

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Toledo School for
the Arts builds
promising futures
through the arts

By Lyman Millard







“Most students meander through high school with no clear ideas about the future,” wrote commentators W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson back in 2004. With large, “comprehensive” high schools still an entrenched feature of many districts, there is little doubt that legions of adolescents continue to sleepwalk through their high school years. Authored by Lyman Millard, the work that follows offers some clues about how to change this dynamic.

One of Ohio’s oldest public charter schools, Toledo School for the Arts (TSA) was forged from concerns about the state of arts education. National data support such apprehensions: though most U.S. high schools still offer music and visual-arts courses, fewer than half offer performing arts, and a mere 12 percent offer dance. For young people with a keen interest in the arts, this shortage of offerings limits opportunities—and may lead to less engagement in school. Yet what we see from this profile is a specialized charter school able to tap into students’ interests, focusing and inspiring them to cultivate their talents. With a relatively small student body—its class of 2017 was just seventy-nine—TSA allows students to gain a clear sense of belonging. As one student says in this profile, “We got to know each other and know TSA while we created art together.” Moreover, the school also has a unique way of motivating pupils to go even deeper by asking them to pursue an art “major” starting as freshmen. Courtney, one of the TSA graduates Lyman interviews, majored in dance and is currently studying this subject at Wright State University. Her twin sister Terri majored in writing at TSA, and it just so happens that she’s now working on an English degree at the University of Toledo. For Courtney and Terri, their school of choice ignited their passions, opened opportunities, and put them on firmer pathways to success. How many other young people would benefit from a high school like TSA?

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— AARON CHURCHILL
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Courtney and Terri Draper sitting on TSA's senior stairwell. In seniors' last week at TSA, they have the opportunity to decorate a part of the stairwell to "leave their mark."

Walking through the Toledo School for the Arts (TSA) with Terri and Courtney Draper is bittersweet. The twin sisters are excited to have just graduated and are giddy to be finally taking the next steps in what promises to be bright futures. But just a few days after their last day of high school, they're already talking nostalgically about the school that unlocked their passions.

The girls don't look alike, but they're obviously close. They finish each other's sentences and tell inside jokes. Courtney is constantly pushing her introverted sister to talk more and say what's on her mind. Terri is more quiet, thoughtful. It's little surprise to learn that Courtney is a dancer who lives for the stage, while Terri is a writer who thinks deeply before expressing herself on the page. At TSA, both sisters found an environment that fostered their divergent gifts and encouraged them to develop their individual identities as artists and young women. And it shows. Courtney performs with Dayton Contemporary Dance Company's second company and Terri has already had two poems published in *The Oddville Press* as well as a short story published by the Toledo Public Library.

Terri and Courtney had attended a well-regarded district school since Kindergarten, but as the girls grew older, the school began to change. "They cut art and music from daily classes to once a week," remembers Courtney. "And they started tracking kids into a 'smart group' and a 'dumb group,'" adds Terri. The girls' mother, a Toledo police officer, noticed that they weren't being challenged like they had before. As is often the case with dissatisfied parents, she began talking with other moms about other educational opportunities. "One of our friends had an older sister at TSA, and she was able to develop her love of dance while being pushed academically," says Courtney. After an especially frustrating fifth-grade year, Courtney and Terri's mom made a change.

When pigs fly

TSA is one of the oldest charter public schools in Ohio. In response to arts programs being cut across the country, a group of local artists wanted to create a school where arts were the centerpiece, not an afterthought. Development director Dave Gierke tells the story of the first school director approaching the local school district in 1998 to get support for the vision. The response from a district official: “You’ll open that school when pigs fly.”

If the administrator had intended to discourage the group, he had the opposite effect. “When pigs fly” became a rallying cry for the artists, who saw an opportunity to open the school under Ohio’s newly passed charter public school law. Twenty years after that fateful meeting, the Flying Pig still serves as TSA’s mascot.

But success in those early days was far from a sure thing. The founders had to rely heavily on Toledo’s close-knit creative community. That’s how Dave Gierke became involved with the school. “I had a music shop and ran a drum school in the basement,” recalls Dave. “Our first director, Marty Porter, called me up and said, ‘I have an empty room. I want you to fill it with instruments and do for my kids what you’re doing in your drum school.’”

As TSA grew, it developed a strong academic and artistic reputation. From the beginning, the school has consistently ranked as one of Ohio’s top-performing urban high schools. The school’s arts programming gained national attention in 2010 when former student (she didn’t finish) Crystal Bowersox was runner up on American Idol. “At our next open house, hundreds of people were lined up outside wanting to get their kids in,” remembers Dave. Although that moment gained TSA a lot of attention, they had been steadily building a strong arts program for years.

TSA started with the art-school basics: music, theatre, writing, and the visual arts. Over the years, they’ve built an impressive array of offerings, leveraging Toledo’s history as the glass capital of the world to build a first-rate glass studio and introducing multiple dance disciplines (ballet, stage, contemporary, and modern), a recording studio, and a graphic-design program that includes



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3-D design and animation. In 2013, they created the Center for Art and Industry to prepare kids who wanted to make careers in production instead of performance. And in 2017, their film department had so many exceptional student pieces that they created the TSA Film Festival, featuring thirty-five shorts, documentaries, and feature films as part of the Glass City Film Festival. Not surprisingly, the school now attracts over seven hundred students in grades six through twelve, from twenty-one school districts across the Toledo area. With only so many seats, the school has an extensive wait list.



“The building is alive until 8:00 or 9:00 every night. I never realized how busy I was until we graduated.” — COURTNEY DRAPER



Finding a home and declaring a major

Walking the halls of their alma mater, it is clear that even with their different personalities and artistic interests, sisters Courtney and Terri both found a home at TSA. “On our first day of sixth-grade, all of the seniors were lined up, cheering, welcoming, and so happy to see us,” remembers Terri. Courtney recalls spending her first few days of school in a small, mixed-grade group of students creating a mural. “We got to know each other and know TSA while we created art together.” They had initially intended to transfer to a traditional high school after eighth grade at TSA, but after a few weeks, they couldn’t imagine leaving the school.

Courtney and Terri especially loved the central role that art played at TSA, which encourages freshmen students to declare an art major. Between instruction, studio time, and preparing for performances, students spend two to three hours a day on their major, in addition to other classes. “The building is alive until 8:00 or 9:00 every night,” says Courtney. “I never realized how busy I was until we graduated.” It also taught them how tough it is to be an artist in the real world. Though

admission is open to anyone, students audition for their art major and to advance in levels within that major. Courtney remembers not being chosen to advance one year in her dance major: “It hurt, but I learned a lot about dealing with rejection. It really built my character and my resilience.”

In addition to being able to practice their art, Terri and Courtney loved the way the arts were integrated throughout the school’s curriculum. Terri was thrilled to learn about Native American tribes not only through reading, lectures, and discussions. Even though she was a writing major, she especially loved her project that recreated the beadwork of a specific tribe using authentic materials such as deer tendon and leather. “I never stopped learning about the art around us, even in organic chemistry.” Courtney appreciates how the school purposefully mixed students from different disciplines. “They put us all on the same floor, so when I wanted to do a dance project, I had friends who were composers, designers, filmmakers, and engineers,” says Courtney. “Anything is possible on this floor!”



Toledo School for the Arts is also looking to serve more than their seven hundred students. “Schools that are doing right by kids have a moral obligation to serve as many kids as possible.” — DAVID GIERKE

A bright future ahead

TSA has unlocked the door to incredible opportunities for two talented young women. Both are off to college, pursuing their artistic passions as well as rigorous academics. Courtney is heading to Dayton to continue her work with the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company and to study dance at Wright State University. Terri will further her writing skills as she studies English at the University of Toledo.

Their alma mater has big plans for the future, too. TSA is expanding their arts entrepreneurship program to help students prepare for the hard work that goes into being a working artist once they leave school. “We’re teaching our kids to understand that being successful in any work these days means being creative and being able to hustle,” says Dave Gierke. The school is also looking to serve more than their seven hundred students, both by potentially expanding the number of students in each grade level and by exploring ways to serve more kids in their immediate neighborhood. As Dave puts it, “Schools that are doing right by kids have a moral obligation to serve as many kids as possible.”

Pigs have been flying at TSA for more than twenty years now. Courtney and Terri are grateful for that fact, as are thousands of alumni for whom TSA represented their best opportunity to develop their creativity in an engaging, supportive, and academically robust environment. It would be easy for its leaders to rest on their hard-won laurels. But it is the nature of artists to continually create, be it a moving dance piece, an evocative poem, or an incredible school—a school that is providing opportunities to thousands more young aspiring artists.

Perhaps the most critical factor in Courtney and Terri’s love for TSA and the school’s remarkable success is the people. Humanities teacher (and War of 1812 reenactor) Mr. Moyer brings history alive in his classroom, including inviting historical reenactors to visit. When he learned Courtney was stressing about paying for college, “he helped me come up with ways I can use my art to help pay my college tuition.” Then there is Mr. Longacre, who began his student teaching in English at TSA in 2005 and fell in love with “being in a creative environment that fostered student creativity and teacher creativity.” In Terri’s words, “He really pushed me to submit my work for publication and is always looking for opportunities for his students.” The way Dave puts it, “The most important conversations in our classrooms aren’t about art, they’re about people.”

