

Tara: A Waldorf High School of the Performing Arts

BY BETSY BARRICKLOW

Tara Performing Arts High School in Boulder, Colorado, was born in the 1990s when Laurel Fisher and I, who had been Waldorf educators for a combined forty-plus years, recognized that deep work in the performing arts inspires an all-encompassing love of learning and interest in life itself. Together with Greg Fisher, we founded Tara on the following principles:

- engaging academic and experiential learning through the Waldorf high school curriculum and pedagogy
- deep experience of the festivals of the year
- experience of culture and history through travel
- an honor code and substance agreement
- the performing arts as a vehicle for adolescent intellectual and personal development

Today, over twenty years later, Tara is a thriving institution. Intentionally small, we try to hold our enrollment at twelve to fifteen students per grade in order to create the ideal environment for all aspects of our program. A high percentage of our applicants come from local Waldorf schools, but students from many other educational backgrounds and parts of the country—and the world—meet our criteria for acceptance, principally, the passionate desire to be a part of what Tara offers. All enrollees commit to a substance agreement in which they promise to forgo all recreational drugs and alcohol, 365 days a year. They also agree to uphold the student-created and annually updated honor code that embodies the ideals our community strives to live by.

Tara offers a full, demanding academic curriculum with all the usual high school subjects—

including English, math, the sciences, and world languages—taught according to Waldorf principles. Integrated into the schedule are regular, twice-weekly choir rehearsals as well as recurring intensive periods of three to five weeks dedicated to the preparation of a play and culminating in a weekend of performances at our own historic theater. Each year, the school puts on three plays and one all-school musical, as well as two public festival events. Recent productions include Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Tina Howe's *Pride's Crossing*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights*. At Tara, performance builds confidence and community spirit, preparing students for success in all of life's endeavors.

Travel is an essential part of the Tara curriculum. In our classrooms-without-walls program, each year the ninth and eleventh graders travel to New York City for a week of theater and museums; the tenth graders spend a week in the Ute Tribal Park in Colorado studying Native American traditions and ten days on the San Juan River in Utah studying geology; and the seniors spend four weeks in Europe in direct experience of the history, art, and culture of other countries.

Over the years, Tara has sent close to two hundred graduates into the world—clear-thinking, talented, compassionate human beings eager to make a positive difference in the world. They lead extraordinary lives in fields ranging from astrophysics to education and from environmental law to theater.

This past holiday season, the entire student body gathered in the home of a board member to hear Greg, Laurel, and me read a version of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. The students listened with rapt attention; they laughed, they wept, and, upon leaving, they said that the experience was better than seeing a professional theater production. At the Christmas Candlelight Festival later that week, over one hundred alumni were



Ninth-grade History through Art class, taking place in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City



Christmas Candlelight Festival choir, directed by Laurel Fisher

in attendance and joined the choir in singing a beloved piece of music traditional to this celebration. At the final performance, as the choir processed out, the alums raised their candles above their heads to honor Tara and its current students.

A few days later, many of these alumni visited our home. As the Christmas tree was lit, they began to sing songs from their Tara days, and the room was filled with joy. They stayed until midnight dipping candles. As they left, they told us how strongly the theater, music, and travel of their Tara years continue to impact their adult lives and how grateful they were to come back to

recharge and refresh those meaningful memories.

Moments like these with our students and alumni confirm for us that the unique Waldorf-based program we offer young people at Tara is critically needed in our world. One graduate recently characterized Tara as “Outward Bound for the Soul.” ☉



BETSY BARRICKLOW began her Waldorf teaching career in the kindergarten at Highland Hall (Northridge, California). She continued as a class teacher there, taking a class from grade one through grade eight, and then for twelve years was active in teaching and administration in the high school. In 1997 she cofounded Tara Performing Arts High School with Greg and Laurel Fisher.

Tenth-grade Native American Traditions trip to Ute Tribal Park

To learn more about Tara Performing Arts High School, visit www.tarahighschool.org