Community Collaboration Makes for Exciting Theatre On/Off Stage

If you thought that every Fontbonne student studying theatre was focused on performing on the stage, you’d be mistaken.

FCC funding is assisting two very innovative related programs-- Fine Arts Department’s “Theatre for Social Justice, Education and Community Connection” and Mission Integration’s Tunnel of Oppression. Both take theatre well beyond the confines of a physical theatre – and a theatre-goer’s comfort zone.

Adam Flores, Fontbonne BA 2007, earned his MFA at Baylor University and returned to his alma mater in the fall semester as Assistant Professor of Theatre. He and Professor of Theatre and Mustard Seed Theatre founder Deanna Jent set about to launch Theatre Education and Community Connection outreach, a devised theater, educator outreach program. The FCC award enabled a dream to become reality by helping assure that the program is adequately supported.

Devised theatre (also called collaborative creation) is a form of theatre where the script originates not from a writer or writers, but from collaborative, improvisatory work by a group of people. Collaborators on the project, led by Jent and Flores, include the Director of Retention and the Department of Service, Diversity and Social Justice, the Bosnia Memory Project, Mission Integration, and Arts and Faith St. Louis. The new program engages and impacts both the Fontbonne and St. Louis communities and expands the Fontbonne and Mustard Seed Theatre offerings to a much wider and diverse audience, well beyond the confines of a theatre. The unique Community Outreach Educators program also sets Fontbonne’s theatre program apart from other university theatre programs in student recruiting. Students and community collaborators work on outside class projects and take on marketing and community outreach for each theatre production, honing collaborative and communication skills relating to this season’s theater productions at Fontbonne and Mustard Seed. Collaborators also help Mission Integration’s Mary Beth Gallagher and Leslie Doyle, Director of Service, Diversity, and Social Justice, assemble the Tunnel of Oppression (see page 6) in consort with the post-Ferguson Peace and Justice planning group on the FBU campus.

An exhibit for the Bosnia Memory Project came into being, nurtured and supported by the FCC, and that project plays a particularly important part in this collaborative undertaking. During this second semester, the educator outreach program is working closely with Dr. Ben Moore, associate professor of English and director of Fontbonne’s Bosnia Memory Project, doing classroom work and spending time in the Bosnian community in St. Louis, talking especially to young adults born in Bosnia and raised in St. Louis. In April, the St. Louis community will have an opportunity to experience Bosnian/American, a collaboratively created narrative brought to life in a script by Jent, celebrating the true stories of how our neighbors’ painful history meets today’s reality. This unique theatre experience will be at the Mustard Seed Theatre, April 22 - May 1.

Both the Tunnel of Oppression and Bosnian/American demonstrate to FCC members the far-reaching effect of our own collaboration within the Fontbonne community …and beyond.
It is an early November celebration that is a homecoming, meet-and-greet, mission affirmation and kick-off for the FCC’s giving year all rolled into one great evening. Fontbonne President Michael Pressimone and FCC member Cathy Pressimone generously host the party at their home, assisted in planning and impeccable execution by FCC Events Committee, chaired by Sandy Lehrer.

It is a gathering where you are certain to engage in great conversations, meet old friends and discover new ones. However, it is a party with a purpose. The autumnal gathering is a time to introduce potential members and friends to the FCC; to let them know more about the work our organization does to benefit the University, the students and its faculty. Members and guests hear what’s happening from those who are utilizing their FCC awards.

Following hors doeuvres that would classify as amazing and a variety of wines and champagne – all donated by FCC members -- guests stopped their conversations to hear from Dr. Pressimone and two very special awardees who have made a significant difference and touched many lives in many places far beyond a classroom. Introduced by FCC Chair Maggie Gunn Fowler, Leslie Doyle, Director of Service, Diversity & Social Justice and Ben Moore, Associate Professor of English and Communication, made it very clear that our giving circle awards are impactful.

Doyle’s students spoke for themselves that night, explaining that the Griffins Achieving Progress (GAP) program chosen for an award, is a work in progress. From their perspective, the student mentoring program is helping students of color adjust to the many challenges they face. (SEE More About GAP on page 3)

Ben Moore, dedicated since 2006 to the preservation of an enduring record of Bosnian genocide survivors, especially those living in Metropolitan St. Louis, has been awarded funding for the protection of Fontbonne’s Bosnia-related special collection housed in the Bosnia Memory Project’s permanent location in the Jack C. Taylor Library. He spoke of his emotional visits with survivors who often part with the only artifacts they have left from a relative or friend killed in the genocide.

We come together to celebrate all of the educators and students whose dreams the FCC helped become reality.
The FCC receives many proposals for project awards every year, including The Bosnia Memory Project, the Mustard Seed Theatre, from faculty, staff and student proposals requesting funding to work on campus or for mission trips. Leslie Doyle, Director of Service, Diversity & Social Justice, submitted a grant application in 2015 for a new program, Griffins Achieving Progress (GAP). Details about this project were shared to a full room at a recent FCC event.

Doyle and Deanna Williams, an alumnus and part-time employee, along with their former colleague, Suzanne Stoelting, were instrumental in developing this program. After researching national trends, they analyzed and benchmarked Fontbonne statistics for persistence, retention and matriculation of students that are underrepresented at predominately white institutions. They held focus groups and identified a need for a leadership and mentoring program that would serve these students.

Modeled after a successful program for international students to assist in their transition to the Fontbonne Community, also funded by the FCC in 2012, the goal of GAP is to ease academic, social and cultural transitions for student who are underrepresented. Striving to improve the retention rate among these students, Doyle and Jent want to provide them with a sense of community at Fontbonne University. As an advantage, this program fosters faculty and staff awareness to the issues impacting students who are underrepresented.

Over the last semester, GAP participants learned about leadership, goal setting and career development in workshops. The program coordinators focus on academic success by requiring study hours, monitoring students' academic progress and providing referrals for academic services. Also, they require students to engage in service, social and leadership events at Fontbonne to increase their relationship with others on campus and the university itself.

GAP asked upper class students to mentor incoming students, and according to Doyle, “the program is successful because we have 20 students who support one another and hold each other accountable. They check in with each other on a weekly basis.”

Everyone benefits. Jent recalled a mentor who, during winter break, told the program team that he earned an improved GPA this semester-- because he wanted to be a better role model for his mentee. Doyle will assess the efficacy of this program through satisfaction, data analysis and anecdotal evidence. The name ‘GAP’ is slowly being recognized by the Fontbonne community, and her goal is to weave the program into the fabric of the university.

Given the passion and commitment of its two founders, the GAP program, it appears, will be a mainstay of Fontbonne University for years to come!
Tech Expo – Sharing Educational Experiences with a Larger Community

The Fontbonne’s Center for Educational and Emerging Technology (CEET) is a premier location for the latest emerging technology used in education and other select fields. The Center recently provided some great fun for Fontbonne students, faculty and staff, as well as members of the K-12 education community in the Metropolitan St. Louis area.

Following the last day of finals, CEET transformed the Dunham Student Activity Center into a Holiday Tech Expo, made possible by CEET’s award from FCC, combined with a gift from the Wells Fargo Community Investment project. The FCC award enabled the CEET to purchase a new 3D printer, laptops and Chromebooks, increasing the Center’s influence on campus, as well as in K-12 schools in the surrounding area.

Director of Institutional Technology Amy Peach welcomed more than 70 registered Expo attendees from across the area, who came — not only to see what they hoped to find under their Christmas trees — but also for the fun of exploring some emerging technology, used in education and other select fields, which is just hitting the market.

One of the most popular devices at Expo was a Virtual Reality viewer, which provides great educational potential for virtual excursions, rather than merely reading about places. FCC member Carol Spehr was delighted to give the VR viewer a try. She celebrates Fontbonne’s Tech Expo — sharing new educational experiences with the larger community!

New Member Carol Sestric Finds FCC a Natural

Carol Sestric has a long history with CSJs, both at high school in Hannibal, MO, and at St. Teresa of Avila College, KC. Carol says, “the profound social conscience” of the sisters is especially appealing to her, who with her husband Tony — well known St. Louis lawyer, who died in 2012 — has engaged in significant volunteer work for local non-profits. So FCC is a natural for Carol.

Before beginning her family, Carol taught Fashion Merchandising at Fontbonne in the mid-60s, then continued part-time for nearly another 20 years. She also worked at Catholic Charities in an outreach program, and then at BJC in Marketing for 18 years. She sings in her parish Choir (St. Steven Protomartyr) and is committed to 5 mornings a week at the gym — tending to both body and soul.

When Carol taught in what was then the Home Ec Department at Fontbonne, Sr. Mary Carol Anth was department Chair, and they’ve been good friends ever since. Sister recently shared highlights of her FCC involvement and Carol was intrigued. She attended the FCC program last fall, where Ben Moore spoke about his Bosina work and students explained the GAP program. Carol found these and other FCC endeavors fascinating — and the kind of thing she enjoys supporting. The Bosnia project held extra interest, as Tony had held joint American and Croatian citizenship, because of his parents’ Croatian heritage.

Family is Carol’s highest priority these days. She’s fortunate to have her 3 children and 5 grandchildren (ages 7 to 18) living nearby, and grandma Carol delights in them and in assisting their parents, whenever possible. She’s excited about FCC membership and looks forward to studying the proposals and participating in round table discussions and the all-important voting, as an active member of our unique sisterhood!
Fontbonne Community Connection members were invited to a festive Presidential holiday event, on Sunday December 13, for the University’s Lyon, LePuy and Legacy Giving Societies — which includes FCC members.

A host of FCC members and others enjoyed one another’s company at a lovely wine and hors oeuvres reception before President Pressimone and Director Deanna Jent welcomed this “full house” audience to a performance of the Mustard Seed Theatre’s resoundingly successful “All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914.” Sold out for its two previous years’ holiday runs, the a cappella musical is based on real events during the Christmas Truce of World War I. Several in the audience were excited to see this show for the third time! All found it a profoundly moving and powerful theatre experience.
Tunnel of Oppression — This Walk May Change the Way You Think

Leslie Doyle, representing Service/Diversity & Social Justice, and Mary Beth Gallagher, Mission Integration, received an award from FCC to bring a learning experience called Tunnel of Oppression to campus. The event will take place March 8 and 9 in the Dunham Activity Center.

What is the Tunnel of Oppression? Doyle and Gallagher explain it as a powerful opportunity for students and others to witness oppression or to experience it firsthand. Participants will walk through a series of rooms that contain skits, monologues, videos, role-plays and other configurations. The Fine Arts Department is collaborating with Doyle and Gallagher in creating and presenting this uniquely personal learning opportunity.

In less than 60-minutes, participants move through the tunnel experience, where various examples of injustice and oppression are incorporated — related to disability, race, international origin, gender bias and more. Initial participants have found the experience deeply moving and challenging.

FCC members are welcomed to attend this originative experience on March 8 in the afternoon or evening, or on March 9 until 3 p.m. Registration is required. Specific details will be sent to FCC members.
FCC is off and running in 2016, and I’m delighted to announce Carol Sestric, Jan Johnson and Laura Farrar as our newest FCC members. Welcome from us all! See the profile on Carol in this issue; Jan and Laura will be featured in next issue. All new members, please note an orientation session is in the making.

Also in the making is a more vibrant, interactive and accessible FCC website, with FCC's Liaison Laura leading this charge. Our “Blackboard” posts will also receive much needed updates, and tech guru Glazer Liz continues streamlining all Award posts. Finally, our newsletter — highlighting people, projects and events that demonstrate FCC’s reason to be — will boast enhanced visual appeal in spring. As with all new projects, these works in progress beg your patience.

Special “thanksgiving” to all who made our November Wydown House event so meaningful: Cathy and Dr. Mike Pressimone, the Events & Membership committees and the presenters. Leslie Doyle and her students' presentation about their mentoring program for underserved students was truly inspiring, as was Ben Moore’s heart-rending Bosnia Project stories.

Elsewhere in this issue, see the FCC-sponsored December Tech Expo on the latest industry innovations — put together by Amy Peach for on-campus and community members -- both the tech savvy and the innocently curious (that’s me)!

Mark your calendar: “Tunnel of Oppression” opportunity for growth in understanding March 8 and 9, Jan Sheehan’s March 11 tour of FCC on-campus contributions, and a tour of the CSJ Motherhouse on April 16. (Official invitations will be forthcoming.) The newsletter calendar includes these dates, as well as roundtables and award deadlines. All preliminary applications have been received and the 2016-17 Award Cycle is underway! I urge you to join in our various FCC activities and to invite potential members to “Come Bloom with Us.” Remember, more members equal more available award funds. Use your “one woman - one vote” gift, attend at least one Round Table and VOTE!

Finally, do not hesitate to contact me. We are in this together – and for that I thank you.

Maggie
Maggie Gunn Fowler
FCC Chair