



*Southwest Austin's Weekly Newspaper Since 1995*

## **First Night projects help keep creatures of night alive**

Adrienne deWolfe

Bats and owls are among the endangered Texas animals that Oak Hill area students hope to benefit during a lively march down Congress Avenue on New Year's Eve.

In preparation for this annual First Night Parade, local high school students gathered recently at the HEB at Slaughter and Escarpment to enlist the aid of other young shoppers to create paper lanterns that bring attention to the plight of Austin's nocturnal animals.

"We created our Keep the Night Alive program as part of a public celebration that revives the ancient tradition of art, ritual, and festivity," said Karen LaShelle, executive and artistic director of the Theatre Action Project (TAP). The paper lanterns that were created at HEB, along with hand-made puppets, hats, masks, banners, and drums that are being created as after-school projects at other sites, will be showcased during the finale of the First Night Parade, scheduled for Dec. 31st.

According to the TAP website: "TAP is a team of professionally trained artists and educators that works in partnership with schools and communities to lead unique and engaging arts programs which allow young people to learn critical life skills, gain tools for creative expression, and have successful experiences that build self-esteem and confidence."

According to literature that TAP was distributing at HEB: "The owl, bat, spider, ocelot, and red wolf excite the Texas landscape, but are in danger of becoming extinct. . . Due to hunting for furs and urban development, we are losing thousands of these creatures every year . . . By studying the Texas landscape, students all over Austin have been considering how they may take part in protecting these creatures."

"I'm a big activist for helping animals and kids," said 16-year-old Isabel Castano of Akins High School, who was onsite, helping young HEB shoppers create lanterns. "We need to reach this younger generation of kids and help them understand that the owls are dying. (Children) are the best audience, because they (will help determine) the future of the owls."

Roy Macias, 16, and Tenzin Dickyi, 18, both students at Akins, were particularly concerned about the welfare of bats.

"The Southern Yellow Bat is going extinct in the U.S. and Mexico," Macias pointed out.

"I don't believe in hurting animals or bugs," said Dickyi, a self-professed Buddhist. "Sometimes my friends will tease me, since I believe in reincarnation. They'll say,

'I squashed a bug. Was that your aunt or something?' But for the most part, I think people really care about the animals. The more people know, the more they want to help." Brittney Boles, 16, and Natalie Marquis, 16, both students at Bowie High School, were also volunteering on behalf of TAP at the HEB to raise awareness and create lanterns with young shoppers.

"Bats aren't the spooky, stereotypical creatures that people tell you about," Boles said. "They're beneficial to the ecosystem, and they kill insects, like mosquitoes, that are a problem."

"I'm against blindly killing anything at random," Marquis said. "Just last night, a spider was in my bedroom, and I left it alone. If you need to kill an animal for food, I think that's fine. But killing an animal (or spider) just for the sake of killing what's the point?"

When the students who were participating in the lantern-making project were asked what attracted them to TAP, they each agreed that they had a special love for art and creativity.

"I love the fact that we're here, doing hands-on art projects. We're not just talking about art," Marquis said.

"Making the lanterns for TAP is a lot more fun than (earning community-service credits for the National Arts Honor Society by) gift-wrapping presents," Boles said. "Besides, we're helping the First Night Parade, which benefits Austin."

"Teen involvement in community service is really important," Castano said. "When we get involved, we help adults understand that teens care about the environment and that we want to make (Austin) a better place."

"Every TAP program is theater or arts based," said Johnna Weaver, an Oak Hill resident who works as a contract educator for TAP. She was onsite at HEB to coordinate the lantern-making project. "We provide creative ways to address social issues, to get kids excited about reading."

For instance, Weaver was part of a TAP project to act out the story, "The Woman Who Outshone the Sun," which addresses planetary environmental issues. "We teach young people that they're part of a community that makes a difference" in the lives of every world species, Weaver said.

Not-for-profit TAP is one of the top providers of art education in Texas, according to LaShelle. In Austin alone, she said that TAP engages 12,000 students and 35 after-school sites.

LaShelle noted that arts-based education goes a long way toward instilling character values in children.

According to the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGACBP), which published a study related to the impact of art on learning, children who study the arts are:

- 4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement
- 4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair
- 3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- 4 times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or a poem

NGACBP's study also reports that children who participate specifically in drama education score 40% higher in written and verbal standardized tests than those who have no drama

education, and that adolescents who participate in theatre education have dramatically reduced incidences of name-calling and other racially intolerant behavior.

TAP's Keep the Night Alive project involves five schools, whose TAP educators, students, and their families plan to march with their artwork at the end of the annual Congress Avenue Parade on New Year's Eve. "We'd like to invite people to march with us," LaShelle said, "by filing into the street as TAP marches by during the Grand Finale." The procession will be held on New Year's Eve, from 6 to 7 p.m.

TAP is "always open" to adult and student volunteers, LaShelle said. Future TAP projects include a summer camp for Austin-area students.

Oak Hill Gazette