

CCS students explore creativity with LeTour

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

For the past 40 years, Community Christian School has provided Tallahassee children with an interdenominational environment where they can learn and grow. Former CCS principal and current creative arts director Tom Argersinger knows that a holistic spiritual education must include the arts, and he has worked with others to develop LeTour. This unique program allows students to explore the intersection of their faith and creativity.

"LeTour is a natural outgrowth of the school's philosophy of education. We examine cultural narratives, then we listen to those stories and we either cover or create art that expresses those things. We also try to bring a response that actually begins a dialog."

LeTour helps participants build empathy and compassion for others. Argersinger said that "we want to understand where you're coming from and we want to respond artistically. I believe that the arts are a particularly powerful medium for connection. It isn't that we just want you to believe what we believe, what we're really trying to say is we want to connect with you as a human being and along the way, we want to bring some hope."

Connection is a key concept in LeTour. The performance group is a mix of 15 middle- and high-schoolers who work together to weave a variety of arts disciplines into their productions.

"One of the most rewarding things for me personally, is watching a 12th-grader and a sixth-grader sit down in a collaborative conversation and hearing them discuss things with great maturity," Argersinger said. "It's an unusual thing, you don't see it very much. You've got to set up the right environment."

Students have the freedom to select songs, poems and dramatic scenes to perform. They are also encouraged to create new works of choreography, music compositions, film and visual art. This multidisciplinary approach allows student to contribute their own perspectives in the way that they feel they can best express them.

For 12th-graders Hannah Argersinger (Tom's daughter), and Jim Shashaty, this approach is ideal. "Whenever you're allowed to choose what you want to put out there, I think it makes you more passionate about what you're doing," Hannah said. Jim agreed and added, "The leaders of this program really want you to do your best and they're really good at helping you grow. There might be things that you wouldn't even think you could do and they're like, 'Why don't you try some harmony or why don't you pick out a song and try it?' They really want to see you spread your wings and find new art forms."

Eighth-grader Anna Maguire is a veteran of the stage. She has been involved in musical theater and dance for many years and while she is very comfortable performing, she has never written her own material, until Argersinger challenged her to do just that.

"I was like, 'I don't know what to do.' I had no idea, so I thought I would take my personal experiences and channel that through my art." The process of creating a monologue revealed new depths to Anna's capabilities as an artist. "I love LeTour; it has truly changed my life and how I perform. It has expanded my writing and emotional range tremendously."

Though many of the LeTour participants have performance experience, others are just beginning



Students are encouraged to create new works, including choreography, for LeTour.

PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON



Community Christian eighth-grader Anna Maguire performs an original monologue.

to test their mettle. "I came in here as a super shy, awkward person," admitted eighth-grader Lydia Hermann. "The whole group has helped me gain so much more confidence; it's been a really awesome experience."

In LeTour's most recent production, Lydia tackled three songs, including "Count On Me" by Bruno Mars. She hopes it reminds the audience that support is never far out of reach, and she sees a parallel in the lyrics and her own experience in LeTour. "You can count on your friends because they're here for you and they love you. It's kind of like the group, I can count on all of them and they can all count on me."

There's also room in LeTour for those who are more interested in the technical aspects of a production. Eighth-grader Nathan Clark said, "I don't really like to be on

stage, but I do like helping people that are and I also like the things that happen behind the scenes because that's not usually what you get to see."

He has found his niche running sound for the LeTour productions and he sees that his new skills can be a benefit in



LeTour Artistic Director Tom Argersinger helps a student tune her guitar.

participate in LeTour have space to develop creatively, intellectually, socially, and personally. He hopes they gain the self-assurance and skills to become active contributors to their community's culture.

"We want the kids, as emerging artists, to think and to feel. The arts allows them a language to express things that are too deep or too hard, that words alone just don't do. So let's make it a craft, let's work on our art so that people can hear and understand our voice."

You can see the members of LeTour in action during their upcoming performance at Railroad Square Art Park from 8 to 10:30 p.m. Friday.

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).

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