

# suburban life

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A robust fine arts program empowers Nazareth Academy High School students to become stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for the challenges ahead. page 14



**PROFILE**

by **Lindsey Getz** | photography by **Jody Robinson**



Taking

# Center Stage

**A robust arts program empowers Nazareth Academy High School students to become stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for the challenges ahead.**

**A**T A TIME WHEN SCHOOLS ACROSS THE NATION ARE MAKING HEADLINES FOR SLASHING THEIR ARTS PROGRAMMING, THE ARTS ARE FLOURISHING AT NAZARETH ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL IN NORTHEAST PHILADELPHIA. Each Nazareth student is encouraged and empowered to discover the magic that can happen when she puts a paintbrush to a blank canvas, picks up a musical instrument, or walks on stage and steps into the spotlight.

The arts offer students much more than opportunities to express one's personality. Research has shown that creative outlets can help

students lower stress, improve memory, and enhance verbal and critical thinking skills, thereby enabling students to make gains in other areas of study. In other words, the arts help students attain their full potential—academically, spiritually, and personally. As a result, students are better prepared to tackle the challenges they will face in college, throughout their careers, or wherever life takes them.

Nazareth, an all-girls private, Catholic college preparatory school, offers robust programming in the visual arts, the performing arts, and music. Students can major or minor in music or art, if they choose, for an in-depth study that



allows them to gain academic credit. Bridget Shaw, Chair of the Art Department, says it's incredibly important for students to have a "safe place to express creativity." That need came to light more than ever during the early days of the pandemic, when students sought ways to cope with the uncertainty of the world around them.

"We have learned just how important our students' mental health is during these difficult times," Shaw says. "Our students are so focused on learning, and they're very high achievers—things that we are proud of here—but they also need some space to breathe. They are wonderful at math and science and reading, but art shows them they can create things with their hands, too, and that builds confidence."

Visual art programming evolves constantly, with refined lessons in drawing, mosaics, painting, sculpture, and more. Students may excel at or enjoy some forms of artistic expression more than others, which is why Shaw believes it's important to expose students to multiple media.

"Each student has her own creativity that is unique to her," Shaw adds. "The energy and the heart that students put into their project is wholly unique to each of them, and the results always blow me away."

Similar moments of transformation happen in the performing arts, according to faculty member Natalie Graveley, who runs Nazareth's theater production. She provides students with a creative outlet through performance and stage productions. As of press time, the theater department was preparing for a production of *Legally Blonde*, a musical to be performed in November.

Graveley loves seeing the "marriage of so many talents" when Nazareth students embrace the arts. Nazareth's academic programming remains incredibly strong, with so many students cultivating their strengths in mathematics and science. Graveley treasures the opportunity to help students hone their skills as artists, too.

"Being on stage helps with speaking skills and confidence and other lessons that stem far

beyond schooling," she shares. "Of course, we recognize that not everyone wants to stay center stage. There are so many other opportunities from the orchestra to the stage crew that give students a chance to get involved and pursue something new."

Graveley says these lessons prepare students for life after Nazareth. Even if students choose not to major in arts or play a starring role in a theater production, she believes the arts teach students a great deal about who they are and what they can achieve. As a Nazareth alumna, she can speak firsthand to the support students receive as they strive toward building their futures.

"We are full of 'Yes' teachers here, meaning that students come to us with ideas and dreams, and we're here to find ways that we can support them in that," she explains. "We advocate for our students and are really committed to their growth."

The same philosophies are true in music, according to Katherine Chmelko, Nazareth's Director of Performing Arts. Students can participate in unique classes such as AP Music Theory, as well as a seminar class on musical history, which includes an introduction to the music of Philadelphia.

Nazareth students have performed everywhere from the Philadelphia International Airport, singing carols for travelers during the holiday season, to Carnegie Hall in New York and the Vatican in Rome. Music students have also traveled to Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Italy. A trip to Ireland is planned for 2022.

Chmelko says students have multiple channels in which to exercise their musical talents,

including orchestra, band, instrument ensembles, various vocal ensembles, and chorus. At the height of the pandemic, Nazareth organized a virtual choir of participating alumnae from as far back as the 1980s, connecting generations of Nazareth graduates during a trying time.

Like the other arts programming, Chmelko believes music offers lasting benefits even if a student does not choose it as her primary area of study. Among them is a "sense of belonging," she says.

"It's yet another creative outlet for them to channel their talent," she adds. "There are so many benefits to having a creative outlet. Even as an adult here in Philadelphia, you can join local ensembles and community singing groups that give you that place to escape some of the stress of life."

Graveley says the arts are all about discovery. They enable students to explore their talents, try new things, and meet new people. Furthermore, the arts create opportunities that help students become stronger, more resilient, and more well-rounded individuals.

"Isn't that what becoming an adult is all about?" she says. "It's about pursuing different opportunities and figuring things out and eventually learning what you're good at and what you like. Art in many different forms allows students to do that, and we're here to support it." ■



**“Each student has her own creativity that is unique to her.”**

— Bridget Shaw, Chair of the Art Department at Nazareth Academy High School



→ **Nazareth Academy High School**

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