



Stone Soup

Creating an Arts-Based Afterschool Program in Rural Maine

Valerie Zapolsky

I'm hoping that people in some other small town that is poor in financial resources but rich in talent and heart will read our story and be inspired to develop their own afterschool program. Rangeley Friends of the Arts (RFA) is a nonprofit arts organization in Rangeley, a town of 1,200 souls in the rural western mountains of Maine. Working with existing facilities and a largely volunteer workforce, we have established Creative After School Arts, or CASA—a program that provides a safe home away from home and enriching programming to local students five days a week. Our example shows that communities can build arts programming for youth with few resources, as long as they have the will.

The Context

The five-town regional school district that includes Rangeley has only 190 K–12 students, all housed in one building. The next biggest town is 40 miles away. That is also the closest traffic light, so our driver ed students travel there to practice. The school district has some of the lowest-paid teachers in a state that has one of the lowest pay scales in the country. The school has a music teacher and an art teacher, but no drama, chorus, or band program; in fact, there are few clubs beyond competitive sports.

Nearly 40 percent of our public school students are considered to be financially at risk. However, financial need is not the only thing that puts students at risk. Most students have no real opportunity to shine. They are not “cool kids,” merit scholars, or star athletes—they are just regular kids. CASA focuses on preteens and teens in grades 5–12. These young

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people are too old for day care; most participants are too young for work, but old enough for responsibility. Most are latchkey kids, entering adolescence with all its potential dangers but with little supervision. These kids have few opportunities to succeed.

The Talents

Having recognized this need, we could not look away. Our afterschool program grew out of recognition that RFA, as an arts organization, has access to resources including free space and artists who want to work with disenfranchised students.

RFA, which just celebrated its 50th anniversary, operates the Lakeside Theater as a community arts center. We show movies, present community theater productions, host art shows, underwrite dance and music lessons, and run summer arts camps. Looking at this big building we were heating every day but using only on weekends, we saw an opportunity to serve disadvantaged students by bringing them together to create art. We therefore started CASA in fall 2017.

The theater had lists of willing volunteers in set design, theater lighting and sound, and audio-visual recording. We also knew many people with creative talents—sculptors, watercolor and acrylic artists, writers, radio broadcasters, and more—most of whom pursued their art in time off from their “day jobs.” We asked each and every one to contribute an hour to work with the youth of their community. Some said no, but most said yes. After contributing the single hour we asked them to commit, several asked to volunteer every week. Artists run one-hour workshops in technical theater arts, watercolor painting, calligraphy, writing, public art, cooking, and other crafts. When you look, you could be amazed at the talents people have to offer: One person knits, and another loves to play board games. When I asked people to share their hobbies, they felt complimented and were excited to share their passion with someone new.

The Treasure

When it came time to find the money to make this idea a reality, we wrote grant applications—several of them. RFA was already writing grants for our other arts

programs, so it was just a matter of switching our focus to find willing charities, such as the local United Way. We also asked the five municipalities that make up the school district to underwrite some of the costs. These are their kids, and the program is free. The towns donated \$3,000 the first year and \$13,000 the second.

Because the budget was tight, we asked for donated snacks the first year, but we kept track of this in-kind value and put it in the budget the next year. We had to increase RFA’s insurance to cover the new program; though we write such expenses into our grant proposals, we never get anywhere near enough to cover the full cost. We also wrote policies and procedures to deal with student and teacher behavior, but that was just a matter of modifying local school policies.

Finally, we recruited staff—one person who could manage logistics, coordinate volunteers, and be a caring presence for our young people. During the first year, two people shared this job on alternating days: a recent high school graduate and an experienced teacher’s aide. The second year, the staff position was filled by a college graduate who worked as a substitute teacher.

The Program

The afterschool program creates space for a bright creative community through the long, dark Maine winter. The program is drop-in and free; students can come every day or once a week. Typical attendance is four to 10 students. A typical day begins at 2:30 p.m. when the staff person arrives to turn on lights and prepare the snack. Shortly thereafter, the students arrive on the school bus—noisy, excited, and hungry. They enjoy their snack and relax after a long school day. Then they do whatever homework they have. After that comes the day’s art lesson, which lasts an hour or so. Everyone pitches in to clean up in time for dismissal at 5 p.m.

The paid staff person is on site every day to monitor students, help them with homework, and assist the volunteer artist. The program also pays a music teacher to run an instrumental music group once a week. Everyone else is a volunteer. Dedicated

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The public art project “Our Town”

artists volunteer an hour each week or each month to instruction. For example, the local dance academy offers an hour of tap dance every Wednesday. A woman who feels strongly about creating involved citizens spends an hour a week working with students on civic awareness and developing a volunteer attitude. With her help, students raised more than \$550 for an animal shelter and a domestic abuse support organization. Similarly, a jewelry designer volunteers an hour monthly to help students create gifts or items to sell for fundraising. We have intermittent volunteers for everything from holiday card making to baking to Easter egg painting.

When the theater has a musical production scheduled, the afterschool participants help with set design and production, taught by the set designer or producer. So far the students have helped to stage *Willy*

Wonka, *Once Upon a Mattress*, and *Annie*. For *Annie*, several students performed on stage. Students learn technical arts by working with the theater’s extensive light and sound systems.

One student who wanted to get involved with the technical aspects of theater was only 12 when she started—but she has the kind of quiet, calm personality that is perfect for the tech booth. After learning about stage lighting, she has been part of the tech team for two productions now, working with adults 30 to 75 years old. They treat her as a peer who is responsible for her cues. Her mother wrote a note of appreciation:

My child ... is so looking forward to the program this year. She stayed connected to the theater over the course of the summer and has at last found her niche. She calls the theater and CASA her “safe space.” [She] has just blossomed and grew such self assurance. Thank you to all who continue to make this program a possibility.

RFA’s ties to the artist community have offered our students other creative opportunities. When another nonprofit organization received a grant to create and install barn quilts for a barn quilt trail, we were asked if our students wanted to help. Of course we said “yes”! In another example, last year the community radio station worked with the students to read children’s stories aloud. Station staff coached students on reading with attention to tempo, volume, and dramatic emphasis. Together, the station and the students created the radio show “Read to ME” in cooperation with the statewide Read to ME program. Every Sunday night at 6 p.m., young children can tune in for 15 minutes to listen to a bedtime story.

Every CASA project involves direct artistic expressions, but most of the learning comes from concurrent discussions of relevant art history, engineering, and possible public perceptions of the art. For example, the barn quilt artist made a presentation about barn quilt designs that included instruction about color choices, the color wheel, contrasting and complementary colors, and similar concepts. For

another public art project, I took students on a tour of public art already existing in the town to discuss what they liked and didn't like. They practiced collaborative skills in deciding what form their own public art project would take. An added benefit of the public art projects is that they offer the ongoing opportunity for students to shine in their community.

The Recipe

People have said that Rangeley is unique and that RFA is amazing.

Although it is wonderful to hear these accolades, I believe our success is replicable in other small towns. Those towns may have different resources, but they can provide meaningful afterschool programming if they have equal generosity of heart.

Rangeley's story is like the children's book *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown (1947). In that story, hungry soldiers come to town asking for food from townspeople who are afraid to share what little they have. The soldiers put some stones in a kettle and begin cooking a delicious stone soup. They assure the townspeople that stone soup is delicious, but it would be so much better with a few carrots! So one household dips into

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its meager hoard to contribute a few carrots to the pot. Oh, but if only we had some cabbage! Of course another household can add a cabbage. And so, each family contributes something and everyone enjoys a hearty feast—from just a few stones.

Like the soldiers with their stone soup recipe, RFA had a vision and a proactive approach to problem solving. We aggregated many people and organizations, each with bit of time or a few resources to donate.

We provided space, insurance, vision, organization, grant writing, and volunteer coordination—and the people of Rangeley contributed everything else. In this way, nonprofits art organizations are perfectly situated to marshal their towns' resources in order to expose children to the arts, broaden their horizons, and give them opportunities to shine.

Reference

Brown, Marcia. (1947). *Stone soup: An old tale*. New York, NY: Atheneum.