

DAREarts Holiday Cheer event held in Caledon

Written By KIRA WRONSKA DORWARD

This year's DAREarts Holiday Cheer event held special significance as the organization saw the end of one era and the beginning of another on Dec. 7.

President and Founder Marilyn Field held her swan song at her beautiful Caledon estate, all decked out for the occasion as was the hostess herself. With live performances by Kelly Walker and sixteen-year-old ingenue Joelle Crigger, who herself serves as a young artist educator for DAREarts, followed by Christmas carols sung by all, it was a merry seasonal gathering. As guests, volunteers, and board members mingled around a table set with gourmet nibbles and the first historic wine bottles from Marilyn's new winery, Windrush Estate, the talk turned to Field's legacy of the past 23 years.

"I had a dream to inspire young people with lifelong motivation for creative thinking, excellence and leadership in their lives through arts education," said Field. "Those years have been bountiful as I lived and breathed DAREarts to build a national charity. Together, with your support, we are now reaching the far corners of our country and beyond, having impacted the lives of over 220,000 children and youth.

"After 23 years, we all can be deeply proud of what our young people have accomplished. Now it is time for me to pass the DAREarts leadership torch to the next generation. As I reinvent my place beyond DAREarts, as its Founder and, as the kids say 'Mama DARE', I will remain a passionate advocate for this organization's work empowering our young people."

DAREarts was Marilyn's brainchild, which she founded with the help of her husband and silent partner John, whom she credits with "bringing practical business sense as we together built the charity to its million-dollar budget."

As an educator and music teacher in the early nineties, she saw how kids in her detentions responded to the introduction of music, particularly Mozart who embodied the imp spirit of these wayward teens, some of whom began showing up when they didn't have a detention, and thus her inspiration for the organization was born.

"The kids were my inspiration all the way along?the kids just loved the arts, whatever it was, from doing drama to dance. The thing that really struck me was in the middle of winter I arrived at 7:30 in the morning to go into school, and there were kids already waiting there for Ms. Fields. Some of them didn't even have shoes on, but they had smiles on their faces. That taught me just how important the arts were. It reminded me of being a kid when I lost my mum, and that art had helped me through. These kids were relating to me with their own challenges. And I thought there has to be a way to bring more arts education to more kids, and to give them that same sense of accomplishment and sense of hope. That was really the spark for DAREarts."

The next 23 years would be an ongoing trial as the organization grew exponentially, touching the lives of thousands of at-risk children between the ages of 9-14 in communities all over the country including Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, as well as isolated aboriginal communities in the Northwest Territories, some of which are only reachable by small charter planes. The program, in its many forms and incarnations across the nation encourages children to become involved in the arts, empowering these marginalized kids to become leaders and changemakers in their communities.

The statistics around the importance of children being involved in the arts are many and startling, but due to budget constraints, many school boards, especially in less fortunate communities, have cut or done away completely with art programs for youth, a particular hardship for those who are already denied access privately for lack of funds. The facts, according to a reported by the United Nations Convention on the rights of a child and Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health are simple.

One in nine Canadian children, more than a million, lives below the poverty line, low self-esteem in children often leads to non-social behaviors, underachievement and even suicide, youth at risk of joining gangs tend to be from groups that suffer from the

greatest levels of inequality, Canada has 434 youth gangs with roughly 7,000 members nationally (Canadian Police Survey). School dropouts who get involved in drug selling are at higher risk of being involved in gun-related violence.

Further, dealing with financial pressures, some school boards have cut budgets for music and other arts. Saving money by targeting arts programs imposes a particular hardship on those that have no access to the arts.

In a study at the University of California, children who received daily music lessons for eight months scored 80% higher in spatial intelligence (for complex math and engineering skills) than children who did not.

Employers look for people who can think critically, solve problems, communicate well, conceptualize, reason and make decisions. Today's corporate leaders recognize the role of the arts in preparing people for the workplace.

Teachers in low-income Canadian communities are challenged with problem behaviours and high needs of students to be given customized learning opportunities.

Research proves the arts help children to develop the pro-social skills, such as self-confidence and resilience that they need to succeed. Yet, the arts are cost-prohibitive for underprivileged Canadian youth.

When Canada's underserved children aren't given the skills to say no to drugs, gangs and violence they face each day, their safety is at risk. When Aboriginal youth are not given the tools to overcome their life challenges, the rate of teen suicide, which is already the highest in the country, continues to increase.

Volunteers and Board members of DAREarts donate their time and energy out of true belief in the power of the organization.

"For me, it's a duty and a passion," said Lesa Williams-George, TDSB representative on the Board of Directors.

She has been involved with DAREarts for a decade, splitting her time between that and a demanding position as a centrally assigned principal supporting 130 schools in the GTA.

"It's a commitment because when we're talking about students' well-being, the arts are another outlet. Not every child can get that outlet in sports. DAREarts really encourages students to improve engagement and self-esteem through their involvement in the arts and the kids love it. Our schools see it as a good support and service, it's of value to the community, and more importantly our students value it. Some of our shyer kids find their place in DAREarts, and it also provides an opportunity that otherwise families could not afford. My proudest moment as a principal is seeing the change in my students, and I am in awe of that. A student (of mine) who would never speak and had a lot of adversity in his home life spoke at the Winter Promenade and that brought tears to my eyes. I had to physically pick him up and bring him to DAREarts, and there he found some voice and some confidence."

Author and writer Monika Jensen Stevenson, who has been a member of the Board of Directors for thirteen years, commented, "I've seen [DAREarts] grow. In a way it is like a business- Marilyn Field is an entrepreneur. She gave up her job, mortgaged her house, but it wasn't about making money. She wanted to establish something with the schools to keep the arts going and I just admire that. I loved what was happening, and still do because I could see the changes." She then went on to relate a story which Field recounted again later that night, about a DAREarts student walking home alone at night in a bad neighbourhood, who was then confronted by three men with guns. Using the confidence, he later discussed his involvement with the organization, he was able to get away without harm. "In a split second, his mind went to 'I can do this. I am DAREarts,'" said Field. "And as an organization, that's all we can ask." Later, this student went on to become COO of a multi-million-dollar international company. "All of our kids do something with their lives. The arts give kids confidence, and learning about that world, it's so rich and wonderful. I'm sure they always had that in them in the beginning, but DAREarts really brought that forward," said Stevenson. "I go back to Marilyn acting as an entrepreneur. As other people build businesses, she built this. It's all a stupendous accomplishment."

Lesla Williams-George echoes her fellow Board member's sentiments about their fearless and recently departed leader, "it's rare to

find an inspirational leader that you can get behind?and for me Marilyn?the word for it is just magnanimous. I think our school board and students will forever be in her debt for the gift of DAREarts.?

Marilyn herself is humble about her incredible accomplishments of the past 23 years, and attributes much of it to living in Caledon. ?The community of Caledon has been critical to the growth and success of DAREarts. Living this community, being supported by the Mayor and other politicians, individuals, and many businesses has made all the difference, as together we built this national charity helping kids across the country have hope. In the end, this is the future of us all.?