

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

By Laurel Kupka



Cheers and applause greeted Kenny Beard and Michelle Youngquist when they took the stage, but a hush fell over the auditorium as the unconventional actors began to sing “Start of Something New” and the audience realized they were in for a show unlike any musical they had ever seen before.

OPPORTUNITY TO SHINE

Beard and Youngquist, like the rest of the cast, participated in *Acting 101*, a Special Populations Division class for members of the community with disabilities. An adaptation of Disney’s *High School Musical* was the most recent of numerous shows put on by the class, including adaptations of *Grease*, *Footloose*, and *The Wizard of Oz*.

Such performances were not what Annette Deghand, Special Populations supervisor for Lawrence Parks and Recreation Department, had in mind when she created the class several

years ago. Deghand is always searching for activities that will assist individuals with disabilities in becoming better self-advocates who feel comfortable speaking up on behalf of themselves and others. She thought an acting class would be a good way to introduce participants to public speaking and give them experience appearing in front of a small group.

But what was intended to be a small public speaking class



quickly grew into something greater when it became apparent that participants were capable of much more than simply memorizing short monologues.

“We had thought we would do acting and dancing skits in class, but the actors wanted to



take our show on the road,” said Angela Harris, who has been involved with special populations in Lawrence for 11 years.

Members of the *Acting 101* class, which now includes more than 20 participants, began putting on full-scale performances that include dialogue, costumes, singing and choreographed dancing – a class favorite.

“I love to dance and learn new dances,” Youngquist said. “That’s the most fun part of class.”

In addition to being fun, *Acting 101* benefits the actors in other ways, such as raising their self-esteem. This is especially important to Deghand, who said individuals with disabilities are more likely to struggle with their sense of self-worth. Each performance is an opportunity to shine in front of an audience.

“They gain confidence and an increased self-concept, and they take on so much responsibility for their lines and dances and everything,” Harris said. “There is an incredible sense of accomplishment in the end.”

That’s definitely true for Alan Tarcy, who admits to struggling with memorizing his lines from time to time.

“It’s a little bit hard to learn them, but I just practice and I can do it,” he said.

READY FOR HOLLYWOOD

The actors also inspire others in the community. Deghand recalls a conversation she had with a friend after the performance of *High School Musical*.

“My friend came up to me after the show and said she just couldn’t believe it. She didn’t expect it to be

bad, but she didn’t expect the show to be so good, either,” she said. “People are always really surprised by what these actors are capable of. It can really change the opinion they may have about what people with disabilities can and can’t do.”



And while the actors still face the occasional struggles with stage-fright and nerves, they continue to set the bar higher with each performance.

“I’m ready to do a show in Hollywood,” Renae Johnson said.

“That would be really fun,” Cole Browne, another veteran actor, added. “I think we could.”