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Profiles - Rosie's Theater Kids

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Photo: Rosalie O'Connor



Profiles

Rosie's Theater Kids

What started out as a single dance and song class in a borrowed New York City public school lunchroom has evolved into programming that touches the lives of students across all five New York City boroughs in a dedicated building near the heart of the Broadway theater district. The Rooftops Project's Frank Loffreno and Professor James Hagy visit with Rosie's Theater Kids co-founder and Artistic and Executive Director **Lori Klinger** and Director of Advancement **Lindsay Miserandino** at the Maravel Arts Center in New York's Midtown West neighborhood.

Rosie's Theater Kids (RTKids) was launched in 2003 by comedienne and actress Rosie O'Donnell and Lori Klinger at P.S. 51, a Title 1 school where 60 percent of the enrolled students live at or below the poverty level. From that modest beginning, the organization is today housed in its own building, the Maravel Arts Center, located on West 45th Street and offering services that include performing arts instruction, life skills development, and academic tutoring, all in a home-away-from-home environment. Children served range from sixth to 12th grades. The building was acquired and donated by Rosie's For All Kids Foundation and outfitted and equipped thanks to a major grant from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs under Commissioner Kate Levin.

Lori Klinger has served as Artistic and Executive Director since the organization's founding. She sees her role increasingly today as transitioning to others within the organization, including Lindsay Miserandino, Director of Advancement at RTKids. Lindsay has been with the organization since 2005, first as program administrator and then expanding into roles including facilities and office manager, human resources manager, and legal affairs, as well as fundraising. She continues to serve as General Manager.

Lori recalls for us that first programmatic step, at P.S. 51, which was then on 45th Street. The selection of that school for the pilot program was directly related to Rosie O'Donnell's vision for the charity.

"Rosie wanted to start in the heart of the theater district," Lori explains. "She felt those are the kids that walked by the theater every day and never got to go inside. She said it was like living in Hawaii and never going to the beach."

"P.S. 51 was lacking arts programming and funding for enrichment activities," Lindsay notes. Title 1 schools can get federal funding to help students. The RTKids PS Broadway program provides 15 weeks of introduction to American musical theater to fifth graders at New York City schools. All of the schools for the PS Broadway program are Title 1 schools.

"The schools we go to are all in Manhattan," Lori explains. "We are launching a new program in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. But even though the kids go to school here in the city, they may live anywhere. If they move, they are allowed to stay in [the same] public school. If they lived in Manhattan and the family moves to Brooklyn, they are allowed to stay. So our students come from all five boroughs."

Like many in-school enrichment resources, the first program was in an impromptu setting. "At P.S. 51, they didn't have a gym. It was in the lunchroom. The lunch ladies would be getting lunch ready, there were refrigerators that were very, very loud and humming the whole time, and we would teach classes," Lori remembers. "Our class consisted of a live pianist making music for the kids," she adds. "They didn't have a piano. We had to buy them a piano and send it over there."

P.S. 51 has since sold that property, which is now under residential redevelopment, and moved to another location nearby. "The new school is quite well designed, with a great gym space," Lindsay observes. Rosie's Theater Kids still offers programming at P.S. 51 but also admits selected P.S. 51 students into a scholarship program at Maravel Arts Center.



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Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

Rosie's Theater Kids describes its programmatic model as conservatory-style. Lori explains, "Arts classes can cover a big range. When we started this organization, I felt if we were going to invest [several] million dollars a year; we really had to have a high standard of excellence. Conservatory is proper training; it's holding the bar very, very high in ballet, theater dance, drama, and vocals. And it really carries through your whole life."

From 2003 to 2009, the organization rented studio space by the hour for after-school programming and shared office space with Rosie O'Donnell's business premises, which were also located in Midtown Manhattan West. Lindsay and Lori remember hauling buckets of dancewear and shoes across Times Square every day.

That walking route frequently brought Lori past a narrow building for sale on West 45th Street. "It was a really horrible building, but it was for sale," Lori relates. "So I kept looking at it. The first floor was a little workshop where they made signs. The second and third floors were something else. The fourth floor was an avant-garde theater, with navy blue walls. It was a little narrow for dance studios; that was a downside. There weren't a lot of choices in this location. The more I looked at it, the more I thought, 'I think this is it.'"

The property satisfied several criteria they felt were important for a permanent home: separate entrances, an elevator, and not merely space in an office building and surrounded by adults, or where office tenants might be on the floor below while students are dancing. A dedicated space was also more practical than constant setting and resetting for rehearsals or performances. As plans developed, it was possible to add a floor that became conference and meeting space, as well as a roof terrace overlooking the neighborhood.

Leadership was fortunate to be able to move quickly in responding to the available property. In addition to the Rosie's Theater Kids charity, Rosie O'Donnell had established Rosie's Kids For All Foundation, which initially funded childcare centers around the country.

"One of Rosie's greatest gifts was to purchase this building for Rosie's Theater Kids, to really ensure the longevity of the organization," Lindsay points out.

"We were very lucky," Lori acknowledges. "That foundation's board bought the property and built the building. When she was on TV, Rosie said she felt she had to make a national presence in her giving. But she said she never met the kids, never really saw it change their families. With the Maravel Arts Center, she could get to know the kids and know whom she was giving to."

Rosie and the team were convinced that the neighborhood, in the theater district, was critical to providing the experience and in attracting students. It has also served to facilitate greater participation by professionals in the arts because it's close to them, too.

Lori believes that the transit system is another unique asset to programs in New York City, compared with other metropolitan centers. "This location is so central," she says. "Every subway goes to Times Square, so everyone from downtown to uptown to the east side can get here easily. If something goes wrong with one train, you can hop on a different train. If we had a place further out, I also don't think the Broadway community would stop by like they do."

The Center's name carries an inspirational message from Rosie's own childhood. "Pat Maravel was Rosie's fifth grade teacher," Lori explains. "Rosie's mom died when she was in fifth grade. Pat showed her how to take care of herself and to love and live. Pat was a big influence. She later also died of breast cancer like Rosie's mother."

Naming the building after Pat Maravel seems very fitting for an organization enriching the lives of children through the arts. "Rosie keeps in touch with all of Pat's kids," Lindsay adds. "They were here at the ribbon cutting and they come to our galas. They are part of the family." The Russ Berrie Performance Studio is named after an individual donor who contributed significant funds to the initial capital campaign.

There are nine full-time staff members. Six are artistic, and three are administrative. In addition to on-site programming, four of the artistic staff commute to the public schools where they serve as lead teachers. Part-time staffers, as well as interns and teaching artists, also contribute to program delivery. Teachers return to the Center at the end of each day in the field to teach in the after-school program. The Center also has a full-time Academic Coordinator, who brings in tutors and mentors to work with students one-on-one. Anti-bullying workshops for staff, students, and parents are offered as part of the Center's commitment to providing a safe and welcoming environment for all students who participate.

In summers, the space is bustling with programs every day from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Transitioning students from one space and program to another can be its own art form, as Lindsay sees it. "It is truly choreography to move them from class to class," she says. Cooking and nutrition programs are also part of the programming during the summer.

The building was a gut renovation. Lori recalls workmen pointing out that there was much more brickwork replacement to be done on the fourth floor than originally anticipated, due to existing brick literally disintegrating in their hands.

The building is fully utilized. Ready convertibility of the spaces is important to make maximum use of every room. There is wood flooring with rugs, rather than carpeting, so that there are no worries about spills and so that the rooms



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can be repurposed easily. "It was also important for the dance space and the floors to be of the highest quality to serve the students well and to be professional," Lindsay adds.

"I think the best money we spent was hiring a consultant whose business it is to design dance studios and theaters," Lori notes. "His impact was really great, and I'm so glad that we had him. We also hired an acoustician. The first floor plans had an HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning] duct going through the middle of the dance studio. You can't really have that: It is going to be really noisy. The acoustician had it moved to the side, and he wrapped it."

Acoustic quality makes a major impact on programming. "When we first moved into the building," Lori tells us, "we would go into the music room, which is beautifully, acoustically lovely. The kids would be singing. They were rehearsing. Daniel was singing with Brian Stokes Mitchell [a Tony-winning, Broadway star], and it sounded beautiful. Then they went on stage, and I thought Daniel didn't sound as good. It happened again. It took me five years to realize they sounded really good in the music room because the acoustics are so beautiful there."

While the space works well for programming, the building of course remains narrow. "We adapt," Lindsay indicates. "We have showcases [student performances] for our board, where we line up two rows of chairs in the studio space on the first floor. The kids are right in their faces, but that works for us because the people love to see the kids up front."

The building also has a costume room, with clothing and wardrobe for performances. A small kitchen, which the Center calls the café, serves as a break area with free and nutritious snacks. "It's really part of the holistic approach to the child," Lindsay notes. "We want them to feel at home here. 'Drop your backpack and have a granola bar and a water. If you come between school and your class, don't go home. Don't wander the streets or play in the park. Come here, have a snack, and do your homework.'"

"I think all kids deserve the best," Lori states. "It shouldn't just be parents that can afford the most who get the most beautiful places. Our students work hard for a chance to be in this building. Kids know where this building is and come back 10 years after they have left [the program]. Sometimes we have had kids who are in trouble just show up at the door and say, 'I need help.'"

The outdoor rooftop terrace is used for a variety of functions, from donor cultivation events to board and staff meetings. Use of the space is primarily limited to Rosie's Theater Kids. In leadership's minds, the staffing, set-up and

clean up, security, and risk of damage all outweigh any benefits that might come from outside or corporate events.

The terrace was decorated through the involvement of celebrity chef Rachael Ray, who has been a major supporter of the Center. Rosie had appeared on Rachael Ray's television programs several times. Just before the building opened in 2008, Rachael came up with the idea and made decorative upgrades to the space, including a mosaic that adorns the terrace. Other celebrities have visited, including Sarah Ferguson, who conducted a book reading at the launch of her coincidentally-named *Ballerina Rosie*, in which Rosie's Theater Kids children participated as ballet dancers.

"We have two main events a year here in the building, hosted by our board for friends and supporters of the organization," Lindsay comments. "We have also done performances at the Alvin Ailey, although this year they are under construction. So we are moving to the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College. And we do a grand performance at the Marriott Marquis [hotel] for our gala every year. We do get invited to do small performances here and there."

Small indeed. Performing at the White House, for example! While the Center focuses on its proximity to Broadway, the students have had other prestigious and sometimes unexpected performance opportunities farther afield. The first White House performance was on the occasion of Rosie's Theater Kids ACTE II [A Commitment to Excellence] Program receiving the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, the highest honor for enrichment programming for students.

Building on that first appearance, Rosie's Theater Kids were invited back in fall 2016. "They called and said, 'Hi, it's the White House calling,'" Lori remembers with visible amusement. "They said they would like the kids to sing at the final state dinner the Obamas were hosting, for the Italian prime minister. I asked, 'When is that?' and they said, 'It's [next] Tuesday.' Five days away. Then they called me back the next day and asked if we could [perform] a *cappella* because they wouldn't have a piano there. I said, 'Sure'. We took six kids down. They stood at the front door and greeted the guests as they came in with different songs. They were spectacular. The kids in the program love these opportunities," Lori confirms. "Being a performer, you actually have to perform! It's not just taking class after class. To perform is part of their education."

Lindsay sees in this story another advantage of the Marvel Arts Center property. "Having our own building was great," she says. "We had to do pop-



Photos: Rosalie O'Connor



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up rehearsals on Saturday and Sunday. We could just come here, and this is available for us.”

“We didn’t have to be calling,” Lori agrees. “There was enough to do without having to call and find space to rehearse. Just come here at two o’clock.”

Further acknowledgement of the extraordinary impact that Rosie’s Theater Kids makes on students in New York City came in 2014, when Rosie O’Donnell was awarded the Isabelle Stevenson Tony Award for her commitment to providing New York City public school students arts education with the Rosie’s Theater Kids programs.

The building facilitates not only rehearsals, but also the connections among everyone involved in the programs. Lori believes that the ability to locate the support staff and back office spaces close to the children’s program areas is not just a convenience, but contributes to the effectiveness of the organization’s mission. “What our staff get to see on a daily basis is really key, very motivating. They have the joy of the kids in their lives every day.”

“All of us act in that capacity with the kids,” Lindsay reflects. “There are times when I will walk down to the study café and start conversations with the kids, ask questions on what they are doing. We all feel very responsible for the kids when we walk through the building.”

Dominick Romeo is the building superintendent. Most building functions, from cleaning to systems maintenance, are outsourced to vendors. An Associate General Manager monitors expenditures, aiming at maximizing spending for building operations.

Lindsay finds that budgeting comes more easily as she gains experience with both the building operations and the programmatic uses. “Now we have a

history to look back on about what was spent with each vendor. But little things pop up. Things are going bad, things are starting to break, things are starting to get old. That’s really difficult to plan for, but our board did designate a building fund. We realize now is the time to start. So each year we have been putting a little bit in the building fund for those emergencies that come up.”

The size of the building and its rehearsal and performance spaces are being used at capacity. What others might see as a limitation, Lori sees as a gift. “If I had more space, I would fill it with more kids,” she says. “But these are how many students we can have. It is nice to have a boundary, what can fit in this building. It informs our programs.” Lindsay notes that with a bigger space, the organization might also be able to build a theater of its own. Lori shares that ambition.

The daily, vibrant activity inside the Marvel Arts Center, as well as in the RTKids field-based programming, delivers on the organization’s tag line for all of its participants: “Rehearsing for Life.”

“There we go,” Lori agreeably smiles. “That’s what we do!”

Frank Loffreno (Class of 2018) concentrates his studies on real estate law. During law school, Frank has joined the Center for Real Estate Studies and is an active member of the School’s real estate club and Italian club. Prior to attending law school, Frank worked at Credit Suisse in the Prime Brokerage department. While there, he aided equity swap traders by establishing more efficient trading software across their platform. Currently, Frank is externing at a private real estate investment company, where he hopes to work after graduation.



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