing, dance, act and have fun with my sister."

He recognizes there are other benefits as well.

"The performing arts are centered a lot around mistakes and learning from them, which is a skill that many people need," he said. "It also works to strengthen a teenager's confidence and increase their abilities. All the people I knew taking a performing arts class loved it, and it is absolutely necessary to keep that feeling of joy and creativity intact during the pandemic."

Corbin and Lydia's mom, Brooke Beazer, was initially concerned about the amount of time they were spending on this project. She admitted that after the first couple of hours, she considered coaxing them back to their other schoolwork.

"But it was so refreshing, seeing them do something besides sitting lifeless in front of the computer," she said. "There was so much laughter and creative energy."

"The four hours spent were some of the happiest and most energetic I've seen them in the last few months. The artistic and creative kids that thrive off expressing themselves and connecting socially in their elective classes most definitely need the arts to



Corbin Beazer and his older sister Lydia show off their comedic timing in a number from "Beauty And The Beast." SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

maintain balance and for their emotional health. I know that changes will need to happen for the fall, I just hope it's not the arts. For some kids, it's their life-line in school."

Drew understands this too, and she actively cultivates space for kids to explore their creative potential. She also recognizes that it could be time for her to learn some new tricks, too. Based on the recent outcomes, she plans to continue experimenting with a blend of in-person and online instructional opportunities for her students.

"I got to see them sing and perform alone a lot more which adds to their personal growth and me understanding them better," Drew said. "I found I had a ton of students with all kinds of talents I didn't know they were hiding from me,"

As part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection, this article highlights how area arts educators have used distance learning to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the assistant director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).