

KIDDING AROUND

Bringing Arts and Culture to Golden Isles Children

By Kathi Williams
Coastal Illustrated



The shout goes up from the group: “Bananaas!” Arms are thrown wide, heads back, faces wide with grins. Then, “Prunes!” Faces scrunch up, eyebrows come down, and hands curl. Again! “BANANNAAS!” Louder, the joy of the sound echoes through the room. “PRUNES!” A low rumbling growl can’t quite hide the delighted giggles bubbling forth. Next, work on enunciation: buh-duh-guh, guh-duh-buh, pah-ti-kah, kah-ti-pah. Following these warm-up vocal and stretching exercises, the young actors sit in a circle, concentration evident on their faces. They watch their coaches intently, studying the physical cues for the lines they will perform.



Jess Pillmore and Christopher Beaulieu

No, we are not behind the scenes at “Shakespeare in the Park”, or even on the dusty floor of a theater stage where rehearsals are taking place. This is Mrs Llewelyn’s elementary class at Lord of Life Christian Montessori School on St. Simons Island. The performers are three to six year-old children. The instructors are stage and performance veterans and Artists-In-Residence Jess Pillmore and Christopher Beaulieu. It’s clear that the kids love their time with these talented performers; their faces shine with sheer delight as they preparing a Shel Silverstein poem about helping for the end-of-year program!

Pillmore and Beaulieu are the first “Artists-In-Residence” in the Cultural Arts program at the Montessori School and it is clear they are a success. Since its development three years ago, the Cultural Arts program at the school has made great strides. Lord of Life Christian Montessori School Director Sidneye Henderson says the Cultural Arts program was designed “to bring the bigger world of art and culture that can be found in larger cities to the children here.” They began inviting different artists, musicians, actors and storytellers to come to the school to share their craft. The program has included such diverse experiences as presentations on Seminole Indian Culture by Jim Sawgrass, History of

the Gullah Culture presented by the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Egyptian Culture and Artifacts presented by the Cummer Museum, storytelling and acting by Queen Nur, concerts by the Phil Morrison Jazz Trio and Dave Grover & The Big Bear Band.

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Lord of Life
Christian Montessori
School Director
Sidneye Henderson

Sidneye says that exposure to these various elements of art and culture has been extremely effective in the classroom, creating a “complete immersion” experience for the children. In this way, the school is discovering the unique gifts and talents of their students that might not have otherwise come out

through traditional learning. Afternoon Enrichment Programs including art, yoga, chess and music are part of the Montessori School experience. A quote from Maria Montessori explains the school’s philosophy simply: “It is necessary to give children the possibility of developing according to the laws of their nature, so that they can become strong, and having become strong, can do even more than we dared hope for them.”

Jess Pillmore and Chris Beaulieu first came to the Montessori school for a Christmas program in 2006. They were such a hit that they were asked back to teach a “Greatest Hits of Shakespeare” workshop in 2007. Sidneye marvels at how well that workshop went, saying “It could have been chaos, but turned out just the opposite! While the kids were encouraged to improvise in practice, Jess and Chris showed that developing that improvisation was part of the process that led to a polished performance. This was wonderful because process is so important in the Montessori system.” Just watching the interaction that Jess and Chris

have with one class, you can tell they are a perfect fit as Artists-in-Residence at this school.

Pillmore and Beaulieu have impressive bios. They are the founders of Creatively Independent. Their website www.creativelyindependent.net is replete with testimonials about their work, press clippings, students’ praise, photos and links to other parts of their world. This married couple has a farm in Blue Ridge, Virginia, but they are on the road approximately 250 days per year, doing what they love: “enriching other people’s lives.”

Jess was a dance major at the Douglas Anderson School of the Arts. She was recognized at age 18 for her dance and percussion skills by STOMP. She received her BA in Theatre at Florida State University. She is a singer/songwriter that has nationally released and toured four albums. In Chicago, she was co-director and choreographer of the award-winning musical “City Girl!” Jess’ professional work includes theater, dance, performance art and choreography for dance, theater and stage combat. Her work has been performed throughout the United States and has garnered praise from critics and audiences alike. Jess has taught students in elementary through college levels, as well as presented seminars for teachers. Some other trivia: Jess has danced with Gregory Hines, worked for “The Daily Show with John Steward”, was named the National Best Female Actor/Combatant in 1999, and is an active knitter and proponent of recycled knitwear!

Chris is a clown! That is to say, he teaches clown/performance skills under the Big Top for a well-established youth based circus school called “Circus Smirkus” and has also taught a guest clown workshop for the prestigious Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. On a more serious



Jess Pillmore acting out

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