

Andrea Ball, Philanthropy: Theater Action Project brings arts to kids

Nonprofit uses theater and creative arts to address social issues

By **Andrea Ball**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Today's column features an organization I recently learned more about: Theatre Action Project.

Generally, I'm not an arts gal. I tend to focus my coverage on basic needs organizations that provide services to the poor and vulnerable. But there are plenty of groups that help the community in other ways. As I'm learning, food and shelter are crucial, but they're not the only things a person needs to succeed.

I talked to Karen LaShelle, executive director of the Theater Action Project, about the group's work. To learn more, go to www.theatreactionproject.org.

What is Theatre Action Project?

Theatre Action Project teaches youth critical life skills through the power of theater and the creative arts. We tackle topics like bullying, dating violence, prejudice and conflict, and give youth tools for expressing themselves as artists. Each year, we work in more than 100 sites and bring innovative and exciting arts-based programs to 16,000 in six area school districts through a variety of in- and after-school programs.

How many employees does Theatre Action Project have, and what is your annual budget?

Sixteen full-time (workers), 50 part-time. Our budget is just over \$1 million.

The economy has been hard on many nonprofits, but it's been especially rough on organizations that focus on the arts. Talk about how you've fared.

We have relied on our ability to market our programs to school districts and to garner public support from government agencies. We serve more youth now than ever before. However, our fundraising from individuals and foundations has declined, and that makes daily operations more challenging.

At a time when so many people are struggling with unemployment, homelessness and a lack of medical care, arts nonprofits are seen by some as frivolous. Are they?

Of course not! Children who study the arts are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, to participate in a math or science fair and three times more likely to win an award for school attendance. Our evaluations show that 90 percent or more of TAP participants learn new skills to solve the problems they face each day, like bullying and conflict as well as reading skills.

Any special events or new programs in the works?

We are launching a huge new after-school program for every school in Del Valle, reaching 1,000 new kids. On Oct. 15, our annual Youth Arts Symposium offers teens theater skills taught by professionals, and on Nov. 6, our annual food contest, the "Kooky Cookie Cookoff" at Central Market north, will feature

Sara Hickman, Austin's finest pastry chefs and tons of taptastic arts and crafts activities for kids.

Talk about TAP's future.

Just five years ago, we operated out of a 200-square-foot space, and now we are about to launch a capital campaign to build a 7,000-square-foot neighborhood arts center in East Austin, where we will offer around-the-clock programming for youth and families. We were recently gifted a piece of property by the Meredith family to be a part of the Chestnut Plaza development along with PeopleFund and the Sustainable Food Center at this exciting new location right by the new light rail on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

aball@statesman.com; 912-2506

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