

PELHAM EDUCATION FOUNDATION'S "FRIENDS OF THE PERFORMING ARTS" COMMITTEE SUPPORTS PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG PERFORMERS

While most of his fellow 2009 graduates of Pelham Memorial High School are busy this summer outfitting dorm rooms, and working at summer jobs if they're lucky, Max Kleiner commutes daily into New York to pursue his dream of becoming a professional actor. As a newcomer to theatre during his senior year, Max landed feature roles in the two Sock N Buskin productions— *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Blood Brothers*. While he is not the first Sock N Buskin alum to hear the call of the professional theater, increased enrollment in the high school has resulted in more students wanting to be part of the theatre group and/or a weekend Theatre Day, a new Forensics Club and the Young Playwrights Festival. Ticket sales alone cannot cover the costs of these after school programs so The Pelham Education Foundation stepped in with the "Friends of the Performing Arts Committee" to accept donations from the community. Max is now a student at the Circle in the Square Theatre School's summer workshop, intensive professionally oriented acting classes that he hopes will lead to a place in the organization's two-year program and a career on stage or screen.

When Max began his senior year last fall, he had no acting experience. But John Orefice, the director of the High School's Sock N Buskin theatre program, did not see that as a barrier. When Max tried out for a role in the group's fall production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Mr. Orefice saw Max as Demetrius. Following his considerable success in that role, Max tried out for the spring musical, *Blood Brothers*. Drawing on his years in England and his fine ear for English accents, he played the role of a child separated at birth from his impoverished family and raised in a posh environment. Max, along with his fellow actors and backstage crew, received rave reviews for his performance.

The extracurricular theatre program at Pelham Memorial High School provides opportunities each year for over 100 students like Max to learn about, and participate in, all aspects of theatre. In addition to performing on stage, students take full responsibility for the production: student artists design and create sets and advertising posters, future engineers work on sound and lighting, and fashion fans choose costumes and learn to apply theatrical makeup. A talented student writer may act as dramaturge or write publicity articles, while another with an interest in business will manage ticket sales. Students create the programs and act as ushers. Students acquire life skills while learning that each role is critical to the success of a performance and that only by working as a team can they succeed.

Although some students, like Max, become engaged as late as their senior year, many of the students who participate in the Sock N Buskin program hone their skills in the Pelham Middle School drama club, directed by Tom Beck. The directors of both the Middle School and High School programs find a spot for each student, on stage or off, regardless of prior experience. Many discover a new passion, and some their life's work. For Max Kleiner, working with Mr. Orefice and Mr. Beck (who assisted with the High School shows), provided motivation: "When I wasn't feeling confident of my ability," he says, "they assured me that they could recognize my talent even when I couldn't. Until I joined Sock N Buskin, I didn't know what I wanted to do after high school. Being in the plays gave me a future direction." The broad success of the programs is evident in the large number of recent graduates who have pursued the study of theatre and have gone on to successful careers in the dramatic arts.

Increased student enrollment has created growing demand for quality experiences in the performing arts. Recent responses to that interest have included a weekend Theatre Day aimed at younger students and a Young Playwrights Festival, both sponsored by the Friends of the Performing Arts ("FPA"), a committee of The Pelham Education Foundation (the "Foundation").

The growing demand for performance opportunities has also led to the rapid growth of a new club in the High School: Forensics at PMHS. During the last year, the club's fourth under the coaching of Tom Beck, six students qualified for the New York State Forensic League state championships in Oral Interpretation, and PMHS student Omar Gouda was first in the state in Oratorical Declamation and qualified for the national championships.

Most performing arts groups in the Pelham secondary schools—the bands, orchestras, choruses and select vocal group—are credit-bearing classes taught during the regular school day. As such, they receive funds from the school district budget to cover not only instruction but also supplies and materials. Because the theatre and forensic speech programs are extracurricular and take place outside the school day, most of the expenses must be funded outside the school budget. School district financial support is limited to stipends for the director and assistant director or coach and the use of space for the program.

Additional program expenses include royalties and script rentals, lighting and sound equipment, sets and props, costumes and wigs, and tickets, programs, posters and banners. In addition, the theatre program must cover the cost of outside professionals, including a lighting designer, a set design consultant and, for musicals, musicians and a choreographer. In the case of the forensic speech team, there are costs associated with travel to meets. That's where the FPA steps in.

Mr. Orefice recognized that costs were growing much faster than ticket revenues and that the theatre program could not sustain itself going forward without additional help. He worked with the Foundation to create a designated fund that became known as the Friends of the Performing Arts. The mission of the FPA is to provide funds for Pelham students grades K-12 to work in the performing arts, broadly defined to include music, dance and theatre. To help support the theatre program in particular, the FPA has invited the public to benefit performances, has made direct appeals to parents of students involved in theatre and others with an interest in the program, and recently submitted a successful \$5,000 grant request to the Herman Goldman Foundation to cover the expenses of *Blood Brothers*. Mr. Orefice and Mr. Beck, working with the FPA and students, continue to generate new ideas, but recognize that private donors will need to supplement the district budget in order to turn those ideas into performing arts experiences.

Tax deductible contributions to the Pelham Education Foundation may be made either by check sent to 18 Franklin Place or online at the Foundation's website: www.pelhameducationfoundation.net. In either case, a request to apply funds to the FPA can be noted on the contribution form or check. As Max Kleiner points out, "There are actors in the ranks of Pelham students eager for an outlet for their creativity. It would be unfair to deny them every opportunity that our community can afford." Each donation will help a student find his role, under the footlights or backstage, in front of the camera or in the editing room.