AMANDA THOMPSON
Both theater students and passersby enjoy Marshall's Broadway karaoke between classes.

LESSONS IN EMPATHY

LEON DRAMA TEACHER SHOWS HOW THEATER CAN UNITE STUDENTS

AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON
COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Lea Marshall has a ritual. Between classes every Friday at Leon High School, she stands at the door of her theater classroom and serenades the students with Broadway karaoke. Her drama kids join in, making their own requests, and passersby also get in on the act, belting show tunes from "South Pacific" and "Wicked" as they hustle along to their next class.

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Collaboration, inclusivity and mutual respect are the key to success in Lea Marshall's theater class at Leon High School.

"I believe I'm featured in a lot of Snapchats on Fridays," laughed Marshall who added that people seem compelled to take part in the performance. "Today, there were two football players dancing to 'Hello Dolly' in their football jerseys."

That's part of the magic of

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September 6, 2017 9:46 am (GMT +4:00) Powered by TECNAVIA

Drama teacher

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Marshall's classes, everyone is welcome and everyone has a role to play. At the beginning of the school year, Marshall stresses her philosophy of inclusivity and introduces her instructional methods to students in an engaging way. The advanced theater class is broken into four groups and they work together to answer questions about the course requirements. They can consult each other and their class syllabus, which takes the form of a playbill.

To keep things interesting, Marshall has conceived of a variety of possible plot twists and students can spin a wheel to take points from another group, add points to their own score, recite a line from Shakespeare, or sing the chorus from a Broadway song. By playing this game, students learn what's expected of them and that one of those expectations is to create with intention.

Kicking off every class, students stand and state their feelings and intentions, acknowledging their current state of mind and their goals for the hour. "I think it's really important to speak our intention out loud but then we have to be disciplined enough to do it. That's also the first thing you need to know before you step on the stage. What is your character feeling and what is their intention in that scene?"

"Theater is about playing a character and bringing in all that character's experiences. You're asking what would it be like if that had happened to me. How would I act, how would I feel? You realize that other people have things that they go through that you have no idea about."

Marshall has an extensive background in theater and years of teaching experience though she chose to step away from the classroom to raise her own children. What brought her back was a comment from the keynote speaker of an event she attended. "He said, 'we cannot keep a democracy until we teach empathy' and at that moment, I was like where do we teach empathy? I'm going back to teach theater."

Her students are glad she did and they also recognize the importance of empathy, acceptance, mutual respect and collaboration. Tenth-grader Devin Kimber is starting his fifth year of study with Marshall. He was her student for three years when she taught at Raa Middle School and he moved along with her to Leon last year. During that time he's gone from "liking drama to being a theater kid and falling in love with the theater." He now has a deep appreciation for the level of cooperation that's required.

"It takes a lot of teamwork to get it done. If you've got an issue with someone on the outside, you've got to check it at the door and work together with them. You've got to find a way to put aside your differences."

Twelfth-grader Kelsey Gilmore agreed and added "there are going to be people that you don't like, in every setting, even in the theater, but you're going to have to get over yourself because it's not about you. It's about the thing that you're trying to do." Working together successfully towards a common goal is only possible if each person feels valued and accepted. Kelsey especially appreciates that the theater provides a place where individuality is encouraged.

AMANDA THOMPSON

Kelsey Gilmore (center) encourages her group to share their ideas in the Leon drama class.

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"You meet all different types of people that you never thought you'd interact with. There's so much diversity and I'm not just talking about skin color. I'm talking about your path in life, your religious beliefs, what you think, how you do things, all that stuff."

Ashley Campbell is an 11th-grader who has also seen how quickly the theater can unite people, both on stage and off. "I love, after a show, getting to talk with people in the audience who say,' I can really relate to that.' To hear from the audience, 'I totally got what you were saying,' that means a lot, just having that connection. That's something really special that you can build on."

Building connections is a big part of Marshall's teaching strategy and she encourages her students to take the lessons they've learned through theater and apply them towards the greater good.

"I don't care that you're a better actor when you leave here, I care that you're a better human being, and that is why I do this. I don't need a world filled with actors but boy, do we need a world filled with some better human beings."

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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