

Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre Makes Theatre Accessible for Children

Meet Board Member Lorraine Lortie-Krawczuk



By Janine Chiasson

Seven years ago, Lorraine Lortie-Krawczuk learned a friend was enrolling her son in Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre (EDCT) production of *The Wizard of Oz*, and thought it would be good for her daughter Alexa, 10 years old, on the Autism spectrum, and shy. "She got the role of the wicked witch and was so tiny she needed a special staircase," Lorraine recounts, "but here she was, this huge presence with a booming voice: she just blossomed." When her younger daughter Simone got involved, Lorraine couldn't resist the pull and joined the board.

Lorraine is now president of the hands-on six-member board where everybody pitches in. She's blunt when she says, "a lot of our challenges are about money." EDCT a non-profit with a mandate to keep things as affordable as possible asks kids to pay a nominal fee of \$125 to be in the show which means fees don't cover costs and ticket prices are very low to allow struggling families and schools to attend. "If cost is prohibitive and people are kept away it goes against everything that Eleanor Drury is all about," Lorraine emphasizes. "It's not about filling the seats, it's about making sure that our actors and families, and the community, have exposure to theatre without financial hardship."

For this to happen, EDCT and generous sponsors subsidize school groups and offer tickets to organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, but the community can help too by attending and promoting shows, paying for a class to come to the show, covering bus costs, or providing food for cast lunches. Plus, Lorraine confirms, "if there's a child that wants to be involved in the production, they won't be turned away."

With a combination of fees, tickets, fundraising, charitable donations, and grants, EDCT stays on stage. But just. The magic ingredient is volunteers. "Our board is so dedicated," Lorraine acknowledges with gratitude, "and our treasurer

Susan runs a tight monetary ship. She's also our props master and, like Mary Poppins, just makes things appear incredibly imaginative solutions on a shoestring budget."

EDCT is creative with costuming and everything else to keep their program accessible. The kids work too, breathing life into theatre that is for kids, by kids. "That's what makes us unique," Lorraine emphasizes. "The kids make costumes, they create props, they write the script."

Because EDCT doesn't divide kids by age, 6 to 18 years old work and learn together. "It feels like older and younger siblings interacting, sometimes with annoyance, but you can see the mentoring that goes on," Lorraine points out, "and they learn to accommodate." EDCT has, for example, been using neutral pronouns for a couple of years to avoid actors feeling singled out. "It's part of our acceptance," Lorraine shares. "You're safe here. Just like in a family, it's not always perfect and it's not always smooth, but in the end, we're together."

When showtime comes, these young performers – some of them on stage for the first time ever take over like professionals. But no matter how excellent or innovative, performances need audiences and getting the word out can be a struggle. "We are so grateful to

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be sharing our Eleanor Drury story in a Tbaytel for Good campaign," Lorraine says, "this is absolutely huge for an organization with virtually no advertising budget."

When the show finally gets to the stage, Lorraine thanks her lucky stars again for sponsors like Tbaytel who help ensure that if there's a child that wants to be involved in the production, they won't be turned away. And Lorraine admits that, "every year, I stand backstage and I think 'wow, we pulled it off again.' And I cry. I'm so proud of them."



EDCT Goes Virtual During COVID

Based on an Oscar Wilde theme, 2020 first-term programming saw cast members exploring verbatim theatre, filming skits, and developing monologues. Starting in January 2021, kids will explore acting for film; music and movement; and visual production techniques like puppetry and claymation; culminating in an online *Wilde Life* performance, to be staged in person when COVID status allows.

Support Youth Live Theatre!

EDCT is a registered Canadian charity bringing accessible live theatre to children and youth in Thunder Bay. Interested sponsors are encouraged to contact EDCT directly (details on Facebook); everyone can make online donations through CanadaHelps.org.

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