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Empowering Young Actors

Theatre Teaches Love of Learning

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Alumnus Daniel Main

A teenage kid, a preacher’s son, repeatedly gets into trouble at school while also failing most of his subjects. When he does pass, it is with no better than a D. His high school career arrives at what must have felt like the only logical conclusion: he dropped out. . . .

A young man attains a degree from IU Southeast in philosophy. After graduating, he starts a theatre for children, a place where children can go and study the arts and a place where this philosopher can instill the importance of thinking well. This theatre would become a home away from home to literally hundreds of kids. Within the walls of this theatre, children learn that their thoughts have purpose, that their ideas have merit and that their very being has worth. . . .

It may surprise many to learn that these young men are one and the same. Daniel Main, that high-school dropout, is now a graduate from IU Southeast with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and a minor in English; he is also the founder and director of Pied Piper Productions, a non-profit children’s theatre located in Salem, Indiana. The theatre aims to empower children, not only by teaching them the basics of the performing arts but also by providing them with a place where their questions will be explored. According to the theatre Web site, piedpipersalem.org, Pied Piper “give[s] every child an opportunity to harness, refine, and exhibit their talents on and off stage.” Each age group—elementary, middle, and high school—puts on productions that allow the young actors to “gain self confidence, social skills, and self awareness, qualities that continue to serve them for the rest of their lives.”

How did Daniel become an inspiration for so many children? Although Daniel may not have entered higher education in the usual manner, he left knowing he wanted to turn his education into something positive. By studying philosophers such as the eighteenth-century thinker René Descartes at IU Southeast, Daniel came to understand what he believed was missing from his public education. There, no one had been able to answer basic questions like, Why do we study math? Why is literature important? To get a good grade simply was not enough of an answer for him. But in college, “I was not fed answers. I was forced to think. This

is what education should do for you, and if you enjoy the luxury of being what is considered educated, it is your responsibility to help others find that path as well.”

Daniel feels that by combining his philosophy education at IU Southeast with his natural talent for the arts and his experience in his community theatre, he is helping others find their paths. Children are all different, but one thing that they have in common is that they are questioners, and they need to be allowed to explore those questions. Daniel insists that his theatre be the kind of environment where that exploration can take place.

Daniel’s work in every aspect is a stage production. What happens on any stage is the result of hours of dedication. His theatre puts on shows that would be considered impressive by even the strongest critics. He is known to be hard at work till the early hours of the morning in order to make a production succeed. The endless behind-the-scenes work—hours spent helping, tutoring, and listening to his kids—is something that Daniel feels is just part of what has to be done. He beams as he speaks of the hundreds of kids that he claims as his own. “It is truly remarkable when you see a shy little first grader who won’t speak to anyone except his or her parents grow into an eighth grader who will dance across a stage and belt out a song so proudly it brings tears to your eyes.”

Pied Piper Productions teaches students whose personalities range from reserved to outgoing, but Daniel emphasizes that “one thing that none of them are, at least in my theatre, is forgotten.” He strives instead to encourage them to discover who they are and explore new ideas. In mentoring these children, his primary goal is to “impart to a child the true concept that your mind is beautiful and because it is, so are you. No matter how you think, that thinking has worth.”

Every year students compiling scholarship applications are encouraged to explain who was their most important influence. Daniel Main has countless times, in his small county, been the subject of their essays. Pied Piper Theatre has influenced many children and taught them the value of education and the importance of higher education