

Access to confidence

Campers tune up performance skills at Next Step



Students prepare an extravaganza of Disney favorites. AMANDA THOMPSON

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Isabella Hanselman has big dreams. She sees herself on Broadway one day but, in the meantime, she knows she has to hone her skills. Millie Seckel, owner of The Next Step Performing Arts Studio is helping her do just that. Currently, Isabella and a dozen other campers are preparing for a summer extravaganza of Disney favorites.

"I like the Lion King's 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight' dance and the

If you go

What: Disney Magic

When: 6:30 p.m. July 26

Where: The Next Step Performing Arts Studio Theater, 1626 Capital Circle Northeast

Tickets: \$10 per adult and \$3 for children 12 and under.

Seckel believes her students all deserve contemporary technical and performance based hands-on training. "That's what I'm here for. That's why I call it 'the next step.' I want to prepare them as much as possible for whatever comes next," she said.

Seckel's training in the performing arts goes back to her own childhood in Tallahassee. By the time she was 18, she was working as a theater professional for a Pennsylvania production company, workshopping new shows headed to Broadway. "I got all the training in the world. I grew up real fast. I did my thing, then came back home to be home."

In the 36 years that have passed, she has worked as a choreographer, director and educator all over the area, most notably at Leon and Godby high schools.

One of her goals is to help students become more confident in themselves and their abilities. "I tell them that when their moms and dads get here, I want them to say, 'I didn't know you could do that' and they're going to say, 'I didn't either.' They will project and know how to stand in front of an audience. If they don't have confidence they won't succeed on stage. They've got to be strong."

This lesson resonates with

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12-year-old Genesis Jones. She signed up for The Next Step's summer program because she "wanted to try something new. It has shown me what I'm capable of instead of hiding in my shell. When I was little, I was the shy kid in the class and I didn't like answering questions," she shared. "This camp has really brought me to my potential and shows me I can do anything I want to do if I put myself to it."

Seckel strives to provide instruction for students who may otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in this type of programming. While she was teaching high school, Seckel noticed that "so many of the kids, they couldn't afford this. There is so much talent out there and I want to be very diverse. It's an access issue."

The overarching philosophy at The Next Step is to break down ethnic, gender, and age stereotypes about who can inspire, create, perform, and contribute. "I want that little black boy who would never ever have thought to be on stage with that little white girl, but now they're friends because they share something. They just want to perform," Seckel said.

"I would love to do "The Color Purple" or "The Piano Lesson" and have these kids walk away saying I am important, I'm not just the doorman or the butler or the maid. I want them to see that Sarah Brown ["Guys and Dolls"] can be a beautiful brown girl and so can Eliza Doolittle ["My Fair Lady]."



Millie Seckel looks on while her students rehearse.

The public is encouraged to attend the "Disney Magic" performance on July 26 at 6:30 p.m. It will be held at The Next Step Performing Arts Studio Theater, 1626 Capital Circle Northeast.

Donation tickets will be available for \$10 per adult and \$3 for children 12 and under. All proceeds will go to theater renovations and programming that serves our community and underprivileged youth.

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Interim Executive Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



The Next Step strives to be inclusive and celebrate the talent of all participants.

PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON