

Spotlight: Middle school playwrights



The alien appears at the end of the Pleasant Valley Middle School Drama Club production of a play the students wrote titled "Spaced Out: Navigating NASA Prep." CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS



These student actors are portraying the emotions of Delta, the leading male role, in "Spaced Out: Navigating NASA Prep."



Pleasant Valley Middle School girls wore brightly colored wigs in a bob style as they portrayed the emotions of the female lead, Nova, in the school's production of "Spaced Out: Navigating NASA Prep."



The entire cast and crew of Pleasant Valley Middle School Drama Club's production "Spaced Out: Navigating NASA Prep" take the stage. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Published January 07, 2023 09:06AM

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For the advisers of the Pleasant Valley Middle School Drama Club, it isn't just about putting on a play. It's about helping students find their voices.

"We are strong proponents of student voice," said Alexandria Gibb, an English teacher and club adviser.

"They don't get a lot of that at this level," her co-adviser and an English teacher, Amanda Altemose, added.

The duo decided to launch a new idea late last school year. Have the students write the play.

"We're kind of risk takers, so we saw it as a challenge," Gibb said.

The advisers have purchased plays in the past, but they cost \$10 to \$15 per student book. Plus, they sometimes contain content that is not quite right for middle school students. Gibbs said they can't edit the plays because they are written by someone else.

Altemose said writing their own plays saves money and the students can change the story when needed.

Having the students do the writing isn't actually a big leap for the club.

"Day One, we tell them you're going to run the show at the end," Gibb said.

"It's really cool to see how much they grow," Altemose said.

Their own show

The students direct and act, as well as decide on lighting, costumes, promotion, advertising sales and more.

Before handing the writing to the students, Gibb and Altemose wrote a play for the club. This helped them figure out how they were going to have the students approach the project.

They brainstormed for ideas with their eighth-grade students at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, and announced their plans to the incoming sixth, seventh and eighth-grade classes. Sixteen students from those grade volunteered to help write the next play.

They began meeting two or three times a week in August for two-hour sessions in the morning.

Gibb said she and Altemose provided a framework for the characters and divided the students into four groups. The students then took the framework and fleshed them out.

After the students left for the day, Gibb and Altemose selected about eight ideas from each group to mold together to create one voice. All of the writing was done anonymously, so they didn't know whose ideas they were choosing.

The next session, they would change the members of each group and give them a new writing assignment.

"We tried to make it as collaborative as possible," Gibb said.

Gibb and Altemose also employed the help of a professional playwright. They got a grant through the Pleasant Valley Education Fund to hire Don Zolidis, who is also an author and educator. He provided tips and coaching to the students via Zoom.

"He was super helpful, and it was a great opportunity for the students to learn through a professional like him," Gibb said. The students had three sessions with him.

After a total of 10 sessions, the club had a play.

An alien

Performed in November, "Spaced Out: Navigating NASA Prep" mixed emotion characters like those in Disney's "Inside Out" with some "Mean Girls" and a little romance like in "Grease."

Set about 20 years into the future in a colony on the moon, the lead characters are Nova, a girl who is hoping to get admitted to NASA Prep, and Delta, a boy who will be a sophomore at the prep school when classes begin again for the next school year. The two students meet at a NASA Space Camp and lose touch, but reconnect later at the high school.

The story includes a science fair, hungry teenage boys, lots of problems, confirmed suspicions, and of course an alien.

Gibb said the alien was originally supposed to just make noises offstage, but their plans changed. The girl who was cast to be the alien told them her mother was making a costume for her. Turns out her mother has experience with puppetry, Gibb said.

“OK, the alien’s in the show now,” she said and the change worked out well.

Finding their place

In addition to finding their voices, Gibb thinks many of the students find their place in the drama club.

Samantha “Sam” Lowell, one of the writers and a student director in seventh and eighth grade, said she got involved in drama, because her friend, Alayna Boland, wanted to join.

“Before seventh grade, I never had a place in my school,” she said.

Lowell said that when she told Boland she was “thinking about going for student director, she instantly told me to go for it, and I can’t thank her enough for it. Thanks to that, I gained the confidence to get on stage for the spring musical later that year. I now have more confidence than ever, an amazing group of friends, memories that will last me all my life, and a place in my school. All thanks to Drama Club.”

Similarly, student director Shelby O’ Neill said, “Drama has helped me in so many ways.” She said she was feeling down before getting involved in drama, but the club helped her overcome it. “The play was honestly the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I am so thankful for everyone I met along the way.”

“They really stepped up and made themselves known as leaders to the entire cast and took pride in being student directors,” Gibb said,

Altemose added, “They didn’t initially have any idea that they wanted to be part of drama. Once they became part of drama, they realized that it was where they wanted to be.”