

## **Woog's World / Who holds key to Westport school arts enrichment? You do.**

**Dan Woog**

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Westport is an arts community. Plenty of parents spend plenty of time taking their children to museums, concerts and Broadway shows.

But plenty don't.

And even the most well-meaning parents lack the time, energy and breadth of knowledge to expose their kids to the many lesser-known, harder-to-access performers and performances that make up the vast arts world. Afro-Boricua music, anyone? Japanese storytellers? How about wheelchair dancers?

That's where PTA Cultural Arts Committee comes in. You may have vaguely heard of them. Your child may have described a very cool school show, without mentioning their name. You might have received a low-key donation request, and tossed it aside.

Too bad. CA -- as the group calls themselves -- is one of those unsung, seldom heralded organizations that makes Westport what it is. And a group that, year after year, quietly builds the foundation for a new generation of arts lovers, who become broad-minded citizens, in every school.

Formed in the early 1970s by a group of women -- including professional opera singer Mary Lee Culver Casson, and indefatigable arts advocates like Eve Potts, Mollie Donovan and Ann Sheffer -- the goal was simple: Expose Westport youngsters to a wide variety of arts, to encourage lifelong appreciation. The committee -- with parent representatives from each school -- meets monthly. They discuss shows they've previewed; negotiate contracts; work with administrators on scheduling, and assist behind the scenes on performance dates.

Every Westport school gets two assembly programs a year. CA also offers "enrichment subsidies" of \$500 to each grade level at every school, for a performance that teachers choose. Fifth graders studying ancient Greece may see "Chariots of the Sun" -- bringing mythology to life -- while Staples English students might hear a reading by a young Mexican poet prodigy. In addition, the committee helps defray transportation costs for Westport students to visit fine arts museums.

How do they pay for it? Keep reading to the end.

Last fall, Push Physical Theatre came to Westport's elementary and middle schools. Students were not only awed by their impressive dance skills and physical stamina; they also delivered a positive message about group cooperation and acceptance.

They return April 2, for two performances at Staples High School.

Staples Principal John Dodig cited CA's role in bringing "a new window into the souls of another culture." Cultural Arts programs have helped create a high school climate "free of harassment, meanness and bullying," he said.

This spring, elementary schools will see the Northeast Children's Theatre Company's "Jack and the Giant." The troupe was founded by Staples graduate, and longtime CA appreciator, Tyler Paul. Middle

school youngsters will view "Lou Del Bianco as Abraham Lincoln." (His grandfather was the head carver for Mount Rushmore).

In today's high-tech, high-pressure, standardized test-filled educational world, the importance of arts cannot be overemphasized.

Greens Farms Elementary School parent Julie Podziba noted, "Cultural arts education provides experiences for children that cannot be duplicated by other means. It celebrates multiple perspectives, and different ways of seeing and interpreting the world." Many studies show that arts education fosters brain development. Citing CA programs like flamenco dancing, CelloBop, Shakespeare Guyz and the Push Theatre, she said, "I can't imagine other school districts providing such a rich background in the arts." "Our kids are lucky devils," Coleytown Middle School parent Christy Colasurdo added. "I don't think they'll realize it until they are old enough to look back on some of the shows they've seen." Arts appreciation does not just happen. It takes time, and CA is willing to plant the seed, water it, and wait however long it takes for the flower to bloom.

Coleytown Middle and Kings Highway Elementary School parent Janine Scotti was "blown away" by the performances she's seen. "I am so glad to live in a town that believes in exposing all kids, from all economic backgrounds, to quality cultural programs," she said. Karen Versano described her children running off the Long Lots bus saying, "It was the best day ever! We saw Boogie Chillun' and we danced in our seats!"

So, once again: How does CA pay for its wide, diverse programming?

It asks us.

Cultural Arts relies on the generosity of Westporters. It is funded entirely by donations. The committee's budget -- \$75,000 or so -- comes without any town funding.

Money is raised through direct appeal to parents, via a flyer sent home with back-to-school materials. It's easy to overlook. Recently, contributions have not kept pace with demands.

Committee members are sure that Westporters want to help. Many, however, don't know how.

It's simple. On Paypal, donate via this email link: [westportPTAculturalarts@gmail.com](mailto:westportPTAculturalarts@gmail.com). Or make a check payable to "PTA Cultural Arts," and send it to Cultural Arts Treasurer.

Then sit back, and let the shows begin.

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