

THE CHALLENGE...

Our drama department is facing major cuts.

This isn't all that unique of a situation. Hard budgetary decisions are an unfortunate inevitability in school districts across the country, and Shrewsbury is no exception. When money is tight, it becomes increasingly enticing to label thespianism for eighth graders as superfluous. To a degree, this is understandable, because it's difficult to argue for theatricality as essential curriculum. But also understandable is the small legion of parents, and teachers, and dedicated students who rail against the idea that a department that has given them so much is of no value. How could the thing that gave them confidence, a voice, team building skills, communication tools, stress management and more be described as anything other than essential learning?

Despite a recent override greatly widening our schools' ability to hire new teachers where they're needed, only a few years have brought us back to the point of substantial cuts. That override was heralded as a great success for our schools, and it was. However, it wasn't a permanent fix, and it left "niche" departments like drama with only a temporary reprieve from cuts.

Now, I'm not here to simply praise the endless virtue of the theatre department. That's because I'm not a part of it. Not remotely. I've never been in a school play or musical. In my four years I've never once enrolled in an acting elective. Any attempt I've made at singing sounds more like an impression of an injured whale than it does a part of a choir.

So, I'm a bit of an onlooker as that passionate, small legion fights against diminishing resources. Or perhaps onlooker isn't the right word. More accurate would be:

bystander

'bī,standər/Submit

noun

a person who is present at an event or incident but does not take part.

The point I'm trying to illustrate here, is that we cannot just be present in our community. We have to take part, whether or not this is "our fight". We can't allow for our personal interests to take the helm of our sole motivator. We need to look to other groups, ones that may not necessarily benefit us personally and find their value for our community. Opportunity breeds opportunity, and when people are given the resources to succeed more doors are opened for everyone. The drama department is a snowglobe example of this, but the same is true of the school system as a whole. Just as it is crucial for me, someone who is distinctly not a theatre kid, to support the needs of my peers in the theatre department, it is hugely important that those who do not have students actively enrolled in Shrewsbury schools to provide support for the youngins.

Now onto some actual problem solving. My broader point is that we need to reach past what is immediately relevant to us and offer our support to what may at first glance appear niche. But the same is true vice versa. What is niche needs to prove its value to the community as a whole. Here are some ideas of how the drama department could achieve this:

Community Service: Our choir, our actors, and our performers are all students who have worked hard to be entertaining. Unfortunately there is often a deficiency of entertainment among our senior citizens. By reaching out to offer performance, volunteer service, and general friendliness, a bridge can be formed between those who need funding

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and those who may not see any reason to give funding. Whether or not this services the drama department's end goals, it's still a great way to service the community

Visibility: Although I am uninvolved in theatre, I am a very proud and active member of a community I would consider to be theatre adjacent. That community would be none other than Speech and Debate. Thanks to Senator Michael Moore himself, the coaches who give so much to us "Speechies" have the honor of National Speech and Debate Education Day (March 2nd).

Not only is this an enormously meaningful gesture within our community, it has tangible benefit in increasing our visibility to the world at large. It's impossible to get people to care about something they're unaware of, and a national spotlight such as this immediately combats that lack of awareness. If drama could attempt to replicate a similar proposal, I believe it would be to their benefit.

Allies: Much more meaningful than hearing someone ask for something for themselves is to advocate for the well being of others. Empathy reads a little better than self interest. In town meetings discussing the future of the drama department, those advocating for continued funding were, unsurprisingly, members of the drama department.

A slightly lower stakes but similar situation offers an effective strategy. Our SHS Student Council, a multigrade organization, was advocating for lessened restrictions on certain academic apps. They used seniors to represent their case to administration, who were not specifically in need of these apps as the underclassmen were. By showing that our school community as whole, not just the subgroup of underclassmen cared about this issue, the Student Council's proposal was all the more effective. I think our drama department reaching out to "allies" like these could strengthen their message in the same way.

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When it comes down to it, I think the obvious answer to a lack of funding is to seek out more funds, the source of which would be a relative heightening of Shrewsbury's already (comparatively) low taxes. However, this is not so much a permanent address of the underlying issue as much as it is a band-aid, just as our town's last override proved to be. In order to gain the support of a community, one must carve out their place in that community, and prove themselves essential. This starts by contributing to the community. The rest, if all goes well, will follow.