

SUPERINTENDENT'S BRIEF

Together, We are the Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District

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'Annie Up!' marks Drama Club return

Ironically, coincidentally, fittingly, it was a version of "Annie" that marked the return of theater to Poughkeepsie High School's stage. It's a play best known for the idea of "tomorrow" providing hope. At the start of this year, that's all Grayson Fuller had, and even that was in short supply.

"At that point," the senior said, "Drama Club was kind of just an idea that we thought would be something that would be very hard to happen in this building."

First-year Drama Club faculty adviser Nasarima Foster said Fuller was the only member at the start of the year. But through recruitment and publicizing the club, and by finding members of the staff, administration and community eager to contribute logistically and creatively, a cast of eight students and several more working behind the scenes put on a production of "Annie Up!" to the delight of their fellow students in the high school auditorium Friday. An encore performance is scheduled for the Family Partnership Center 6 p.m. Wednesday night.

Poughkeepsie hadn't put on a theater production in recent memory. The school features other elements of the performing arts through several clubs and, until this year, extracurricular opportunities for drama have been tied into those. Last year, the students performed a revue of songs and skits, but not a full show.

"That's what I was looking for when I came here," Fuller said. "We kind of brought it back to life." The effort to revive theater, the scrappiness of which rivaled the residents of the Hudson Street Orphanage, comes as the Poughkeepsie City School District is placing a renewed [emphasis on arts education](#). In addition to investing resources, the district is preparing to launch the [Smart Scholars Early College High School Performing Arts Academy](#) this fall.

Foster and Fuller recruited through word of mouth and approached students who were suggested to them as people who may be interested. Foster said students would sometimes be attracted from the hallways during rehearsals on stage. Maelia Vasquez – who plays Annie – said she was hooked while watching Dorothy Torres – Georgia in "Annie Up!" – rehearse for a set of monologues the Drama Club performed during the Multicultural Club's Black History Month assembly.

Assistant Principal Cecil Coston dropped in on a rehearsal in late fall. It just so happened to be a scene Foster wrote set in an orphanage. He asked Foster what her plans were for the club the rest of the year. "She said, 'We'd probably do this, we'd probably do that,'" Coston said. "I said, 'Well... I do have a play.'"



Above, Annie, Maelia Vasquez, listens to Brooklyn, Jordan Dawson, during Friday's performance of "Annie Up!" Right, Poppa Big Bucks, Grayson Fuller, gives Annie Jordan sneakers.





After the show, Assistant Principal Cecil Coston took the stage to explain his inspiration for the play and perform for the students.

Coston wrote "Annie Up!" in 2001 but has never had the avenue to perform it. It's a reimagined story incorporating hip-hop music and more modern teenage sensibilities. For example, at one point Fuller – "Poppa Big Bucks" – gives Annie a gift of Jordan sneakers.

"It's not like the original 'Annie,'" Vasquez said. "There's a lot of different 'Annie's' out there. I think this is relatable to the audience, the way that we dress, the way that we talk, the music we listen to. We recognize it."

The students in the auditorium appeared to agree, cheering key moments and singing along to the music. That was gratifying, of course, but

the staff and students involved focused on the rewarding experience of coming together to put on the play more than the performance itself.

Foster noted the wide range of support the production received – the Art Department made a sign for above the theater, furniture was donated from Poughkeepsie Youth Theatre, and rehearsal space was provided when needed at the Family Partnership. The stage crew was also assembled of students from a variety of backgrounds and grade levels. For example, Jolie Lassiter, who handled music, lighting and filled in gaps where needed, is in the ninth grade. Still, the students blended together.

"I think that's crucial, because we have so many social groups, grade levels, genders, everything mixed, and we're all in one room," Foster, a longtime English teacher in the school, said. "It just makes me a little bit emotional because I love that they feel accepted."

Fuller called the club "a group of people who no one knew," and said some may have had the wrong impression of them. "We wanted to be put in a new light. That was important to us."

One person everyone surely knew may have elicited the biggest roar from the audience. As the story hits its climax and two characters are being arrested, it was School Resource Officer Jonathan Geuss who emerged from backstage to apply the handcuffs.

Geuss said one of the students had the idea to ask him to play the role just a week before the show.

"I was overwhelmingly flattered and moved at the kids' reaction when I got up on stage," said Geuss, who minored in theater in college. "What I love about theater education is, it's such a connecting experience for the students. They work together to put on a production, which bonds them."

Foster hopes to continue growing the club, even as some of its members are graduating. "I think this show will be something that will encourage kids to at least inquire about Drama Club next year," she said.

Poughkeepsie celebrates athletics at banquet

The Poughkeepsie High School Athletic Department celebrated the Pioneers who contributed to a year of firsts and accomplishments and looked forward to honoring its past, at its annual Athletic Awards Banquet June 6.

Peter Bianco, executive director of physical education, health services, athletics and recreation, noted while the department wanted to honor the athletes, it also feted the contributions of coaches, parents and spectators, "everyone that made it work for the athletic program throughout the course of the whole school year."



Jalasia Weldon and Corey Martin pose with their various awards.



In addition to on-field accomplishments, Bianco noted the department this year boasted 99 scholar-athlete seasons – times a student-athlete finished a season with a class average of 90 percent or better – with seven three-sport scholar-athletes: Hajar El guerouani, Nigel Henry, Travis Jenkins, Abass Na-aata, Tyrell Smalls, Tyrese Smalls and Jhanae Stewart. There were also eight scholar-athlete teams that finished a season with a cumulative average of 90 or better. The school overall received a National Federation of State High School Associations Award of Excellence “for exemplary display of sportsmanship, ethics and integrity.”

Bianco said the banquet each year, in which students, coaches and parents gather in the gymnasium for dinner and a slew of awards, “really is about the students and getting them the proper recognition for what they've been doing all year. They've been working hard on the court, working hard in the classroom. Having one culminating event at the end of the year really highlights their excellence throughout the year.”

A most valuable and most improved player was announced for each team, as well as a sportsmanship award winner. The Athletic Department also named male and female senior athletes of the year. For the boys it was a tie between football and basketball standout Jalen Lee and baseball standout Corey Martin. Jalasia Weldon, a leader for the volleyball, basketball and softball teams, was honored on the girls' side.

Derek Nguyen, MVP for the unified basketball team, earned the Athletic Director Award.

Many of the students and families arrived in formalwear, and a blue backdrop of Pioneers logos was set up for those who wanted to pose for photos.

Poughkeepsie this year had its share of moments to celebrate. Among them, the varsity girls basketball team reached the playoffs, and won its first game there, for the first time in 12 years; Kyle Duncan became the first bowler in school history to reach the New York State Public High School Athletic Association championship tournament; the girls swimming and diving team earned the Section 1 Conference 4 championship for the first time since 1994; girls soccer coach Dr. Sankung Susso was named Conference I League A Coach of the Year; And the newly created eSports program took the MidHudson eSports League title in the “Rocket League” division.

Aside from the current students, a former Pioneer was also highlighted. The department announced it will, at the start of next girls basketball season, retire the jersey of 1999 graduate Terraya Richardson. Richardson, with 1,888 points, is Poughkeepsie's all-time leading scorer.

“The athletes were very appreciative for all their awards. The coaches did an awesome job talking about the teams,” Bianco said of the banquet, “and honoring Terraya Richardson was amazing. Our goal this year was to recognize her properly.”



Natalia Lopez poses with awards for volleyball, cheerleading and softball.



New members of the National Junior Honor Society were inducted in the Poughkeepsie Middle School library on June 5.

Students inducted to NJHS

Six Poughkeepsie Middle School students were formally recognized on June 5 as the newest inductees of the National Junior Honor Society.

The students were selected by faculty after they successfully completed their candidacy requirements.

Both current and former members were among the guests.

The inductees are charged with maintaining a standard of excellence as members of the nation's oldest, largest and most prestigious student recognition program.



Middle school NJHS President Allyson Perez Gomez highlighted the history of the organization at the school in her remarks.

"Our chapter is proud to have been inducting new members since 1995 and the ceremony indicates the continuing emphasis on excellence that represents our school and community," she said. "Throughout the years, members of our chapter serve as role models for other students."

In addition to the strong academic records that established the eligibility for membership, NJHS members are leaders in many student organizations and serve the school and community through many activities.

"It is at this time that we proclaim to all in attendance, that membership in the Poughkeepsie Middle School Chapter of the National Junior Honor Society has been earned by these candidates through the effective demonstration of the five pillars that serve as standards for the Society: Scholarship, Service, Leadership, Character and Citizenship," Perez Gomez said. "We welcome these new members who bring new energy in support of our continuing work as NJHS members."

The NJHS is open to students in seventh and eighth grades.

The induction came in the same week [the high school inducted 37 new members into the National Honor Society](#) in a ceremony at the school auditorium.



Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education Dr. Charles Gallo introduces Valedictorian Olivia Groucher and Salutatorian Abass Na-aata.

PHS seniors honored at BOCES breakfast

Two Poughkeepsie High School seniors were celebrated, along with students from 12 other Dutchess County school districts, during the annual Dutchess BOCES Distinguished Graduate Recognition Breakfast on June 6 at the Culinary Institute of America.

Valedictorian Olivia Groucher and Salutatorian Abass Na-aata were honored for their academic and extracurricular achievements.

Students in Poughkeepsie's Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFJROTC) color guard kicked off the breakfast by presenting the American flag and leading everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Groucher, who plans to major in psychology and education at Temple University, reclassified last year to graduate earlier than expected. She has been a part of the Sister 2 Sister empowerment group, the Multicultural Club, the Marist College Liberty Partnerships Program and is a member of the National Honor Society. She aims to work in educational psychology to "study how people learn and effective ways to help them learn. Kind of figure out ways to teach different aspects," she said.

"Olivia's dedication to academics, extracurricular activities and community service highlights her commitment to making a positive impact on the lives of people around her," Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education Dr. Charles Gallo said.

Na-aata was born in the Bronx but moved to Ghana at a young age and spent his entire childhood in the African nation. He moved to Poughkeepsie for his freshman year of high school amid the COVID-19 pandemic to get the best education possible. He's served as a My Brother's Keeper fellow; a member of the AFJROTC, Debate Club and Pioneer Post; and competed on the varsity soccer and track and field teams. He aspires to earn a bachelor's in economics and finance from Cornell, with the goal of becoming a corporate lawyer. He is already planning his future by taking related courses this summer, which Gallo said is inspiring to see. "He's getting an early start on his business degree," Gallo said. "He's not wasted a moment of time in order to move his dream forward and I really encourage it."

Dutchess BOCES Deputy Superintendent Jodi DeLucia and Dutchess County Executive Sue Serino welcomed guests before breakfast followed by the keynote speaker and recognitions. Each district presented its own students. Keynote speaker Pius Kayiira, founder and CEO of the Winner's Circle Project, encouraged students to maximize opportunities as they arise and to be a good person, as it will open many doors.

"Approach everything with the right energy because, at the end of the day, I don't know the last time I hired somebody and said, 'Wow, what was your SAT score?'" Kayiira said. "I wanted to make sure they were a good teammate, a person that I wanted to see in the office."