

# **Tara Performing Arts High School: For Those Who Do Not Wish To Remain Anonymous**



*Tara Performing Arts High School was initially established in 1994 as an after-school performing arts program. Since celebrating their first graduating class in 2001, they've grown to over 50 students this year. They focus on the performing arts as an opportunity for growth and renewal for all of their students, paired with a rich and varied academic program, and they have a substance-free policy that works. So how do they do it? What's the school really like? David Kennedy sat down with Betsy Barricklow, Tara's co-director and one of the founding teachers.*

## **What's so different about Tara?**

From the very beginning, we wanted to emphasize the performing arts as a process for self-knowledge and self-development. Our goal is to awaken students' minds and hearts, foster their sense of connection to each other and the world, to engage them in meaningful work and activities, and excite them about life itself. We found that by emphasizing the performing arts, we were able to stimulate the students' academic motivation and achievement. Expert teachers from around the country come here to teach. We have a lot of activities where the classes are mixed together, which helps weave the social fabric. Our artistic productions are collaborative and inclusive rather than competitive. Our students travel! Our strict policy of no substance abuse helps all of us be present and focused.

## **How do you find time to have a performing arts high school and balance it with a full academic program?**

We have found that by emphasizing the arts, and intensively working through a production or a performance, it ended up stimulating the students to better academic work. There are times when academic work is on the front burner and there are times when we are fully involved on stage.



**You talked about having activities where the classes are mixed together. What has been your experience with that?**

The advantage of a smaller high school is that we have a flexibility that we cherish. We can combine classes when it helps strengthen the students experience. Many of our productions are all school. Freshmen working alongside juniors and seniors on stage and off, helps them feel like they belong from the beginning. It also helps them academically. They strive to be like the older students and the quality of their work shows it.

**What's their off-campus experience? Can you tell us about the travelling that you've built into the Tara experience?**

Students need to experience the world. It's a complex and challenging world and they learn by seeing others live with passion and fulfillment in their lives. Every year our 9th and 11th graders go to New York. We go backstage to see what it's really like for an actor or a singer. Talking to them opens up a world for our students. We have our classes in the Metropolitan Museum. Rembrandt's biography really comes to life when you're hearing it from your teacher standing in front of one of his portraits. We go to shows all the time and it's a really great way for the 9th grade to be introduced into the life of the school. By being with the 11th grade, friendships are formed that endure. Our 10th graders travel to Ute Tribal Park as part of the Native American block.



### **And the seniors?**

A Tara education culminates in a month-long trip to Austria and England. In Vienna, London, Stratford and Cornwall, seniors get a chance to experience firsthand the history, art, music and architecture they've studied. As part of a culturally rich and varied itinerary, the group, led by Tara directors, stays in historic inns and homes, enjoys theatre, concerts and opera, and visits museums, abbeys, flea markets and even Merlin's cave.

### **Can you tell us about the substance abuse policy at Tara?**

Developed over years, and with constant involvement and work from the students and faculty, we have a zero-tolerance substance abuse policy. Commitment to an alcohol- and drug-free environment year-round is at the foundation of Tara. We do not feel that drug and alcohol experimentation is a necessary part of adolescence; we believe that substance use distracts from the exciting opportunities we provide, and hinders the important intellectual and personal development of these years. Our students can take pride in upholding the school's expectations, their word and signed contracts.



### **Anything else?**

There's so much more to tell. It's a great place for young people to develop and we're so happy that we're firmly established now. We're always glad to talk about Tara. You can call or visit our website for more information. Thanks.

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