“Number the Stars” has offered up its share of firsts for AECT – a pair of first-time AECT Directors (Gabriel Francisco and Sarah Lynn), a first-time Assistant Director (Ayden Soupal), a first-time Assistant Stage Manager (Shelby Brewer), and the first time we have ever done a production of this kind. It has been many years since AECT has done a show with a more serious subject matter, and we have never done one that has been this sensitive. Often referred to as “the Anne Frank for kids”, “Number the Stars” has been an amazing learning opportunity for our youth who are not only in the cast, but also working on crew. This is a period piece, so it has offered some new and exciting tasks for our Costumes and Props crews, and it is also a story that takes place almost exclusively inside houses, which has given our Sets crew an opportunity to explore different interior sets.

This production tells the story of ten year old Annemarie Johansen and her family as they witness the Danish resistance to German troops’ relocation of the Jewish population to Denmark in 1943. When they take in Annemarie’s Jewish friend, they must conceal her true identity and eventually make their way across the sea to Sweden and safety.

Not only is this story important because it deals with the holocaust in a very kid-friendly way, but it is important to us as a children’s theatre because the story is actually about kids. Often when things are challenging in life and we are dealing with the potential for great tragedy, we forget that kids are still just trying to be kids. “Number the Stars” is beautiful because it reminds us all that ten year olds have huge hearts, and no matter how they may be different, they will do what it takes to make sure their friends are safe.

In the future, we hope to do more shows that are learning opportunities and send a strong message. The success of “Number the Stars” has paved the way for more of these types of shows, and we hope they will all be equally successful. We are also hopeful that during your time experiencing “Number the Stars” you learned, you hoped, and you left with the feeling that good things can happen, even when it seems like there’s no good left out there.
This year’s festival will feature two brand new original plays written and directed by AECT youth participants: “On Air” written by Audrey Tieman and directed by Shelby Brewer, and “What’s Black and White and Red All Over?” written by Ava Brewer and directed by Ellison Winterstein. Pulling triple duty, Audrey will also serve as our Props lead, and our Stage Manager. This team of four is seasoned, and our most experienced youth when it comes to Young Playwrights.

Having learned from the last two festivals, we decided it was time to try something completely new. Our directors are in need of new challenges, and our actors are in need of a completely unique and different experience than they’ve likely ever had before. The one-time performance will literally put the audience right on the stage with our actors who will have their own – slightly elevated – stage right in front of them. The stage will be completely in the round, meaning audience members will sit on all four sides. It will be intimate, with actors sometimes being less than a foot away from the people in the front row. The show will feature no makeup, little to no costumes, and only the props and set pieces that are absolutely necessary to tell the story.

In rehearsals, we always focus very heavily on “cheat out!” and “project!” – both of which is crucial to putting on a major main-stage show. In this new design, our directors and actors will have to ignore those things that have been instilled in their minds, and almost do the exact opposite. It will bring the focus back to the writing, and the story, and making sure these characters and situations feel real. We want our audiences to leave feeling like they were experiencing something real, and not watching a show.

We are very excited to bring this brand new experience to life, and are already hard at work putting it together. Catch the one-time performance on May 12th at 7pm. All tickets are $10 and there will be a limited number so watch our Facebook for when they go on sale!
Auditions are scary. As an actor, you will never experience anything scarier than reading lines from an unfamiliar script so the directors sitting at the table in front of you can determine your future for the next three months. Let me tell you, they will always be nerve-wracking no matter how old you are and no matter how many shows you have been in. However, they do get easier! And lucky for you, young actor, you have a whole family of people willing to give you advice on auditions whenever you need it.

For this show- Number the Stars- we had a whole bunch of new people audition and get cast. Marissa M is one of those people. “Just be yourself, exaggerate the part you’re reading, and be sociable,” she says. Marissa is 12 years old and is playing the part of a mourner. It’s okay to laugh and let loose and talk to the directors and your friends a little bit. The directors want you to feel as comfortable as possible when you are reading for them. That being said, still be professional and open to whatever the directors want you to do. Although Maddie S has been on a crew before, this is her first time being cast in a show. “The directors are all really nice,” Maddie says, “this really is a great program.” Maddie is 9 years old and plays the part of Kirsite Johansen.

As well as a number of new kids getting cast, many returning youth were also cast in the production. “Just have fun and be yourself,” 13-year-old Bailey D says. When you are auditioning, if you are tense and stressed about your audition, you won’t read as well. The more relaxed and at ease you are, the better you will sound when you read. Bailey is playing the part of Mrs. Johansen. “Everyone sucks their first time, but we all get better,” says 16-year-old Ellison W. Fortunately, that is only true because of nerves. When we are nervous, we get quieter and slur our words together and talk very quickly. The best thing to do when you are nervous is to take a deep breath in and then let it out slowly. After that, begin to read as if you are acting a story to your friends. Because that is basically all that theatre is- people acting out a story. (Continued on age 4)
All-of-us Express is a unique company that allows youth to experience theatre from both on stage and back stage. Most of the people on crew for this show have also auditioned for a show before. “Don’t be afraid to be loud and be proud!” 14-year-old Matthew K advises. When it comes to auditions, there has never been a truer saying. While directors mostly listen for what you sound like when you read the lines, they are also listening for how loud you can be. The louder you are during your audition, the more memorable you will be to the directors. The louder you are, the prouder you will feel about your audition.

In closing, here are a few more audition words of wisdom from your friends and family at All-of-us Express.

“Even if you aren’t cast in a show, you can still make a huge impression on the directors and leave them with something to remember you by.” -Ayden S, age 15

“An audition is a first impression, so if you have a bad attitude, you may not get cast. Also make sure to do your best and have a little bit of fun with it.” -Audrey T, age 14

“Theatre is something that is easy to devote yourself to.” -Benjamin W, age 10 “Project your voice and enunciate.” -Atiya W, age 13

“It’s really simple. Just speak your lines, act like the character, speak up, and enunciate.” -Ava G, age 11

“Do your best and speak loudly and clearly. Dress nicely, and if you are auditioning for Dorothy, don’t wear a blue gingham dress.” -Ava B, age 14
"Number the Stars" Cast, Crew and Families Visit the Holocaust Memorial

By Cynthia Wright-Pratt

On Sunday, January 8th, 37 cast, crew, family members and board representatives toured the Holocaust Memorial in Farmington Hills. This event included interacting with a second-generation holocaust survivor.

This event was arranged by the All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre nonprofit board to help prepare the cast and crew for the performance of, “Number the Stars”.

The experience at the Holocaust memorial was profound. AECT traveled without weather or traffic incidence which was a huge relief. Once at the center, AECT was welcomed and well attended to by the memorial staff. The tour docents, Jim Berk (pictured right) and Lori Weisberg were simply amazing. It was especially poignant that the guides emphasized the positive role that Denmark and Sweden had in rescuing Jews from the Holocaust because that is where the play, "Number the Stars" place. AECT kids benefited too from thoughtful architecture of the building, the symbolic design of the memorial, as well as the entirety of the experience.

The telling of Jim Berk's story of his beautiful mother Ilona was compelling, genuine and touching. The kids were very attentive and really soaked up what he had to share. Many kids and parents asked questions which Jim answered with complete openness. His tribute to his mother was so lovely and because we were inspired theatre people, we gave him a standing ovation.

About the experience at the memorial, Ellison Winterstein, Youth Board Representative shared, “The memorial really put into perspective how important the event we’re representing was. The figures have always been staggering, but seeing footage of the atrocities committed by the Nazis really set in stone just what the people like our characters had to fight in their time.”

We are so appreciative of the experience to help enhance our youth understanding of the history surrounding the play that we are performing in February. Thank you to the many parents and board members who drove to the memorial and chaperoned the cast and crew. A big thanks to the Holocaust Memorial Center and the generous staff. Because of this event, AECT kids are better prepared to perform the play, "Number the Stars".
Holiday Giving Campaign

The All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre nonprofit organization conducted a holiday giving campaign to raise money for the All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre. Many generous individuals and families gave money to the nonprofit so far totaling $1091.80. Funds are used to forward the mission of AECT to offer young people of all backgrounds, cultures, and lifestyles the opportunity to produce professional quality plays, study many aspects of the dramatic arts, and develop valuable life skills while providing outstanding entertainment to the community.

The AECT nonprofit is touched by the generous donations that we received from people that believe in our mission and are willing to entrust funds to AECT. It is because of these gifts that AECT can continue to succeed and provide quality artistic experience to children, their families and the community.

A standing ovation to these generous donors:

In Honor of Evelyn Ann Weymouth
The Cooke Family
Katie Brewer
Ava Brewer
Richard and Ruth Brewer
Ellen A. Ives and Colleen Johnson
Melissa Downs
James Powers
In Honor of Mark Willoughby & Tina Newhauser & Family
Anonymous
Dana and Vicki Viges
Scott and Sylvia Swinton
Jean and Paul Carlson
Daniel Shangraw
Lisa Lapious
Tonya Woodrough
Kyle Dymond
Ella Darnell
Christina Lance and Franklin Trout
John Goddeeris
Cynthia Wright-Pratt
In Memory of Robert Wright

Jingles the Elf wanted to say “Howdy” one last time
When talking with retirees, one of their main concerns is to understand RMDs, or Required Minimum Distributions. They may also be called MRDs, Minimum Required Distributions. Either way, they confuse many people! Here’s a completely non-technical explanation:

The Internal Revenue System, aka IRS, aka Uncle Sam, aka “The Man,” sees your retirement account (be it a 401(k), 403(b), 457, Traditional IRA, etc.) as a big pot of money that has not yet been taxed. When you reach the age of 70 and a half, you must begin taking distributions from that pot of money so that the IRS can get their cut. In fact, they tell you the absolute least you must withdraw, hence your RMD.

How do they come up with this dollar amount? There is a formula and it changes slightly every year, dependent on your age and how long the actuaries expect you to live. To over-simplify it, you will need to take less than 3.65% in your first year. The number grows as a percentage of your assets for many years and then starts to decline when you outlive your life expectancy. If you ever forget, the IRS will penalize you 50% of the amount they said you needed to pay taxes on. Really, it’s a win-win for the IRS!

Many retirees have already figured out their budget. They may be collecting a pension and social security. The idea of being forced to take money from their retirement account doesn’t make them happy. They may have to pay more in taxes on their social security because of this forced distribution (it raises their overall income in the year it is taken). (continued on page 8)
How to Stick It to “The Man” with your RMD

(Continued from page 7)

Late in 2015, retirees received a reprieve from Congress when they passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016. This rule made permanent qualified charitable distributions (QCDs) from individual retirement accounts. In layman’s terms, this rule says that money can leave an IRA and go directly to a 501 (c)(3) charity. The government will be satisfied that money left your “untaxed” pot, but it will not be added to your gross income for the year. The charity of your choice will not pay any taxes on the money, either. So you can satisfy your RMD, avoid additional income and taxes, and support a charity near and dear to your heart all at the same time!

Of course, there are some technical notes to keep in mind. You are limited to $100,000 per person per year. This is not allowed for SEP or SIMPLE IRAs, and is much trickier when dealing with inherited IRAs. Your Financial Advisor should be able to help you navigate all of the nuances of making a Qualified Charitable Distribution, if you are so inclined.

*Financial Technology, Inc. does not provide legal or tax advice. You should consult a legal or tax professional regarding your individual situation.

Evelyn Weymouth Scholarship Fund

Evelyn Weymouth is the founder of All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre and the AECT nonprofit board has a scholarship fund in her honor.

This special fund has been available for many years and precedes the merger between AECT and the City of East Lansing. Since 2012, the AECT nonprofit has contributed $7,191.50 to the City of East Lansing for scholarships. This is a specific fiscal contribution above and beyond the funds that the AECT nonprofit contributes to the City for the administration of the AECT program.

Youth members who wish to participate in cast or crew may claim need and apply for the scholarship when completing show participation forms. In exchange for the scholarship registration funds, parents, family members, or the youth participant are asked to volunteer _____ hours to the AECT program.
“Number the Stars” Cast and Crew Shines at Books and Bagels

On Saturday, January 14th, “Number the Stars” cast and crew participated in Books and Bagels at the East Lansing Public Library. Books and Bagels is a monthly event where youth read a selected book and they participate in a guided discussion led by the children’s librarian Eva Weihl while enjoying juice, bagels and cream cheese.

A total of seventeen kids participated, about half regular books and bagels kids and the other half AECT kids. Kids that signed up for the event through the library received a free copy of the book and a free ticket to the play. Several parents and an AECT board member also attended.

AECT kids expertly performed two scenes from the play. Several books and bagels kids also wanted a chance to read from the play so this was done giving the kids an idea of what it is like to play a role and read lines from a script. Eva facilitated a discussion about the preparation for the upcoming play and many the AECT kids shared many experiences they have had through their involvement with AECT. True to form, the kids told some funny stories about unplanned mishaps back stage and what you do when this happens.

The book discussion was masterfully led by Eva. Her questions prompted robust dialogue about the story and the historical events in which the play takes place. All the kids participated in sharing their ideas and thoughts. When asked, what was their favorite character, not surprisingly the cast had a hard time selecting a character other than their own.

Thanks so much to Eva for collaborating with AECT to make this experience possible happen. Much appreciated!
AECT Coloring Books Fundraiser

Did you know that coloring has de-stressing powers? Coloring stimulates parts of the brain related to motor skills, the senses and creativity. For the first time ever, the All-of-us Express nonprofit is offering coloring books for the kids and adults that like to color for fun and relaxation. Photographs taken by the very talented Melissa Downs have been converted into black and white images ready to be brought to life. Get out your markers, crayons, colored pencils and paint. Glitter, fabric swatches and sparkly paint may also be used. All funds brought in will be attributed to the AECT program for the kids.

A Plug for a Mug

When you drink your coffee in the morning do you ever wish that it was a white mug with a blue AECT logo? When the kids come in from the cold, do you ever envision that they were sipping their hot cocoa out of the mug seen in this picture? Your prayers have been answered! AECT mugs are for sale in the lobby during the show, “Number the Stairs”. All proceeds will be contributed by the AECT nonprofit to the City of East Lansing for the AECT program to benefit the kids.
Want to help All-of-us Express, but don’t have time to volunteer?  
Bring a small item to show your support!  
*We will provide a tax donation letter, should it be desired.

Wish List

Makeup Remover Wipes  
Kleenex  
Paper Towel  
Hair Ties  
Bobby Pins  
Cotton Squares  
Popsicle Sticks  
Hex-Head Screws  
Drill Bits  
Electric Tape  
Elastic (all sizes!)  
Interfacing  
Scotch Tape  
Wide (& Standard) Masking Tape  
Disinfectant Wipes  
Sewing Needles (hand and machine)  
Drawing Paper  
Seam Rippers  
Good-Quality Colored Pencils  
Fabric Scissors  
Large Fabric Pieces (no scraps)  
Men’s Boots (black and brown)  
Men’s Dress Shoes (sizes 9+)  
Women’s Dress Shoes  
Women’s Shoes (sizes 9+)  
Button-down Shirts

The BIG Gifts

Vise  
Cutting Table  
Home Depot Gift Card (doesn’t have to be big)  
Joann’s Gift Card (doesn’t have to be big)
All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre
Donation Appeal Form

Thank you for supporting All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre donation appeal. Your gift will help ensure that youth participants of all background, cultures, and lifestyles have opportunities to produce professional quality plays, study many aspects of the dramatic arts, and develop valuable life skills while providing outstanding entertainment to the community.

Please consider sponsoring one of the following:

_____ $25  -  Will sponsor a family of four to attend a show without means to otherwise attend
_____ $50  -  Will sponsor the cost of tech supplies for one show
_____ $100  -  Will sponsor a child's participation fees for one show
_____ $150  -  Will sponsor the cost of advertising for one show
_____ $200  -  Will sponsor the cost of props for four shows
_____ $250  -  Will sponsor the cost of costumes for one show
_____ $500  -  Will help sponsor the cost of royalties for one show
_____ $1000  -  Will help sponsor the cost of the theatre rental for one show run

Name ______________________________________________________________

Address ____________________________________________________________

City _______________________________ State______ Zip_________________

I/We would like our gift to be in honor/memory of: (circle one)

Name: ______________________________________________________________

_____ I/We would like our gift to remain anonymous.

Donations can be mailed to:  AECT, P.O. Box 1871, East Lansing, MI 48826-1871

All-of-us Express Children’s Theatre is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Your donation is tax deductible.