Barbara Alexander, founder of Arts in CT.

by Keith Loria

Barbara Alexander is an accomplished opera singer and theater star, having performed in 30 states and four countries. She sings in five different languages and has been featured in notable plays, major films, and commercials.

Still, she considers her biggest and most important role to be as founder and executive director of Arts in CT, a nonprofit she established last year in Milford to inspire, enrich, and support local Connecticut communities by offering quality arts programs for all.

“We have art programs in-house and then we have a whole group of professional artists who come together and we train them in professional development in art integration to go out and teach their skills to children using the National Core Standards of the Arts,” Alexander said. “We do that in schools, for home schoolers, after-school programs, and there are actual performances.”

For example, children ages 5-15 just finished auditions for Shrek The Musical, which will workshop from Sept. 27 through Nov. 17, with dinner theater performances Nov. 18-20. The musical Legally Blonde will follow in December with a cast of local teens and the Tiny Tot Theater is looking for children aged 2 to 7 to star in 101 Dalmatians.

“Even though we are non-profit organization, we train everyone who works with us — especially the children — to give back to our community. With Shrek, the children are saying ‘thank you’ to their parents and are creating Thanksgiving baskets for families in need in the area. Proceeds from the event will go towards helping to feed families,” Alexander said.

The organization stems from the Performing Arts Academy, which had the same mission. However, Alexander wanted to reach more people and as an
LLC, the academy could not extend the helping hand as much as it can now.

Arts in CT also has an outreach component called Arts S.T.O.P (Street Team Outreach Program), through which it hires professional celebrity artists in local neighborhoods to combine with local communities. Virtual lessons via Skype, FaceTime, and more are also available.

“We might bring an artist into a daycare center and work with the kids in music, playing drums or dancing, and it’s always so much fun at that age to integrate art with learning,” she said. “Children can remember things a lot faster at that age. We also have artists come to our facility and teach dance, music and theater.”

The professional artists who are involved are some of the best singers, dancers and theater performers and teachers in the state. Classes are taught by local certified instructors who are aligned with national performing arts standards from the NAfME (National Association for Music Education), Arts Edge, and the CMEA (Connecticut Music Educators Association).

“Last summer, I was fortunate enough to work with Barbara and her newly founded performance company,” said Brian Riley, who directed a production of The Wiz. “While directing, I was quickly reminded how important theater could be for kids. The very diverse cast became a close-knit family in just a few weeks.”

The Wiz was performed at a rented middle school auditorium in New Haven. Thanks to Arts in CT, new friendships were formed, the community grew closer together, and wonderful memories were been made to last a lifetime.

“The amount of support the cast gave to each other was amazing,” Riley said. “By the time the curtain went up, we were all confident and strong because we had put together this beautiful show that we were really proud of.”

As a music teacher herself, Alexander talks with other educators around the state about the importance of using arts in helping to teach.

“It’s really important to submerge the arts with education. The arts is a tool to be able to help train, educate, ignite and power our community,” Alexander said. “Yes, it’s a therapy, and yes, it will calm raging beasts, but at the same time it gives you the opportunity to stimulate the brain and help you think differently.”

But it’s not just about the children. Arts in CT currently offer more than 65 creative programs throughout the state, bringing professional artists to senior housing, community centers, local restaurants, and more.

“The seniors love when artists come in and work with them,” Alexander said. “We look to bring the experience and love of all things creative to the community.”

Alexander noted the mission of Arts in CT is three-fold: to teach arts integration in schools using the National Arts Standards, to help artists remain employed, and to help students make the connection between the arts and viable careers.

“Arts are important for children,” Alexander said. “My mission is to have every child experience the wonder of it all.”

For more information visit the Arts in CT offices at 64 Ridge Street, Milford, or visit them online at www.artsinct.org; phone, 203-936-8567.

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