COMMUNITY

Photograph by Vicki Thompson

DeAnna Pursai (left) and 17-year-old Moriah Adams check the wheelchair access at Historic Hoover Theatre, where Pursai plans to launch the theater troupe Angels on Stage, dedicated to getting youth with disabilities on stage.

'Angels' theater puts disabled youth in spotlight

New nonprofit to debut at Hoover

By MARY GOTTSCHALK

DeAnna Pursai's dream is to take youth who usually find themselves on the outskirts and put them center stage in the spotlight.

Angels on Stage, a nonprofit group the Almaden Valley resident founded, is the embodiment of that dream. The mission statement says its purpose is to provide children with any type of disability the opportunity to participate in annual professional theater productions.

"I see it bringing children with varying disabilities into the limelight and showing the community the special gifts and talents of these children who often remain in the shadows," Pursai says.

Angels on Stage is patterned after a Fort Wayne, Ind., troupe called The Jesters of the University of St. Francis, which has been staging productions since 1979.

It is the group that helped Pursai's younger sister Angel, who has Down syndrome, participate in theater productions and the group that gave Pursai what she considers a life-changing experience.

"When I was a freshman in college, I became a volunteer, and Angel got involved for a production of 'American Bandstand,' " Pursai says.

It was 1991, and I was about 18, and we had Saturday morning practices. I was assigned the little people, and we practiced singing 'Don't Worry, Be Happy.'

"It was the most exhilarating feeling I'd ever had. I've never felt so alive in my life, and I knew right then and there that wherever I got established in life, I wanted to start a theater troupe."

Pursai has tentatively booked the Historic Hoover Theatre in the Rose Garden area for weekly rehearsals starting in early October, with hopes of staging the first Angels on Stage production in February 2009.

As she's putting out the word that she's recruiting children and youths, ages 5 to 22, she's finding a lot of grateful parents are responding.

Nancy Adams is one, and she shares her daughter Moriah's frustrations at sitting on the sidelines.

A bout of meningitis at the age 2 left Moriah confined to a wheelchair with cerebral palsy-like symptoms and damaged speech.

"She's 17, and she's like any other teenager. She wants to be famous and an actress like Hannah Montana. She can't sing, but acting is her next best thing," Adams says.

"When we heard about this, she got really excited. She can't wait."

Now in special education classes at Independence High School, Moriah was enrolled in a drama class when she was attending Del Mar High School.

However, Adams says, "The drama teacher wasn't allowing her to participate. If you're not going to let her participate, there's no sense being there. She just watched the other kids.

"We run into that a lot."

Lauri Lewis has had similar experiences with her son, Addan, now 14, who has Down syndrome.

"Addan loves drama and he loves musicals and stage productions, singing and dancing, but he doesn't have opportunities at school," Lewis says.

"The chance for him to be able to be on stage and participate in a

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production thrills him. He's in his element. There's a lot of people who are unaware of what our children don't get. The counties and cities like us to believe they're fully included, but really it's a battle for parents. Every service our children get is a battle."

Almaden resident Lynda Wootan is excited about the opportunity for her 7-year-old daughter Cassie to participate in a large production.

"Cassie has Down syndrome, and she goes to Schallenberger [school] in special ed classes. Each year they do a musical program, and Cassie just loves it," Wootan says.

"It's going to be a wonderful opportunity for kids with special needs to shine in a really understanding environment. DeAnna has a sister with Down syndrome so she knows what's going on. She fully understands. She's a very warm and welcoming person."

When it comes to inclusion over exclusion, Pursai agrees with all three parents.

"I just don't believe children with disabilities are given the same amount of extracurricular activities as the typical child is. I think they are often overlooked, and if we slow down and really focus on their abilities, they'll surprise you with the amazing gifts that they have," she says.

"The stage is a perfect avenue for so many children that have mobility issues. They all love to listen to music and so many watch a lot of television and have an uncanny knack to recite movies and songs."

Pursai is not naïve and readily acknowledges that what she's hoping to do with Angels on Stage is likely to result in chaos.

"Certainly chaos," she agrees, but quickly adds, "and a lot of beauty out of the chaos."

Pursai knows she's going to need more than just the 30 participants to which she's limiting the first production.

"I'm going to have to harness a lot of creative talent on the theater side because I'm not a theater person by trade," she says.

"We're going to build our scripts around each child's abilities and put all our creative minds together and come up with a fabulous production, and I have 100 percent confidence in them."

It's not definite, but she is leaning toward making *The Wizard of Oz* the first Angels production, in part because it was the Jesters' initial production.

Pursai also needs money—at least $15,000.

"I received an amazing donation of $5,000 from a couple in the Rose Garden, Jill and Christopher Escher," she says.

Other contributors include Keith Vu at Zip2Print Copyland on Stevens Creek Boulevard and Amato Pizza in Almaden.

As much more is needed, Pursai is organizing a fundraiser on April 10 starting at 5:30 p.m. at Historic Hoover Theatre, 1635 Park Ave., across from the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

The $15-per-person evening includes a pizza dinner, a silent auction and a performance by Daffy Dave, who has been voted best party entertainer for children in *Bay Area Parent* magazine's annual poll every year since 2000.

For additional information on Angels on Stage or tickets to the fundraiser, visit www.angelsonstage.org or call Pursai at 408.394.6816.