

# PROVIDENCE JOURNAL



Journal photo / Bob Thayer

Wrenn Goodrum, the founder of All Children's Theater, in her studios in Pawtucket.

## ***All Children's Theater turns 20***

It has been a place where kids of all abilities have learned to deliver a line, design lighting and face an audience. For two decades, All Children's Theatre Ensemble has been a place where legions of area children have found themselves.

"ACT was the best thing that happened to me in my entire growing up," said Elizabeth Gutterman, an ACT alumna who went on to become a stand-up comic and get a master's degree in playwriting.

"I mean that in the way that I cut SAT classes to go there, and in the way it made the horribleness of Classical High School palatable."

Gutterman, who is now 33 and teaching ethics and values at Manhattan's Central Synagogue, was among the first class of ACT students, before the group broke away from Trinity Repertory Company and struck out on its own in 1987. Like a lot of kids who went through the program, she said ACT saved her from an unhappy youth.

And she said she feels indebted to ACT founder Wrenn Goodrum for instilling a sense of confidence in her students when the world looked like a threatening and uncertain place.

"I think the best gift Wrenn gave us," said Gutterman, who will emcee the company's 20th anniversary gala Saturday, "was looking at a daunting task like directing a play when you're 15 years old and saying, 'Of course I can do' that."

Goodrum spent a recent afternoon at the Vartan Gregorian Elementary School in the Fox Point section of Providence, where she taught a class of 9, 10 and 11-year-olds, and then retired to the teachers lounge to chat about the company that has been her life for the past two decades.

Goodrum, who runs the company out of an office in Pawtucket filled with mementos such as toys and puppets, had been an actress in New York for about a decade when she moved here in 1985. She grew up in the small town of Cary, North Carolina, went to the North Carolina School for the Arts, then boarded a Greyhound bus for Manhattan with a girlfriend (who would eventually star in Phantom of the Opera on Broadway).

She went on to act in off-Broadway plays, do a little waitressing and open a catering business. But it was while she was a nanny that she realized she had a knack for working with kids. She put together a children's theater class and began shopping it around to private schools in New York City.

“Acting on stage wasn't complete for me,” said Goodrum. “I think I'm a very good actress. I got scholarships for acting and I love acting. But I really felt like I was giving back when I worked with kids. My talents were better used.”

Goodrum, a woman with a hearty laugh and curly blonde locks, used her savings to branch out on her own and start ACT.

From the beginning, it was a company that was to embrace kids from all backgrounds. Tyrone Marsh, who is now head of the English as Second Language program at Elmira College in New York, was the first African-American to join the company in 1989. He moved to Rhode Island from Nashville to live with his grandmother, he said, after his stepfather threatened his life.

Marsh said he was shocked when Goodrum told him he was going to play Santa Claus in Babes in Toyland.

“I'm thinking ‘A black Santa?’ and she's saying, ‘What's wrong with that?’ I was the one saying, ‘Do you know what you're doing? No one is going to believe this and it's not going to be fun.’ And she's like, ‘Yes it is. This is what you're going to do.’”

Marsh was living in a black neighborhood on the East Side of Providence back then, but hanging out with kids from ACT.

“It was another way than what I was seeing hanging out on the street,” he said. “The kids from ACT didn't treat me any different if they were going up to Thayer Street. They invited me and I was an equal, which is different from my experience in Nashville where I felt like a disadvantaged kid.

“ACT definitely helped make me the person I am today.”

“We wanted to create a non-threatening environment to grow up in. It's not like school where you have to be the very best football player.”

The company always embraced kids like Marsh from different racial and cultural backgrounds, but about a decade ago ACT opened its doors to children with

developmental challenges. Goodrum remembers giving a part to a boy from the Meeting Street School who was in a wheelchair and couldn't move or speak. He communicated by blinking his eyes.

Right now 21 percent of the children in ACT are special-needs students with conditions such as hyperactivity, bipolar disorder and Asperger's Syndrome.

"We wanted to create a nurturing place where kids can become who they are inside," said Goodrum of the troupe.

Kids who join ACT don't just appear on stage. Some stage manage, some design lighting and direct. Each year ACT holds a playwriting festival for youngsters from across Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts. Members of the acting troupe are also expected to do research on the plays they take part in.

When they did a play about the Holocaust, they were expected to read about the Nazis. A Holocaust survivor also came to speak with youngsters.

When Gutterman was in ACT, she directed *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, a play about children in a concentration camp. It toured the area for two years and was an "absolutely transformative experience," she said.

"I had always known about the Holocaust," said Gutterman, the daughter of Rabbi Leslie Gutterman of Providence's Temple Beth-El, "but it never resonated with me until we did that play. Wrenn made us feel that it would have been us, not that it could have. And we were able to bring that awareness to kids our own age."

"Wrenn just made us feel very special and very creative," said Gutterman. "We started to realize we had abilities we never considered before. It's not that she wasn't honest when our work wasn't as strong as it should have been. But she would always tell us what she could see in us even when we couldn't see it."

The other day, Wrenn was working with children at Vartan Gregorian who were acting out a poem one of their classmates had written. A young girl gestured as she recited lines about a cat wearing a hat and a moose kissing a goose.

Goodrum stood on the sidelines, beaming.

"I can have the worst day of my life," said Goodrum, "and I come in here and realize why I do this.

"I can't make everybody happy, but I've learned over the years that it's all about the kids."