

As a sophomore at Texas City High School, Sonja Angelo played the lead in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*. Though she was successful in her role as Annie, when the curtains lowered, she promptly vowed never to be in the spotlight again.

“At that point, I knew there was something different about me,” she said. “I didn’t like being the center of attention; I liked being behind the scenes. I liked seeing other people accomplish things, and I liked helping them accomplish things.”

And for 50 years, as she has poured her heart and soul into the La Porte High School musicals, she has done just that—inspired thousands of students to accomplish what they thought was impossible, bringing out the best in each of them as they discovered their talents. Along the way, she’s made sure that the spotlight was on “her kids.”

Each year, as the directors talked about the musical dedication page, she pointed to the many people who gave of their time and talents to make the production successful. In true *Sonja Angelo*-fashion, she wanted the spotlight to be on others. However, no matter how much she doesn’t like it, the 50th anniversary of La Porte musicals is a perfect time for her to once again take center stage.

Back in 1967, when she first joined the La Porte High School faculty, Angelo had no idea that what she did in the theater would have an impact on generations of students to come. In fact, she promised her principal that musicals were not in her plans. “He said, ‘I’m going to tell you just one thing—don’t do one of those musicals!’” Angelo remembers. “Pretty soon he came over, and we were working on *Annie Get Your Gun*.”

When more than 50 students showed up to be a part of her group, she knew that a musical production was her only option to include everyone. That continues to be one of her basic desires as a teacher.

“There were two things that were really important to me,” she said. “First, I wanted to make sure that every student could be involved if he or she wanted to be. I said, ‘If you’re willing to work hard, you can be a part of this program.’ Second, I didn’t want kids to have to pay anything to participate, because I knew some families couldn’t afford it.”

Angelo was inspired to become a teacher by her own mentor, John Martin, who was her cheerleader director in junior high school and then her theater teacher in high school. As she directed her own musicals in La Porte, Mr. Martin often came up to help.

“He’s the reason I’m a teacher. Mr. Martin made me feel special,” she said. “He had that special thing about him that made you feel like you were the most important person in his life. Now, I believed that—I really believed that—and so I didn’t really understand that he made a lot of other people feel the same way.”

There’s no doubt that Angelo has that same gift. Despite the large number of students who participate in the musicals each year, time after time, alumni of all ages name Angelo as someone who made a significant impact on their lives. While most have not gone on to be actors, dancers or set designers, they took with them the life lessons of the theater about which Angelo cares so deeply. Lessons like respecting and appreciating others. Stepping outside your comfort zone. Working together to accomplish great things. “Digging deep” to realize your potential. And many, many more.

Our beloved "Mrs. A" officially retired from La Porte ISD in 1996, but she continues to be a driving force behind the La Porte High School theater program. Still, she will be quick to tell you that she "can't do anything."

"I think my biggest talent is I know what I don't know, and I'm not afraid to ask," she says. "I can't choreograph. I can't dance. I can't sing. I am the worst at sewing. I have never hit a nail with a hammer. I can't do publicity. But what I can do is find the people who are the best at these things and get them to teach my kids."

Ralph Waldo Emerson's quote "Nothing great is ever achieved without enthusiasm!" is the cornerstone of the La Porte High School theater program, and Angelo is always the most enthusiastic person in the room. She knows how to energize actors even after hundreds of "takes," coax smiles from the chorus when the rehearsals are long, and help the entire company to believe that the next performance will be the best one yet. As any student who has been a part of the musicals can attest, the greatest reward is hearing her laugh--from the very back row.

The 50th anniversary of the musical is indeed special, but it's not likely that "Mrs. A" will make a speech or step out onto stage to take a bow. You'll be able to find her, though—with that distinctive laugh, squealing with delight as she recognizes old friends, giving big hugs to "her kids" who, after 50 years, range in age from their teens to their 60s.

Sonja Angelo doesn't need a spotlight to brighten up the room.