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## Jewel Box Delivers Equity and Access to the Arts for Long Beach's Kids

By: Dillon Hulse

It's Sunday morning at 11 o'clock and the sun is radiating a warm glow over Signal Hill. A small alleyway off of Cerritos Avenue – by the Chevron station – leads along a 6-foot high, wood-panel fence and up to a two-story apartment with a latte stucco exterior. A sign hangs on the gated entrance that reads, "Beware of Dog;" upon entry, a tiny Yorkshire terrier, named Sammy, with wiry, brown and white fur and a red bandana stands ready to greet any and all visitors; he's deaf and blind and approaching 20 years of age.

The backyard is covered in lemons, weeds and discarded toys, and moving around the side of the home reveals a weathered staircase that leads to the second floor. At that moment, a woman in blue jeans, a red and white striped shirt, and her brown hair pulled up in a ponytail walks out onto the landing and begins to descend the stairs. Her name is Anna Kate Mohler, and she's the artistic director of the Jewel Box Children's Theater Company.

Mohler and her husband, Andy Zacharias, founded Jewel Box as a nonprofit in 2016 with the goal of providing an education in theater and access to the arts for as many kids in the Long Beach area as possible. She warmly greets her lone employee, Kari Venaas, an instructor for the theater company, who arrives to help load up instruments and art supplies for the two classes they have scheduled for the day.

“I tell Kari, ‘I have moments where I don’t think this is going to work,’” said Mohler.

Her pause stems from the challenges that Jewel Box has faced from the beginning: competition for both funding and access to institutions where they can provide their service. Despite being nonprofit, local politics among competing theater companies and skepticism from schools has worked against the business’s growth at times. For instance, the companies which charge a fee to teach face fewer barriers to finding instructional opportunities.

“– Snaps fingers – That can get approved super quickly; if you’re coming in and bringing something for free, it’s like all the bells go off and the alarms go off, I don’t know why ... we’re DOJ-approved, we’ve been teaching,” said Mohler. “Why is that any different from people coming in with money? Why does that set off an alarm?”

Nevertheless, the couple has their reasons for staying the course. Their 4-year-old adopted son, Wes, rounds the corner of the apartment by the stairs after a rousing session on the trampoline with his cousin, Emily, curious as to what items Venaas and his mom are gathering up for the day’s activities. He’s wearing black and white striped shorts, a dark-blue graphic tee, sandals, and his sandy-brown hair lightly drapes over his ears and forehead. The fostering process for Wes and subsequent adoption played a big role in illuminating their path towards the creation of Jewel Box.

“Wes inspired that. When you foster a kid, you think about what they wouldn’t have had the chance to do growing up in another house ... That was a big part of what inspired us to get going,” said Zacharias.

Ready to go, Venaas heads to her own car and Mohler loads the kids into her navy-blue Subaru Outback, along with an electronic keyboard and an assortment of drums, rhythm sticks and craft supplies. Avoiding injury, the car slowly pulls down the alleyway and turns out of sight on the way to its destination.

Mohler’s experiences while growing up gave her a unique perspective that closely informs her motivations and goals for the kids under her care at Jewel Box. She was born on Jan. 25, 1980 and grew up in a wealthy family in Laguna Beach. Their wealth stemmed from her father’s real estate business; however, one day when she was 6-years-old, her father’s business partner emptied the accounts and her father essentially lost everything. Such was the fragility of a hand shake.

“It was just crazy because we went from, like, riches – buckets of money – to total rags,” said Mohler.

Out of pride, the family endeavored to stay in Laguna Beach. Mohler was already enrolled in acting classes at a local rec center, but her and her mother were shocked at the response to their inquiry about available programs for low-income families.

“The woman said to my mom, ‘As far as I’m concerned, you and your child can wash cars to make money to be in our program,’” said Mohler. “That stuck with me my whole life, and I think that’s part of my drive to make sure it’s for everybody, because I grew up in an affluent community and I grew up doing theater with a lot of kids that had money to do theater. And then becoming the kid that didn’t have all the money, and realizing, ‘Oh, wait, this isn’t something that’s just a given.’ That’s what has made it important to me that we make it for every kid.”

After a short drive down Cherry Avenue, Mohler and Venaas pull up to Elevation Studios around 11:30 and begin unloading props and instruments into the building. Elevation is a dance studio that provides rehearsal space to Jewel Box for the only course that they’re currently charging for: ensemble work, casting, and rehearsal all leading up to a full production of the musical, “Annie.”

Inside, the darkened sitting room that sits off the entryway is tranquil, but the lights go on and the energy starts to rise as parents begin arriving to drop off their kids. Amidst the increasing cacophony, parents say their goodbyes and then talk with one another; kids find their friends, stow their snacks in cubbies, and either run upstairs for song and line rehearsal or downstairs for dance choreography. While Venaas and Mohler direct the kids to their appropriate stations, Zacharias arrives after an overnight flight to help his wife with accompaniment on keyboard for the upstairs song rehearsal. Drained from his trip, but ready to jump into the fray, Zacharias nevertheless appreciates his wife’s ability to get the kids into gear.

“With Anna, it’s always effortless for her to collect everyone and get everyone started.”

While the dance rehearsal roars along downstairs to a recording of “It’s a Hard Knock Life,” Mohler and Zacharias work with two of their students, Jayson and Sarah Jane – Daddy Warbucks and Miss Hannigan, respectively – on the songs, “NYC” and “Little Girls,” upstairs. The wooden floor resembles the look and shine of a basketball court, and large mirrors line the walls so that all who enter can see themselves while practicing their vocals and big lines.

Uncompromising in her encouragement towards the students, Mohler adds insight and notes from the sideline between lyrics, all the while checking on them and making sure they're not straining their instrument: their voices, which are still developing from a young age into adulthood. Jayson has been diagnosed with Asperger’s and may seem, to some, like an unlikely candidate for the role he’s been cast in; but Mohler refutes that, adamantly.

“I’m sure there are places that maybe wouldn’t, and I’m sure there are gonna be people that are like ‘Why did they give him the part of Daddy Warbucks? He’s anxious.’ No, he is frickin doing it. He’s doing it, he’s figuring it out.”

Jayson’s mom, Rosie Sandoval, and his dad, Ron, wait in the lobby during rehearsal while their son’s voice grows in confidence in the upstairs room.

“With his Asperger’s, he tends to be a little bit socially awkward and very quiet, and I think Andy and Anna have helped him kinda bloom into this different person where he’s more confident about himself,” said Sandoval.

Another parent, Chris Jordan, also hangs around the studio while his daughter, EJ, enjoys the 2-hour class period. Jordan has enrolled his son and daughter in a number of performing arts programs that are mostly located up in Los Angeles, but he says Jewel Box is the only game in Orange County which matches that quality.

“It magically all comes together,” says Jordan. “Things do get done, but I think they have a way of still adapting so that the kids get it, on their level, and can actually learn things. It isn’t just their formula and you do it our way.”

Two hours goes by like that and the cycle of arrivals and departures briefly rises and dies down once again, leaving the Jewel Box brain trust in its wake and ready for a well-deserved break. The Sunday classes help supplement the company’s reserves, but Jewel Box’s chief goal is in outreach to low-income and underserved kids in the Long Beach Community. The trio dreams of big things for the company, chief among them eventually having a presence in every public school in the city on a weekly basis and someday going national.

“They’re kids, they’re capable of anything,” says Mohler. “You put thirty kids in a room and you take the adults away, I would be amazed to see what they come up with. You put thirty kids in a room with adults who have a good idea of how to coax different things out of them, I think that’s how you make magic. That’s how you get something really, really creative.”