

Arts surge forth at Nottoway High



The dark stage of Fine Arts at Nottoway High School suddenly has light..soon there will be camera and action! New courses offered next year in Theatre Arts are the first signs that a major effort is underway to recognize

and nurture the creative spark in students.

Principal Dr. Patricia Harris, who had all her curriculum requests approved by the school board last month, phrased her philosophy in one sentence: “I feel that if we’re going to touch the creative genius in all the students, we have to do in more ways than are offered in the traditional courses—and one of the best ways is through the Fine Arts program.”

Two teachers at Nottoway, Debroah Elliott, Arts teacher, and Matilda Conley, English/Drama teacher, couldn’t agree more. “For years, I’ve felt like the step-child,” said Mrs. Elliott, who has taught at Nottoway for 18 years. “here only because the state required it, my department was not considered important.”

Mrs. Conley, whose drama class came about only because of a state evaluation, pointed out how much change has occurred in the school system.” This fall the school superintendent and a school board member drove all the way to Charlottesville to see our team perform in the Theatre Festival. I can’t recall that ever being done in the country before!” she said with emotion still underlining the experience.

But no the script is being rewritten and the two teachers are growing excited about the possibilities the new courses will open for students. First there will be Photojournalism, which the two teachers will co-teach. “The group that takes this class is going to be very divers,” Mrs. Elliott said, because photojournalism is only a lose cover for “a myriad of related things” such as video production.

“We can actually do a news show on the school classroom televisions... We could call it N’NN, Nottoway News Network, and put on live news from the library every morning,” Mrs. Conley said. The ideas were coming fast.

“And each week there could be a question, which students would answer through interviews,” said Mrs. Elliott.

“So every week they’d have to go out and video interviews...hey, write that down, that’s a good idea,” exclaimed Mrs. Conley.

Then some fears surfaced that old habits in the school’s registration policy would haunt them. “I hope the course won’t become a catch-all for kids that just need their schedule filled in order to graduate,” said Mrs. Elliott. “You can look at the class rolls and tell exactly who was just dumped in an art class to meet scheduling requirement.”

Both teachers complained that students don’t perceive the Arts courses as being work. “The Fine Arts have the stigma of being easy credits. But they’re not easy...They’re just fun!” said Mrs. Elliott.

“Kids get really surprised and even irate when they find out they’ve got to work in my class” added Mrs. Conley.

But the new courses being offered in Theatre Arts will give her plenty of space to change that attitude. What was once a single class will now be four: Theatre Arts, Advanced Theatre Arts, Technical Production, and Acting. Instead of having to teach everything in one hour, the course is being designed so that students who may not want to act will have something to do. “In Technical Production they’ll be building sets, sewing costumes, doing make-up, lighting, sound, interior decorating...the stage really is a whole world,” said Mrs. Conley. “Every skill that you need to survive in the world can be found there.”

The acting class will be only for those students who want to focus on the techniques of acting. “They’ll be the core group for the kids who are putting on plays,” she said. And Theatre Arts will give an overview of various forms of theatre.

“There is so much students can learn in Theatre Arts. Things that you just can’t learn anywhere else in school,” continued Mrs. Conley. “This is hands-on from the bottom up and if they don’t put their hands on it, they won’t succeed...and they will know why they didn’t.”

“The arts as a whole teaches adaptability,” added Mrs. Elliott. “It could be anything from marching in a parade in the pouring rain to having the lead actor get sick at the last minute.”

“And in the theatre, there is always something that needs to be done and you may not have the money so you learn to improvise,” said Mrs. Conley. “The show must go on at all costs. And you can’t learn this in a math class.”

Both teachers agreed that Fine Arts work with the whole person while academic courses tell students to leave their bodies and emotions outside the classroom.

Here they are, two experienced teachers as excited as if this was their first year. The horizon has a road leading to it. Mrs. Conley feels that she is finally getting permission to teach what she loves and not what she has to. It didn’t seem to matter that the equipment cupboard was bare.

“We have no make-up, no sewing machines, no supplies, no camera, no follow spot for the stage, no darkroom supplies, and not even any money to buy plays,” she noted in passing from smile to smile.

But material things aren’t important when you have a stage and the administration as your patron. Now they are going to solicit support from the community.

They need donations in furniture, clothing, anything for sets or photography, and even money. If the donations come, the storage space will follow, said Mrs. Conley.

“If the community looks at Theatre Arts as worthy, then the kids will see it as worth,” said Mrs. Elliott, drawing her bottom line.